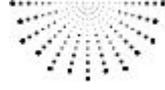


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DIRTY DISCIPLINE

Laylah Roberts | Livia Grant | Renee Rose | Linzi Basset
Delta James | Golden Angel and Stella Moore | Emily Tilton
Ann Jensen | Nicolina Martin | Kate Oliver | Vanessa Brooks
Cooper McKenzie | Sadie Marks | Delia Grace
Allysa Hart and Rayanna Jamison | Maren Smith

DIRTY DISCIPLINE
VOLUME 1



VARIOUS AUTHORS



CONTENTS

A Note of Thanks From Red Hot Romance

Treasured Discipline by Delta James (writing as Willa Bradley).

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

About Delta James

Also by Delta James:

Clandestine Daddy (A Club Rouge: Louisiana Daddies Prequel) by Linzi Basset

Author's Note & Blurb

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[About Linzi Basset](#)

[Life's Unexpected Gifts by Livia Grant](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Livia Grant](#)

[Also by Livia Grant](#)

[Master D's Naughty Gift \(Masters of Midgard\) by Ann Jensen](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Ann Jensen](#)

[Also by Ann Jensen](#)

[Jolly Green Daddy by Allysa Hart and Rayanna Jamison](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[About The Authors](#)

[Maud And The Secret Society of St. Valentine by Emily Tilton](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[About Emily Tilton](#)

[A Little Adjustment By Kate Oliver](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[About Kate Oliver](#)

[Marrying a Murderer by Vanessa Brooks](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Vanessa Brooks](#)

[Also By Vanessa Brooks](#)

[Too Strong To be Weak by Delia Grace](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[About Delia Grace](#)

[Also by Delia Grace](#)

[Stealing Summer by Nicolina Martin](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Nicolina Martin](#)

Also by Nicolina Martin

Behind Closed Doors by Cooper McKenzie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

About Cooper McKenzie

Also by Cooper McKenzie

A Cowboy To Call Her Own by Laylah Roberts

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

About Laylah Roberts

Also By Laylah Roberts

A Double Dose of Discipline by Stella Moore and Golden Angel

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[About Stella Moore](#)

[Also by Stella Moore](#)

[About Golden Angel](#)

[Also by Golden Angel](#)

[His Captured Prey by Sadie Marks](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[About Sadie Marks](#)

[Deathless Love by Renee Rose](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Also By Renee Rose](#)

[Reel Love by Maren Smith](#)

[Note From Maren Smith](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[About Maren Smith](#)

[Red Hot Romance](#)

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A NOTE OF THANKS FROM RED HOT ROMANCE

On October 13th, Author and Publisher Maren Smith lost both her husband and her father in a tragic accident.

In the days that followed, Maren and her company, Red Hot Romance Publishing were overwhelmed with the love and support that poured in from around the world.

Authors and readers alike, reached out not only with kind words of support and donations to the gofundme, they helped ensure that Red Hot Romance, a baby company, was able to function while the owner and other staff members were grieving.

Everyone did so much. And still, the community wanted to do more. When someone floated the idea of an anthology to honor and support Maren and her company, our first thought was “there is no possible way we can take that on right now.” But authors were quick to jump on the idea, and more authors came on board to help flesh out details and logistics and even more authors came on board to contribute stories (both old and new) for this limited-time anthology.

In that vein, we'd like to offer sincere thanks to Delia Grace, who first came up with the idea, and Liv Honeywell and Jacki James who were the first to support the idea. We also want to thank Jami Dabney, Alta Hensley and Livia Grant

for jumping on board and helping flesh out details and organize, Allysa Hart for her two beautiful covers and Stella Moore for her tantalizing blurbs. And last but not least, we want to thank every single author who participated by contributing a story in support of our friend Maren. We've even included two stories and a note of gratitude from Maren herself who was overwhelmed with the love that the community poured into her family during their difficult time.

You have no idea how much this means to all of us.

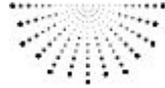
Readers, we hope you enjoy this very eclectic mix of discipline themed stories as much as we have enjoyed coming together on this project. Thank You for reading.

Sincerely

Rayanna Jamison

Red Hot Romance

TREASURED DISCIPLINE
BY DELTA JAMES (WRITING
AS WILLA BRADLEY)



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DEDICATION

MAY THE BEST OF YOUR PAST

For Maren:

*May the best of your past
Be the Worst of Your Future*

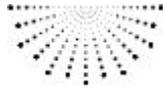
Dedicated to:

Chris, Renee, Lori and the Girls

And to:

*My Readers, Without Whom
None of This Would be Possible*

PROLOGUE



Anne Bonny

1721

The chilly breeze was a welcome relief in the muggy heat of the Charleston night. Anne paused for a brief second and lifted the hair at the base of her neck, knowing she didn't have much time but needing to feel the sweat cool and dry on her skin.

As she rested, she took a furtive look around, the weight on her chest easing a fraction when all she saw was barren landscape.

Hauling the heavy chest was not easy work, especially in her condition. She wanted to ensure the child growing within her would never want for anything, nor have to compromise his or her safety or happiness in order to survive.

Jack seemed convinced they were immortal, especially when he'd had too much rum; Anne knew different. Captain Vane's death only months before had convinced her of the inevitability of their deaths. Not that she mourned him, particularly, but Anne knew he was a better captain with a better ship. Despite that, the Royal Navy had caught and hanged him in Port Royal.

It was a sobering reality. One that visited nightmares upon her sleep, all these nights later.

Pressing her lips together, Anne began tugging the chest across the ground once again. If she could possibly help it, she wouldn't be caught in that web of fear and death ever again. Not if she could help it.

Anne had discovered quickly: Calico Jack Rackham spent his wealth as fast as he acquired it. She was different, even if she was technically a pirate. Life...circumstances...had impressed upon her the necessity of being more careful with her funds.

She'd seen her father expelled from England despite trying to make an honest living, first as a lawyer and later as a somewhat successful merchant and plantation owner. He'd tried to provide for Anne by finding her a suitable merchant to marry but the man had been so dull, Anne had found it difficult to remain awake in his presence. She had run off with a part-time sailor later turned small-time pirate.

It was during the time she sailed with him that she'd met Calico Jack—a charming rogue who had made her laugh and who taught her the pleasure that could be had with a man between her legs. Anne left James Bonny to be with Jack and never looked back.

Well, at least, not until now.

As she dragged the treasure-laden chest to the deserted spot she had scouted earlier, Anne took precious minutes to rest between bursts of exertion. Every reserve of strength and energy she had was rapidly being depleted, not only by her task, but by the life she carried within her belly.

Jack's baby.

Cupping a hand on the bottom of her rounded stomach, the last, angry words she had hissed at him rushed back at her. “Had you fought like a man, you would not be doomed to hang like a dog.”

A tear trickled down the side of her face, wetting her hairline, and she swiped at it in irritation as she rose from where she had sat to rest. Best be getting back to it, she thought, instead of wallowing in the past.

The past, though, wouldn't leave her alone. Not on this hot, deserted section of seacoast, when all that was around to distract her was the sound of her own memories and the clamor of her own regret.

Her hateful words had been spoken more out of fear than any real vitriol; she knew that now. She had been sentenced to hang alongside her lover, but the life growing inside her womb had given her father leave to buy her a commuted sentence and take her home with him.

She hadn't really planned to stay. She longed to be back at sea where she was free but hearing that Captain Vane had been hanged a short while ago had convinced her that she needed to provide for her child and give up her pirating ways.

She found the spot she'd been seeking—one she could keep an eye on from her home in Charleston and secluded enough to be safe from those actively seeking pirate treasure. Her father could well provide for her and was convinced that with a bit of time and some rehabilitation he would be able to secure a successful match for her. While Anne agreed that a husband and a stable home would be best for her child, the side of her that had known loss and instability wanted to ensure she had the funds to escape and make a new life for them both if need be.

Anne dug deep, more than ten feet down, and placed the smaller chest that had until now been enclosed in a larger one at the bottom of the hole. She then took great pains to shovel dirt back over and around the smaller chest for four feet, packing it down hard so that it would appear undisturbed. Then she placed the larger chest which contained some loot, dresses, and other finery atop it and buried it, as well. She did not pack the dirt as solidly, thinking if someone discovered the larger chest, they would be satisfied and wouldn't look further. And even if they did manage to find the smaller chest, they would be hard pressed to figure out how to open the box within. And without opening the box, they'd never get to the real treasure: gold coins and priceless gems.

She felt the fluttering kick of the life growing within her. Anne smiled and embraced it. Boy or girl, this child was strong and healthy. She hoped that he or she would have children of their own. She planned to leave a clue as to the whereabouts of the bulk of her treasure, hoping that her descendants would never need to use it, but content in the knowledge that it would be there if they did.

On a bonny island in the sea

A treasure was laid upon the lee

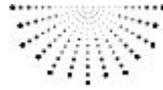
For those who follow she left it there

A painful life they would not have to bear

Across from Charles Town the past was laid to rest

Beneath the first will be found the best

CHAPTER ONE



Present Day

Summer heat had given way to cool fall in Charleston. Norris Wingate was touring her newly-acquired Craftsman bungalow in a soon-to-be-transitional neighborhood—her first foray into the Charleston market.

She'd made plenty of money in Chicago working as an interior designer and flipping row houses, but the bitter Chicago winters had left her wanting to leave the city behind for a more temperate climate. The fact that a well-heeled client had made a job move to Charleston and wanted to hire her to find, renovate, and decorate a new home had made the decision to return to her ancestral home an easy one.

And then there was the mystery of which countless family stories had been told. Some said that her family could trace their lineage back to the pirate Anne Bonny, who reputedly had hidden a fortune to ensure her family's survival. Others believed that was merely a story invented to amuse people at family reunions.

Norris believed the story, and that the treasure existed. She had always planned to one day come to the harbor in Charleston and look for it. Her plan wasn't to take whatever she found, but merely to find the treasure, see it for herself,

and then return it to rest peacefully in the place her eighth great-grandmother had left it.

Dumb? There are those who would say so. The need to see it for herself, though... simply touch it with her own hands, was more compelling than any desire to actually keep or spend any proceeds from what she might find. It was a kind of respectful nod to her grandmother and her heritage, an homage to the incredible female she must have been.

The client had not yet moved to Charleston but was scheduled to meet with Norris at their new home later today. The trust they had for her... the faith in her ability to find them a forever home... it weighed on her. They had purchased the house sight unseen based solely on her recommendation. Today they would see it for the first time.

At least the neighborhood was perfect.

Weeping Tree Hills was one of the more well-established and highly sought-after spots to live in Charleston. Based on their past two experiences with Norris, Ted and Nancy Watson had given her the responsibility to find the right home for their busy and socially active family. Fortunately, that responsibility had come with a healthy budget and carte blanche to find something wonderful, even if it needed extensive work.

It was while looking for the Watson's home and wandering around Charleston that she'd come across the bungalow that had called to her.

The small, vintage home was not much to look at on first glance. Truth to tell, it wasn't much to look at on the second or third glance. It was the most dilapidated house in a neighborhood full of run-down houses, many of which were being slowly brought back to life by couples who had been

inspired by those television shows on various home improvement networks.

Norris was able to buy her bungalow for a good price and her plan was to get the primary suite, kitchen, and fencing completed so she, Nell and Dudley—her two beloved basset hounds—could live there while they worked on the rest of it.

While she would hire a general contractor to do most of the heavy construction work and manage the construction on the Watson project, she liked getting her hands dirty and enjoyed doing a great deal of the work herself. She drew the line at structural, plumbing, electrical, roof, and flooring.

She pulled her Land Rover into the driveway and eyed the new automatic rolling gate to the yard with satisfaction. It had been a bit of a splurge, but she could already tell she was going to love it. She had set it up so that the entire yard around the property was fenced with a solid panel white vinyl fence in the colonial style. Instead of being straight across, the top of the fence curved gracefully from post to post. She liked the way the fence echoed the arch over each of the front windows as well as that over the front door.

Nancy Watson had teased her, saying she bought the place just for the front door, and there was some truth to that. It was original to the house and was a heavy, wooden, arched door with a grated opening in the top. A small iron door on the inside allowed one to peek out.

Norris had run fencing between the yard and the driveway. Nell and Dudley had to have a dog door and their yard needed to be secure when she opened the gate to let herself in. It had been an extra expense, but it was worth it in order to ensure their safety. There were three arched pergolas that framed locking gates into the yard. One led directly from the charming

sidewalk onto a brick paved walkway to the front door, one from the driveway to another walkway to the front, and finally one from just outside the garage area into the back.

Norris closed the gate behind her and got out of the car, entering the backyard via the side gate. The good-sized deck was coming along nicely. She knew the dogs would enjoy sunning themselves when it wasn't too hot outside. She also knew that they would stay inside with the air conditioning once the heat set in. She laughed at her dogs as, like most bassets, they tried to ensure their comfort was uppermost in all things.

She let herself in the back door, walking past the washer/dryer hook up to the kitchen and what was once the back parlor. The latter was now being converted into her primary suite which would, for the time being, double as her office. She was pleased to find that both spaces, after her demo, had been cleaned up and her primary bedroom closet and bath were roughed in. She was also glad to see that the contractor she'd hired had taken it upon himself to haul out all of the demo debris. That had been on her agenda for today.

She noted the fittings needed, and the space allotted to them, for the primary bath. She'd allowed for a large shower, an antique furniture piece she would convert into a vanity and one of the new self-cleaning toilets in the bath. Norris returned to her bright and open kitchen and sketched and measured the space for cupboards, an island, sink, appliances, and open shelving. The space wasn't big but would be open to the combined living and dining space and would be very functional. One of her trademarks in the row homes she flipped in Chicago had been lower cupboards only, combined with open shelving in place of the uppers, and unique range hoods.

She was smiling as she let herself back out the back door and collided with a tall, sandy-haired stranger. “Oof. May I help you?” She asked.

The man smiled and said, “You Miss Wingate? I’m Ian Hunter, your contractor.”

He extended his hand and Norris closed hands with him, liking how his handshake was firm and friendly, even with a woman. Her mother had always said you could tell a lot about a man by the tie he wore and the way he shook your hand. Ian had no tie, but the chambray shirt he wore fit him well, showing off broad shoulders and just a hint of the same sandy blond hair that dusted a pair of strong forearms.

Norris inhaled and let her breath out slowly. She always had been a sucker for a rolled up shirt-sleeves and nice, corded forearms.

“Nice to meet you, Ian. And please, call me Norris.”

Ian worked the toothpick in his mouth, his gaze lingering for a beat. “Norris. Interesting name.”

Norris didn’t generally bother to explain her unusual name to the three or ten people that mentioned it on a daily basis. It had grown old around the time she was four-years-old. She found herself offering Ian a cool smile anyway, though, and doing just that. “Family name. My grandfather’s.”

He nodded, a small tip of his chin. “I like it.”

Norris narrowed her eyes. “I’ll let my mother know.”

His mouth quirked up in a grin, the corners lifting ever so slightly.

“You do that. Anyway. I was just coming to make sure all the debris had been hauled off. I left one of my guys to do it,

but I always like to follow up. You must have had a lot of help getting all that demo work done so fast.”

She laughed. He liked the way she laughed. It had a certain deep, musical quality to it.

“No,” she said. “Just a lot of pent-up aggression.”

It was his turn to laugh. “I’m not sure I should ask?”

She shrugged. “Probably not. So, did you have a chance to look at the floors? Think I can salvage them?”

“I think they’re salvageable, but you might want to hire that out. It’s going to be a lot of work as there’s going to be a lot of hand sanding to be done. If it were me, I’d wait and do all of them at the same time.”

“Normally, I’d agree that it’s best to do them all at once, but I want to get the kitchen and what will be the primary suite done as soon as I can so I can move in. I hate living in temporary housing. I plan to get those two areas pretty much done and then move in. After that, I’ll go about things in a more efficient manner.”

“Why the rush? You know this neighborhood has yet to transition. I think it’ll be good down the road and there are several homes being renovated that will help. But right now, after dark, it’s not necessarily the best place for a woman to be alone.”

“But I won’t be alone. Nell and Dudley will be here with me.”

Ian raised an eyebrow.

“My basset hounds. They’re kind of like my kids and I’m not used to being separated from them.”

“Ah,” Ian said. “Thus the reason the fence was done first and is so secure. Do you plan to have them here while we’re working?”

“Yes, but they’ll be confined to the kitchen, primary suite, and backyard. I figured you and your guys could come and go through the front area.”

He raised a hand to scratch the back of his neck. “That should work unless we need to get into the back for something. I worry about sending my guys into a yard with aggressive dogs.”

Norris laughed. “You obviously don’t know bassets. About the only danger you or your guys will be in is getting beaten to death by their wagging tails or having your lunch stolen. Fair warning, they are both master manipulators and any and all food will be fair game.”

Ian chuckled, “I’ll consider myself warned and pass on the info to my guys. But they might not be the best thing for protection.”

Norris huffed out a laugh. Nell and Dudley would have Ian and his crew wrapped around their paws in a matter of days. “You’d be surprised. Most people up to no good don’t stick around to see what kind of dog it is, and bassets have a deep and loud bark. We won’t let it get around they could be had for the price of a cupcake.”

She could tell Ian was skeptical, but he let it go. That was good; she had no desire to argue with such a good-looking man... even less to prove him wrong.

“I’ll try and figure out the rest of the floor plan and if you’re available, based on what I’ve seen of your work, I’d like to see if you might have time to fit me in.”

“Depending on the timing, we should be able to accommodate you. I don’t want to commit until I find out about a rumor running around.”

It was Norris’ turn to silently ask a question with a raised eyebrow.

“There’s a rumor running around Charleston that one of the old historic homes overlooking the harbor has been purchased by some folks new to the area and there’s to be a major renovation. I’ve wanted to get my hands on one of those beauties since I moved down here from Boston several years ago. If the rumor is true, I want to ensure I have a competitive bid, which often means being able to give a quick start date.”

Norris’ lips twitched. “The Selbourne place?”

Ian’s face registered surprise that she might possibly know of the place.

“It’s a gorgeous old thing, isn’t it? I know the people who bought it.” She didn’t want to tip her hand that she was the interior designer and that it was Ted and Nancy Watson who had made the purchase. “You’re from Boston? I didn’t think your accent sounded southern.”

His grin was infectious, and Norris found herself responding in kind. She didn’t think she’d ever smiled so much in a single business meeting. “Said one Yankee to another. Style looks like New York or DC, but accent is more Midwest. Chicago?”

“Very good deductive reasoning. Born and raised in the Windy City, but only for the past few generations. Before that, my people called Charleston home. Well, I was just heading out. I’ll get everything sketched out and back to you for a bid in a day or two. Email work?”

“It can, but I’d prefer to go over the sketches here with you if that’s all right. That way if either of us has questions, we’re right in the space to figure it out. Would Friday afternoon work for you?”

“That sounds good. I’ll pencil it in, but it’ll depend on whether or not I have the time. I’m not really sure what my Friday is going to look like. I do have to work so that I can pay you.”

Ian laughed. “Okay, keep me posted.”

She walked out to her Land Rover and climbed in, conscious the entire time of his eyes on her. It made her equal parts self-conscious and flattered. She could feel the brush of her clothing—simple jeans and a t-shirt—against her skin as she walked, feeling the pull and stretch of her muscles as she moved them to climb into the Rover.

Did she look as awkward as she felt? Because she felt awkward.

Did her ass look big?

What about her hair...was there something in it?

She started to lift a hand to smooth her hair and stopped, annoyed with herself. Instead, she pulled herself into the seat and buckled up, then looked coolly over at the man still watching her from the doorway.

Lord, but his gaze was... intense. A little shiver shuddered along her spine.

As she started the vehicle, he raised his hand in a slight wave. She smiled, only faintly tremulously, and returned the gesture.

Outside Ted and Nancy Watson's new-old home in Charleston, Norris could see the signs of apprehension in Ted.

"Hit me with it, Ted," she said.

He flashed her an amused look, accustomed by now to her forthright attitude. "It's not the house, per se. It's just..." He tapped a finger to his bottom lip. "It's the scope of the work that would need to be done. Are you sure about this, Nancy? It's a lot of time, a lot of expense."

"Of course, I am! Don't you remember the transformation Norris made on our first home? Not to mention how quickly it sold when we decided to get a bigger place in a better location? Remember when she and I showed you that house? It was the same thing. Oh, my lord, I thought you were going to have heart failure."

"Yes, and the two of you were so excited." He rolled his eyes.

"And remember how much we loved that house and how excited you were when the magazine wanted to feature it in an article about old, vintage homes in Chicago and what could be done with them? I have complete faith in Norris. If she says it's going to be perfect, then it's going to be perfect."

Norris hugged Nancy. "There's my cheerleader." She shook her finger at Ted "Oh, ye of little faith. As Butch suggested to Sundance—there are two kinds of people in the world: some of us have vision and the rest of you wear bifocals."

Ted held up his hands in surrender. “I give up. I’m supposed to be this all-powerful CEO who can negotiate anything, but have I ever gotten my way against the two of you?”

Nancy and Norris laughed, and Norris looped Nancy’s arm through hers. “I don’t believe you have, but don’t let that stop you from continuing to try. Now come on in and let me show you what we’re planning. It’s going to be a lot of work, but I think in the end you’re going to love this home even more than the one in Chicago.”

Norris walked the couple through the large, once-charming home and explained her plans. One of her gifts was the ability to be able to explain things to a client in a way that they could see the end product in their mind’s eye. But her greatest gift was then being able to execute that vision in a way that surpassed her clients’ fondest dreams. By the time they left the house, Ted’s concerns had been allayed, and he admitted to being as excited as Nancy to watch Norris work her magic.

Norris watched them drive off, a small smile curving her lips. She had to admit to herself that she was a bit envious of their relationship. Their marriage was a true partnership. Ted was a highly successful non-profit CEO while Nancy kept their home and their family running smoothly. They had three great kids with whom they seemed to share a happy life.

Heading back to her vehicle, Norris started towards her temporary lodging but found herself drawn back to her house. As she drove back to her bungalow, she spotted a man putting some kind of small folding table out by his curb. She stopped and called to the man, “You putting this out for anyone to take?”

“Yep. You want it, it’s yours.”

Hmm.. It was the side of a wine shipping container that had been attached to folding legs like those found on a TV tray. Its vintage appeal was perfect for her sensibilities—particularly for a make-shift piece that might or might not last through a refurb project.

She tilted her head, visualizing it as a improvised desk and something to eat dinner off of in the living room until she was ready to invest in better pieces.

Perfect.

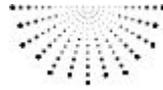
Folding it up, she put it in the back of her vehicle. Having found a makeshift desk, Norris stopped by an office supply store and picked up a nice office chair with adjustable back support. Long hours sitting in the hotel's chair wouldn't do a thing for her back. *All I have to do is get this back to the house and I can start working. Maybe it's even worth getting a blow-up bed. I could camp out in the house, save the money from the hotel and get Dudley and Nell a lot earlier than expected.* Having made up her mind, she headed back to the house.

She pulled into the driveway just as dusk was settling in. She propped the folding table onto the seat of her chair and rolled it into the house. Locating it in her primary suite by the window, she realized she'd need at least one lamp in order to move in. That was something she could purchase with the blow-up bed and comforter tomorrow. Setting up her laptop, she sat down to do a little work and became lost in it until the absence of any kind of good light was starting to hurt her eyes and give her a headache.

Knowing there was little more that she could do, she headed back to the hotel to sleep in a bed with covers and towels for a morning shower. As she backed out of the driveway onto the street, she didn't notice the nondescript

sedan with the solitary figure sitting inside, watching as she drove away.

CHAPTER TWO



Ian hated it when he had one of those lapses of memory where you can't remember if you've locked something or not. He prided himself on keeping the projects he was working on secure. He pulled into the bungalow's drive and noticed that Norris' Range Rover was there but there were no lights on, inside or out. Ian parked the truck and headed into the backyard, noting that the gate was unlocked. He made a mental note to point out to her that unlocked gates wouldn't provide much of a deterrent to anyone wanting to cause mischief. He put his hand on the backdoor knob, and it easily swung open. Not only wasn't it locked, but it hadn't even been pulled shut.

Ian was just turning around when Norris came through the arch from the kitchen into the laundry room with her back turned to him. As she turned, the silhouette of a large man inside her door caused her to shriek. She made the decision to disable first and ask questions later. Before Ian could utter a word, Norris swiftly landed a hard kick to his shin. As he bent forward, she brought the heel of her hand up and made painful contact with his chin. Ian grabbed her before she could do more damage, spinning her around so that her back was to him. Before he could say anything, she brought her head back

into his face, breaking his hold on her when he brought his hands up to his nose and groaned.

Norris spun around, ready to protect herself.

“Norris. It’s Ian Hunter.” He turned on the flashlight app of his phone and shined it on his face.

“Oh, my God, Ian. I’m so sorry. I didn’t see it was you. What are you doing here and why didn’t you announce yourself?”

“I’m here because I couldn’t remember for sure if I locked the place up when I left. And you didn’t give me a chance to announce anything.”

“Yeah, um, sorry about that. Did I hurt you?”

“Not much more than my pride.”

Norris shined his phone up into his face “It’s not your pride that’s bleeding. We probably should get your nose looked at. And my guess is you’re going to have at least one black eye.”

“As I said, my pride. Getting taken out by an interior designer is something my guys will never let me live down.” He wished there was better light so she could see he was smiling.

“I really would feel better if you’d let me take you to the emergency room and get that nose looked at.”

“Only if you’ll let me take you to dinner afterwards.” Ian surprised himself with the invitation. Admittedly, he had found Norris physically attractive this afternoon, but it was her easy, confident manner that made him want to ignore his general rule about getting involved with clients.

Norris side-eyed him. “I’m the one that injured you. Shouldn’t I be the one to buy dinner?”

“You haven’t been in the south long, have you? No self-respecting southern gentleman lets a lady buy him dinner.”

“I see. And do most of those ladies know how to damage said gentleman’s face?”

He didn’t need light to hear the grin in her voice. “Not the point. And for the record, I walked into a door.”

That made her laugh out loud. “I stand corrected. Okay. Let’s go to the ER, and if you still feel like it, we can grab dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan.” They walked out, with Ian making sure the deadbolt was thrown on the back door. “You probably should get an alarm system installed before you move in.”

“Might not be a bad idea to have one installed, but I think I’m going to move in this weekend.”

“This weekend? We won’t have that kitchen anywhere near ready to go.”

“But you could get the shower and toilet ready, right? That’s all I need. I’ll get a blow-up bed, a barbecue grill, a Keurig, and a hot plate. The hounds and I can camp until the rest is ready.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Norris. I think you at least need the bathroom completely set up, an alarm system installed, and some good outside lighting. I’m assuming you were just going to go with lighting you can plug in for now?”

Norris waved him off. “No, it’ll be fine. The hounds and I love to camp. Now, come on, let’s get in the Rover and I’ll drive you to the ER.”

“And how, pray tell, are you getting past my truck? No, we’ll take my truck and after dinner I can drive you back and make sure you get in your Rover safely before heading back to your hotel.”

Realizing that his truck was indeed blocking the single car driveway, she saw no need to get into an argument about who drove. “Fine with me. You can bleed all over your front seat instead of mine.”

Ian walked beside her to the passenger side of his truck and opened the door. She got in and he closed it for her. “You sure you weren’t born and bred in the south? You seem to have that southern gentleman thing down pat.”

“Just good manners. My dad still opens the door for my mom, walks on the outside of the street and all that kind of stuff. She tells him all the time that he’s a bit of a chauvinist, but secretly I think she really likes it.”

They talked about what had prodded each of them to leave their hometowns and move to Charleston. Both had been looking for more temperate weather, the ocean, and a new start. Ian had left a relationship that had gone sour when he found his girl was also seeing another man. For Norris, it was simply the excitement of a new city and starting her own interior design firm.

Nose taped together after visiting the emergency room, he had asked Norris what she wanted for dinner. Her reply had pleased him.

“A great place for burgers, brew, and live Irish music if Charleston has such a place.”

“Haven’t been in Charleston long, have you? Charleston is a real foodie town. If you can figure out what you want to eat,

you can find a place that serves it, and serve it better than any place in Boston or Chicago.”

Ian headed his truck toward Magellan’s, one of his favorite brew pubs. They had a unique way of doing burgers. You could either order them cooked or they’d bring a raw patty to your table and light the small grill in the center, allowing you to cook it to your own liking. It also boasted one of the best selections of micro-brews in the city, and there was live Irish music most every night.

They were in luck. Just as they pulled in, a car was pulling out from right in front. Norris hopped out of the truck before Ian could get out to open the door for her.

We’re going to have to work on that.

For some reason, it pleased him to think of pursuing a relationship with Norris. He did manage to open the door to the restaurant and was happy that Sandy, one of the hostesses he knew, was working.

“Hey, Ian. How’s my favorite contractor? Oh, my God, what happened to your nose?”

Before he could respond, Norris quipped, “He ran into a door. He wanted me to tell everyone he got beat up by a street gang, but it was just his own clumsiness.”

Ian rolled his eyes as Sandy laughed.

“I’m sure a good burger, your favorite ale, and some music will fix you right up. I think your favorite booth is open. Want it?” Ian nodded and let her lead them through the crowd.

Norris liked this place. The music was surprisingly good, and the atmosphere welcoming and a bit seductive. As they sat down in the booth, Norris picked up the menu and said, “Bring all your clients here who hurt your face?”

“Not generally, but then you have the distinction of being the first one. It’s just me and I don’t really cook. Give me meat and a fire and I can keep you from starving, but that is the extent of my culinary expertise. If you don’t like it here, we can go someplace else. There’s one of the big chain burger places not far from here.”

“No. I think this place is perfect. But why is there a grill in the middle of our table?”

“You can order your burger cooked medium to well. Or if you want, they’ll bring your patty to you raw, light up the grill and you can cook it for yourself. Then, if they like you and you tip well, they’ll even offer to bring you the makings for s’mores afterwards.”

“Yum! I see they know you and the hostess seemed to like you. So, do you tip well?”

“Like a drunken sailor on shore leave trying to get lucky.”

Ian was glad she laughed, as he hadn’t meant to be that bold. More and more, the idea of Norris becoming more than a client appealed to him.

Unable to decide on which kind of burger they wanted, they agreed to each get a different one and then split them. Ian convinced Norris that it was only tourists who had their burgers cooked on the kitchen grill. Locals always cooked their own and had then proceeded to grill them to perfection. Each burger came with soup or salad and a choice of regular or sweet potato fries. They opted to get one of each and split the soup, the salad and both kinds of fries.

Ian had opted for a pale ale while Norris chose Diet Coke. They listened to the music, ate, and enjoyed each other’s company. As they were listening to the music and roasting

their marshmallows for the s'mores, Ian reached across the table to take her hand, surprising himself as much as her, judging from the expression on her face. Despite that, she didn't withdraw it and after a moment had taken hold of his, as well. Before they left, their fingers had become comfortably entwined. She shared with him some of her plans for her home, and he again cautioned her that while he thought it would prove to be a good investment, for now it wasn't the safest place for a woman on her own.

He was reiterating that point when they walked out to the truck with Ian's hand at the small of her back. Because he was standing beside her, Ian was able to get the passenger side door open for her. Getting in on the driver's side he finished with, "Seriously, Norris, I don't feel like you'd be safe. At least let me get a security system installed. I could have it and the bathroom done by this time next week."

She shook her head. "No, I really want to be able to go get the hounds Friday night or early Saturday morning and be able to get them settled in before I have to start doing work things on Monday."

"I don't feel right about it, but I can see you're not willing to listen to reason. Do you have a job lined up down here?"

"In a manner of speaking. I plan to open my own boutique firm. I have one client signed on already and have meetings with a couple of others early next week. That's part of the reason I want to get out of the hotel. I don't do well in hotels without my dogs. I just need a place that I can relax and recharge. And yes, I know you don't think that's my house at this point."

"You're right about that."

“So you’re agreeing to be the general contractor for my renovation?”

“Yes. You’re just going to have to put up with me being there with my crew probably more than you’d like until we get it to where I feel it’s safe.”

“Did you forget this is *my* house and *my* life? Southern gentleman thing aside, I’m the one who’s writing the check, which means I’m the one who gets to make the decisions.”

Ian pulled into the drive and prevented her from getting out. “You may be the one writing the checks, but I’m the one who has to live with it if something happens to you. You know I’m right, but you’re just being stubborn. Please, Norris. Just let me make the place safe before you move in.”

“I’m moving in on Saturday, but you can work overtime if you like, and I’ll pay for it and I’ll even let you put in an alarm system. How’s that for a compromise?”

“Compromise? Let’s see: you’ll be doing exactly what you want, the way you want, and the only thing you’re willing to compromise on is letting me work double time to make the place a little less dangerous.”

Norris patted his thigh “See? Compromise.” He heard her laugh as she got out of the truck and headed towards her Range Rover.

Jumping out of the truck, he beat her to the driver’s side door of her car. “You are stubborn as all get out.”

“No. I’m a regular pain in the ass. Ask any of my former boyfriends.”

I’d like to give you a pain in the ass to make you do what I know is right.

It had not escaped his notice that she had a lovely ass. It made his hand twitch and his cock come alive.

God, he'd love to see her over his knee, naked. He shook his head. It had been a long time since he'd felt strongly enough about a woman to think about staking a claim and making her mind his.

That's something I can do something about. He was surprised by that thought. He'd only met her earlier this afternoon, but something told him that Norris Wingate might be what he'd been looking for most of his adult life.

Ian was still leaning against the door, preventing her from opening it. "Ian, I need you to move so I can get in my car and go back to my dreary hotel room with its less than comfy bed."

Ian touched her cheek and when she didn't pull away, but instead looked up at him with steady, curious eyes, he lowered his head and waited to see if she'd turn her face up and offer him her mouth.

He could see and read every thought flashing through that insanely honest gaze like the neon sign at Brady's Bar down on Fifth Street. She didn't need a man. But maybe she wanted one. Or was curious. Just interested enough, regardless, that she wanted to feel his lips against hers. Inclining her head was all the invitation he needed.

He brought his mouth down on hers and kissed her, softly at first and then with increasing need. From the initial clumsiness of the way her mouth met his, he suspected it had been a while since she had been kissed. From the little hitch in her breath, quickly captured, he suspected it had been even longer since she been kissed by a man who knew how and enjoyed doing it.

As his tongue slipped past her teeth to tantalize the inside of her mouth, he felt her sag against the car where he had her pressed against its warm metal surface. His rational mind went into neutral and his libido went into overdrive at the obvious effect he had on her.

Ian's face was still close to hers when he whispered, "You don't have to go back to that less than comfy bed."

"Yes, I do."

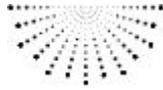
She hadn't rejected his advances so far, so Ian kissed her again, this time with even more feeling. He was pleased when she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his. Against the car, he parted her thighs with one of his own. "You sure?" he whispered.

"No," she admitted. "But I'm afraid we'll both regret it if we don't."

Disappointed, Ian put some space between them. "You might be right." He kissed her again, softly this time. "I'll wait until you're in the car and have backed out of the driveway. Can we meet somewhere for breakfast?"

She smiled, grateful that he was in fact a southern gentleman, if only a recent transplant. She wasn't sure she'd have said no if he'd kept kissing her.

CHAPTER THREE



When her phone rang the following morning, Norris smiled as she recognized the number as being Ian's. "Good morning. Do southern gentlemen usually call at this hour?"

"Probably not, but you have to remember I'm still one of those Yankee upstarts. And my daddy always told me the early bird gets the worm." There was a note of satisfaction in his voice, likely, she figured, that she had recognized his number.

I'll have to make him work a little harder.

With that thought in mind, she decided to tease him a bit. "Are you calling me a worm? That's no way to get a lady to agree to have breakfast with you."

He laughed. "A figure of speech, but your point is well taken. I might even feel a little guilty except for two things."

"And what might those things be?"

"One, I never feel guilty for things I've done deliberately and with some thought put into them, and two, you don't sound like I woke you up."

"Would you have preferred to have awakened me?"

"Not with a phone call, but I wouldn't have minded giving you a soft nudge."

Norris laughed out loud. “I’ll keep that in mind. For the record, I’ve been up for hours. So, are we going to breakfast? I’m hungry.”

“That’s the plan. Why don’t I pick you up and I’ll drop you back off at your hotel when we’re done.”

“That would be problematic as I’m at the house. Dropping me at the hotel wouldn’t be all that efficient. But you could swing by here and drop me back off if you’d like.”

The sun was only now beginning to get high enough in the sky that her neighborhood was marginally safe. “What time did you get there this morning?”

“About five.”

“Are you kidding me? Didn’t we talk about that neighborhood really not being safe when it’s dark out?” Ian’s tone registered more than a bit of annoyance.

His worrying over her felt endearing rather than irritating. And here she’d almost convinced herself that he wasn’t as good a kisser as she remembered from last night. “Oh, you fussed about it, and I ignored your fussing.”

She didn’t trouble to hide the laughter in her voice.

“At least you’re honest about ignoring me. At some point, I’m liable to give you reason not to. Ignore me, that is.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Are you coming to pick me up or do you want me to meet you?”

“I’ll come get you. Shouldn’t take me more than fifteen, maybe twenty minutes.”

As Ian pulled into the drive, he smiled. She returned the smile as she leaned up against the back of her Range Rover waiting for him. He hopped out as she surprised both herself

and him when she reached up to pull his head down for a long kiss.

As she ended the kiss, she drew back slowly, her finger tracing the line of her own bottom lip. “I tried to convince myself this morning that I remembered the kiss from last night as better than it was.”

He put his arm around her as he guided her to his truck. “You were wrong.”

“I really am quite capable of opening my own car door.”

Ian nodded and took the opportunity to kiss her a second time. “I’m sure you are. I’m just as sure you can get used to having me open it for you. Right?”

“Perhaps.”

He closed the door and walked around the hood of the truck to get in. “Do you ever give ground?”

“Rarely. And never unless it’s the right man.”

“And how does one go about becoming the right man?”

“Being able to kiss like that will go a long way.”

“Then I’ll have to do it more often.”

“Oh, goody. I was hoping you’d say that.”

Ian laughed out loud. “You are incorrigible.”

“I know. As I said, just check with my old boyfriends.”

“Not sure I want to check with your old boyfriends about anything.”

“Probably a good idea. After all, if they’d been much good for anything, they probably wouldn’t be ex-boyfriends.”

“Savage.”

She shrugged. “I prefer honest.”

They arrived at one of Ian’s favorite places for breakfast. Not fancy, but the food was good, and the menu was wide and varied. They discovered that they both had a fondness for omelets but once again couldn’t decide between two so agreed to order one of each and split them. Ian also let her know that they made a great hashbrown casserole and that their cheese grits soufflé was to die for. So, as they had the night before, they ordered one of each and split them.

Norris eyed him across the table.

“What?” he asked, mouth full of food.

She lifted her shoulder a little, forking up a bite of her own omelet. “I don’t know. This is just... easy, I guess. Maybe too easy.”

“What do you mean?”

This was awkward.

“I mean...” She felt like a kid passing a note in Reading class. *I like your hair. Do you like mine? Do you want to be my boyfriend? Check Yes or No.* “We just kind of vibe, you know? We have similar taste in food and you’re easy to be with. It feels more like catching up with someone than just getting to know someone.”

Ian wiped his hands on a napkin, his eyes narrowing. “Is that a problem?”

“No! It’s just... different. I don’t... just ignore me.” She was flustered. She didn’t like the feeling. Determined to ignore it, Norris turned her attention to her food and applied herself to eating.

When they were both finished and Ian had paid the bill, Norris made a beeline for the door, wanting to forget her stumbling attempt at an explanation. Ian followed her out of the restaurant and could see she was headed for the truck well ahead of him. He caught up with her and before she could protest about the damn door or stick her foot in her mouth over anything else, he bent his head down and kissed her open mouth.

She went slack immediately, barely noticing when he gripped the door frame and held it open. She was too focused on the hand sliding down her back and briefly caressing her backside as he broke the kiss. “Get in the truck.”

Dazed, she stared up at him. “Huh?”

“Get in the truck.”

Glancing to the side, she noticed the open door. “Oh.” The corner of her mouth twitched and she shook her head. “You...” Without finishing the sentence, she got in the truck.

A short while later, he pulled up to her house, but not into the driveway. He didn’t want her blocked in as she went about her daily activities.

As Norris reached for the door handle, Ian reached across her, gently pulled her hand away and put it in her lap. “Stay. I’ll come around and open it for you.”

“You’re really going to push the whole opening doors for me, aren’t you?”

“Yep. And I’m really going to push the whole kissing-you thing.”

A giggle escaped before she could restrain herself. “Oh, goody.”

He laughed, then came around and opened the door to his truck and helped her out, taking a moment to steal a quick kiss. When it didn't last very long, he was glad to see the disappointment and the question in her eyes. "I don't need my crew giving either of us a bad time about my bruised face or my dating you."

"Is that what we're doing? Dating?"

"Well, you haven't been seeing anyone else but me since yesterday, have you?" he teased.

"Point taken. But I don't know about dating my contractor."

"Why, don't like your men all hot and sweaty?"

"Actually, I prefer them that way, only not necessarily on a job site."

"Where do you like them to be all hot and sweaty?"

"Naked, in my bed, of course."

Ian laughed out loud. He did that a great deal around her—laughed, that was. Was that just his way, or was it her? Or the two of them together? And why couldn't she turn off the questions in her head? This was ridiculous. With difficulty, Norris brought herself back to Ian. He was still talking. "Hey, I offered you my bed last night and you turned me down in favor of a lumpy hotel mattress. That's on you."

She made a face at him and headed towards the front door. She looked over her shoulder as she sashayed away from him and wondered what he was thinking. Was he wondering the same things she was? How easily he made her laugh or how easily he aroused her without even trying? It was probably a good thing that his guys would be there any minute and that there wasn't a blow-up bed in that back room.

He caught up with her and used his key to open the front door. She rolled her eyes at him. “You have a serious problem, you know that, right?”

He spun her around as he closed the door behind them and leaned her against it. “I don’t think it’s a problem at all. But I will tell you I’m beginning to have serious feelings for you.”

Her eyes sparkled as she reached up to pull his head down for another kiss. Just before their lips met, she whispered “It’s too early for that.”

He pulled back a fraction, just enough that she could see the truth in his gaze. “It is what it is.” Then his lips landed on hers, and she ceased to think, to question, to do anything more than feel...for the space of time they had until his men started arriving.

Sam Harris continued his patterned grid search as he had every morning for the last year. The task would have been far easier to accomplish had he been able to actually set up a grid. That was impossible. He didn’t want anyone to know where he was searching or that he was searching at all.

Looking for pirate treasure had always been popular on the coast of the Carolinas. The fact that every so often someone hit the mother lode made it more so. When coupled with the popularity of the show *Black Sails*, there were mornings it was downright crowded on the beach.

Most amateur treasure hunters were looking for the lost treasure of Blackbeard. Harris felt if it existed at all, it was most likely on one of the islands on the Outer Banks. Others were obsessed with Calico Jack or several other pirates who

were thought to have been the model for Robert Lewis Stevenson's Long John Silver.

After years of studying the pirates who flourished in that area of the coast, he knew that Calico Jack had died almost penniless, known for his wild spending ways. Further, the fictional character of Long John Silver had been based on the author's friend, who was a writer and editor.

It was the female pirate Anne Bonny who had fascinated him in all the research he had done. Not much was known about her life except for a very brief two- to three-year period during which she had pirated with Calico Jack.

When Jack and the rest of her shipmates had been caught by the Royal Navy, she and fellow pirate Mary Read had 'pled their bellies' and had escaped the hangman's noose. Read had purportedly died in childbirth. There were numerous theories about what had happened to Anne and to the money she might have earned in her brief pirating career.

He was most intrigued by persistent rumors of Anne squirreling away the riches she earned and then burying them somewhere along the South Carolina coastline before she settled into a life of domesticity.

Harris had been searching for years, trying to figure out what had happened to Anne—if she'd actually had any treasure to bury and where that treasure might lie. After poring over many public records and first-hand accounts of the pirates, and trying to glean the kernels of truth from the legends, he had become convinced that Anne had settled in Charleston with her father after he had bought her freedom and a pardon for her illegal activities.

One persistent rumor was of a longstanding family legend that Anne had buried a great fortune. It was said that its

location had been passed down from mother to first-born daughter in each generation. The story was that she had done so in order to ensure that her female descendants would never feel trapped in a life they didn't want.

The fact that one such daughter—an eighth granddaughter from Chicago—had recently moved back to her ancestral home and bought a small bungalow with a view towards the very area he was searching had not gone unnoticed by Harris. He wondered what she knew. Did she have any clues or secrets to which he was not privy? It was unlikely that it was mere coincidence, especially as one afternoon he had followed her to the pirate exhibition in one of

Charleston's many museums.

No, Norris Wingate knew something. She had to. He just had to figure out what, exactly.

As the crew pulled up, Ian reluctantly broke off his embrace with Norris. She sighed and gave him one last brief kiss before whispering, "We might want to rethink how tall that shower head should be," as she turned and headed toward the back of the house.

He swatted her playfully, causing her to let out a small yelp and one of what was fast becoming a trademark infectious giggle.

Ian outlined for his crew what they needed to get done and a somewhat modified schedule. He let them know that the first order of business was getting the floors in the back parlor and kitchen area done because the client wanted to be able to move in sometime next week.

Norris smiled upon overhearing that and interrupted. “No, the client is going to move in on Friday, Saturday at the latest. I’ll just be sleeping on an air mattress, so I can have everything out of your way if the floors aren’t finished by then.”

Ian growled at her, startling his crew and pulling a laugh from her.

She went back to work in her make-shift office and was putting the last of the day’s to-do list together when he joined her.

“Norris, the floors won’t have time to properly cure before then and you can’t be on them while that’s happening. I know you don’t like having to wait. I get that, but it can only be done so fast. With dogs you’ll want at least three coats of poly, and you need to wait twenty-four hours between each. Even if we get it sanded and stained today—which is being really optimistic—we couldn’t put down the first coat of poly until tomorrow, so that makes it Wednesday. Then successive coats Thursday and Friday and at least twenty-four hours after that to walk on it. With the dogs considered, forty-eight hours would be better.”

“So you’re saying Sunday is the earliest? And I’m also hearing I can’t even work here until then, right?”

Ian nodded. He wanted to be sympathetic, but he really didn’t want her here until he could have a security system installed. “And here’s the thing, I called a buddy of mine who does security systems. You won’t find a better guy at a better price. I asked him for a favor, but they can’t have it set up and ready to go until Monday or Tuesday of next week. So why don’t you plan on going to get your dogs on Tuesday or Wednesday of next week and moving in then?”

She shook her head. “I already told Judy I was coming for them on Friday. She wanted me to stay over Friday and Saturday, so I guess that’s what I’ll do. But between now and then I’m going to get some kind of mattress and other essentials I’ll need.” Seeing him scowl, she reached out to touch his arm. “I’ll be fine. Really. You don’t have to worry.”

It was his turn to shake his head. “You don’t get to tell me what to worry about. I don’t want you here until the security system is installed.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Ian. This is Charleston. I’m used to living in Chicago, and you have first-hand knowledge that I’m able to defend myself. Or have you forgotten that it wasn’t a door that damaged your nose?”

“I haven’t forgotten, but I also know I wasn’t trying to hurt you. Just think about it, please?”

She didn’t want to argue with him, but her mind was made up. “Fine. I’ve got some things to pick up and then I need to meet with some people about a small office space I saw down on the waterfront.”

As she went to move past him, he caught her by the arm. “Dinner?”

She relented and smiled. “Okay. Do you want to meet some place, or should I just come back here about six o’clock?”

His relief was evident. “Let’s meet here at six. If you decide you’re hungry for something in particular, give me a call. Otherwise, we can go to one of my other favorite local haunts.” He bent down and kissed her, not as deeply as he had earlier in the day, but more than just a friendly kiss.

“I thought you didn’t want your crew to see you kissing the boss.”

“Let ‘em get their own girl.”

“So, I’m your girl now, am I?”

“Nobody else’s,” he said with mock severity.

She grinned and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth. “Oh, goody.”

CHAPTER FOUR



The next few days were a flurry of activity. Ian kept after his crew to get the work on her house done. While they were sanding the hardwood floors, he had the tile installed for the primary bath. He'd encouraged Norris at the least to choose a vanity and toilet so she could live there without having to resort to using the port-a-potty.

She'd laughed at his expression when the antique chifferobe arrived with the small sink.

He mumbled something about Lowe's and Home Depot, but she was sure he'd love it once it was installed.

It was a unique piece in that one side was tall and had been meant for hanging clothes, while the other was a taller, counter-height piece with drawers. Knowing what she had wanted from the beginning, Norris had designed the space so that the plumbing came out of the wall as opposed to up from the floor. In this way, she'd only lose one of the drawers, but would be able to utilize the other two. She asked Ian if he had someone who could add shelves to the hanging space for storage. The lower part of the piece had a warm, caramel colored, polished stone which would have a whole cut in it to accommodate the sink and plumbing. She'd also found a small, vintage, oval mirror that would fit perfectly over the

shorter portion of the chifforobe between the counter and the light fixture.

They had fallen into an easy routine. Ian would meet her at the house about 5:30 in the morning and then they'd go to breakfast. They'd come back to the house, and she'd do some work while he got some things ready to go on other job sites. Then he'd meet with the crew he had working on her house before she headed out to finalize plans for her new office space, and to meet with new clients. They would meet back at the house somewhere around four and then leave for dinner about six with Ian bringing her back to the house to pick up her Range Rover.

She'd finally relented about letting him open doors for her but had quickly started trying to outmaneuver him for the check. She'd managed to get it paid before he could a couple of times, but he'd taken to going places where he was well-known and knew he could get the check paid before it ever got to the table. She'd protested, but he'd simply kissed her, having found that was the easiest and most pleasurable way to shut her up.

It hadn't taken his crew long to figure out that Norris was more than just a client. A few had remarked that there were going to be a lot of broken hearts when the local belles realized Ian was, for all intents and purposes, off the market. And when Norris had left for the day, he was often harassed by his guys that they were having to work extra hard in order to make his girl happy. He'd pointed out he expected them to do an outstanding job for every client. They'd all laughed and assured him they did but pointed out he'd been paying this job even closer attention than usual.

He shrugged. They weren't wrong.

On Thursday as the crew were leaving, one of them, newly married, had gone so far as to ask him if he had decided what he would do with his downtown loft. When Ian had made a sharp response, the young man, Beau, said “I just figured she has her dogs, so you guys would be here. We’re going to be looking for a place and I thought if you were going to lease out your loft...”

Ian hadn’t thought that far ahead. He assured Beau that if it looked like he wasn’t going to be living in the loft, he’d let him know. Beau thanked him, then said, “You know, Ian, for all the crap we’ve been giving you, we all think Norris is a special gal and you two seem really good together.”

Ian clapped him on the shoulder and had to agree with him.

Norris rolled up and Ian watched her get out of her car and then turned to watch the street. As usual, it was quiet, except for the crew starting their engines and heading out. Ian saw nothing, but said to her, “Hey beautiful, how was your day?” When she said nothing, he asked, “Anything wrong?”

“Not really. Well, maybe something. I had a funny feeling all day like I was being watched. Honestly, it’s nothing. I’m fine!”

“Did something happen? Did you see someone or something strange?”

“I don’t have anything to base it on other than a feeling.”

Ian scrubbed a hand over his face. “That’s it. You’re not moving in until the security system is installed.”

She shook her head, “Can we not argue about that? It’s our last dinner before I leave to go get the dogs.”

“I don’t want to argue either, but I wasn’t comfortable with you being here by yourself *before* you thought someone was stalking you.”

“I didn’t say anyone was stalking me. I just had a creepy feeling a couple of times today that someone was following me.”

“There’s a fine line between following and stalking.”

She reached up and kissed him to the cheers of the few remaining crew members. Ian frowned. He wasn’t the only one who had found that kissing was an effective method of ending a disagreement. He wasn’t having it, though. This conversation was not over. He didn’t care that they were still tiptoeing on the fringes of a relationship, testing the waters of something real. He cared about her, cared about her safety.

He waited until they were in the house and the door was closed before he swatted her rear end. “We’re not through with this discussion.”

Norris ignored him and went to peek at the floors. “They look gorgeous, Ian. Even better than I’d hoped.”

He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her back to his front and said, “Changing the subject won’t work, either.”

She turned in his arms and wrapping her arms around his neck, rubbed her body against his.

“What would?”

“Keep that up and I won’t be taking you to dinner, that’s for sure.”

“Where would you take me instead?”

“To my bed.” He waited to see how she’d respond.

She had made no further protests over the past few days when he'd kissed her and run his hands over her body. They were both old enough to recognize the signs of arousal in each other. He hadn't gone so far as to truly fondle her. He didn't want to rush her but knew if he ever got his hands or lips on any bare flesh other than her face or arms, he'd want to get between her thighs and claim her.

“You've had worse ideas.”

“Then why don't you, Dudley, and Nell stay at the loft for a couple of nights when you get back?”

“Only a couple of nights?” she teased.

“You can stay as long as you want, but as you said, you bought this house and specifically fenced this yard so they'd have a place to play and could go in and out as they pleased.”

“Why don't we go by the organic grocery store and pick up some things and go back to your place? I can cook you dinner.”

“You're assuming my kitchen is up to your gourmet cooking level.”

“I know you bought that place and renovated it. You're smart enough to know that kitchens sell homes and you've said that at some point you're going to want to move into a single-family residence.”

He was inclined to ask her if she had any particular single-family residences in mind but decided not to push. It was early days yet. “How do I know you won't give me food poisoning?”

“Because I'm smarter than to switch contractors mid-renovation. Especially when the one I have is doing such a good job on my home.”

“A fact which hasn’t gone unnoticed by my crew, I’ll have you know.”

She laughed. “Yeah, they didn’t seem too surprised by that kiss.”

He put his arm around her and led her back out to the truck. He held open the door for her as she got in and then kissed her. “You’re getting so good about that.”

“Ugh. It just seems too silly to keep getting riled up about.”

He laughed and got in the driver’s side. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he caught a glimpse of the same compact car he’d seen driving down the road when she first came in. Not wanting to alarm her, he didn’t say anything.

Going through the grocery store was fun. They already knew they liked the same foods and flavor profiles, but Ian hadn’t lied when he said he knew little to nothing about cooking. They’d picked up a lovely fillet of triggerfish that Ian said he could easily grill. Norris decided to pair that with some locally sourced long beans, as well as wild rice and a nice balsamic vinaigrette sauce.

Although he wasn’t aware, Norris had been unable to avoid the temptation to drive by Ian’s converted loft space. Now, she couldn’t wait to get inside, though Ian had warned her it was sparsely furnished. Ian grabbed up the groceries and they went inside. Spying a pair of doors leading outdoors, she walked straight through to the balcony and stepped out. She gasped when she saw the view for the first time. It was spectacular, with city and sea stretching out before her like a carpet of lights and black velvet. “This is gorgeous, Ian.”

Ian wasn't looking at the same view she was, but responded anyway. "Yes, it is."

Even from the other side of the loft she could hear the lust in his voice and an answering flicker within her started to grow. She turned around to face him. "See something you like?"

"Not the view I want, but I suppose it'll do."

"And what, pray tell, would you like to see?" she teased.

"I think you know what I'd like to see—you naked."

The smile that came over her face was stunning. "Really? You seem to have developed a keen and sudden interest in seeing me without my clothes on."

Ian started across the loft towards her, setting the bag of groceries down on the breakfast bar. "Oh, there's nothing sudden about it. I've wanted to see you naked almost from the first moment I saw you." He reached for her and pulled her into his embrace. "And judging from your reaction, I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual." He leaned down and kissed her, enjoying the way she clung to him and returned the kiss, deepening it of her own accord.

"The thought has crossed my mind a time or two," she said smiling as she sagged into him, letting his body cradle hers, enjoying the feeling of his hard cock pressing against her.

Ian, in turn, loved the feel of her hardened nipples rubbing against his torso. He let his hands slide down her back until he was cupping her ass with both hands. She needed little encouragement to press against him harder. "We need to get dinner ready."

Norris looked at him with incredulity "Really? You want me to make you dinner?"

He chuckled. “Only because I want to feed you before I take you to bed and ravish you.”

She giggled, a breath of sound. “Perhaps I’ll be the one who does the ravishing.”

“Not in my bed you won’t,” he assured her. “Now go back inside and let me get the grill going.” He pushed her towards the kitchen and again swatted her backside. Her response was not a yelp, but a rather contented sigh. He hoped that he’d only have to playfully swat her but was fairly sure that wouldn’t always be the case.

Ian went to work getting the grill going. While he knew that gas grills were easier, they weren’t able to impart the same depth of flavor that a charcoal or wood fired grill could. He had just gotten the fire going well enough to leave so that it could burn down to nice hot coals when he turned around to see Norris in the kitchen.

It hit him suddenly, a quick punch to the solar plexus.

She just looks right. .

He knew it wasn’t a matter of her being in his home or in his kitchen. It was more that she was with him. They were together. It felt like something had clicked into place, where nothing really had until now.

He returned inside feeling vaguely unsettled and hiding it as best he could. It wasn’t time to talk about such things. He concentrated instead on helping Norris put together a simple but excellent meal. Both knew where they wanted the evening to end and neither had any reservations.

When the dishes had been cleared away, Ian surprised her by sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her to the bedroom. A moment of solemnity passed between them. Then

the moment was gone, and he put her down, kissing her with a passion and hunger that she returned. They helped each other undress and Ian lay her back on his bed.

“God, you’re even more beautiful than I imagined.”

He loved how she blushed when he said that, but the only sound she made was one of pleasure as he lay down beside her and pulled her close. He began kissing her mouth as at last his hand reached out to cup her breast. He flicked her nipple with his thumb and was encouraged by her low moan.

She kissed him deeply, sucking on his tongue. At the same time, she flexed her fingers into his rippling muscles, moaning her appreciation as her fingers traveled the length of his spine. Freeing his lips, Ian kissed his way down the column of her throat, his low, feral growl causing gooseflesh to tighten her nipples.

The invitation was not to be ignored. His lips found the center of her areola and sucked—hard—first on one, then the other. All the while, his hands roamed over every inch they could, first with gentle feather-like agility, then with more urgency, his fingers pinching and pulling her tortured, needy nipples. The arch of her back and the lift of her hips told him she was eager for more. Her hand reached between them, but he took firm hold, lifting it over her head. “Stay.”

“What do you think I am?” she asked breathlessly and would have said more had it not been for Ian’s mouth leaving her nipple and reclaiming her mouth.

As his tongue pressed between her lips, his hand parted her legs and played briefly with her clit before slipping between the lips of her slit to explore her heated, molten core. This caused her to break their kiss as she flung her head back to gasp in pleasure. Ian kissed his way back to her breasts to feast

on them as he slowly and then with more speed stroked her sex.

“Ian,” she moaned.

He did not answer her with words, but by increasing his attention to her body. He couldn't repress a very masculine chuckle as her body surrendered to his and she came hard and long. He kissed his way back up her neck, removing his fingers from her pussy to come up and play with her clit.

As her arousal began to quickly build again, he whispered in her ear, “I'll bet I can make you give ground now.”

He cut off any verbal response she might have had by once again plunging his tongue into her mouth, mimicking the way he'd just fingered her and the way he planned to stroke that same hot center with his cock. He moved over her and nudged her legs apart.

Ian kissed her deeply as he slipped his hands under her to take hold of her bottom to position her for his cock to thrust deep inside of her for the first time. He filled her more fully than she'd expected but she reveled in the absolute feeling of possession that enveloped her. Ian was a strong and skilled lover. She wanted to move of her own accord but he held her in place as he fucked her so there was no question as to who was in charge. All she could do was grasp his arms and then his back, and then his ass as he continued to drive into her with more speed and force as time went on. He brought her to climax several times before she could feel him start to reach his own finish.

He continued to kiss her mouth and face and murmur words of love and sex and encouragement. She found she couldn't help but respond more passionately with each stroke. Ian could feel his own climax starting to build. He felt as

though he couldn't get deep enough or stroke her hard enough. It was taking everything in him not to pound away at her and come. He wanted not only to master her body, but to ensure he'd maximized her pleasure before finding his own release.

Norris' fingers had been flexing along his back down to his buttocks and back up again. As his tempo increased and she came yet again he felt her rake his back with her nails. His only response was to once again capture her mouth and conquer it. As he released her mouth and nuzzled her neck, his own climax built.

She whispered in his ear, "Now, Ian. Please."

He thrust deeply one final time as he erupted into the very depths of her body. He cried out her name as he came, spurting thick ropes of his cum into her core.

Ian's body began to still. He liked that she didn't seem to want to uncouple from him. He felt the thin sheen of perspiration on both of their bodies.

She nuzzled his neck and nipped his ear lobe before whispering, "See, I told you I liked my men hot and sweaty and in my bed."

He chuckled. "I suppose I could take issue with the fact that it isn't your bed. But given how good you feel and that I want you in it as often as possible, I could settle for 'our' bed. And I'm not the only one who's hot and sweaty."

She giggled as she kissed him, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his upper thighs. "Genteel people know that a lady never sweats; she simply glows."

Not inclined to leave the space he'd just claimed as his, he didn't move, but said, "Sweetheart, there's nothing genteel

about the way we just fucked. But if that's your idea of glowing, I'm going to have to work harder the next time."

She giggled again. "You do that any harder and I'm not going to be able to walk."

Ian woke, not for the first time since they had fallen asleep in each other's arms, to find his bed empty. He'd awakened twice earlier, once of his own accord and once at Norris' invitation to make love again. They had found an easy, natural rhythm to their passion.

Ian rolled out of his bed and checked the primary bath. Not finding her there, he grabbed a pair of jeans and walked out into the open living space of the loft, buttoning up his fly. The aroma of something wonderful cooking reached his nostrils. He paused in the doorway, the corner of his lips twitching as he saw her standing at the stove top. Her hair was still messy and she seemed to have adopted one of his chambray shirts as her own.

"Well, there you are sleepy head. The sun's come up over the horizon."

"What can I say, someone tuckered me out last night with her demands."

He joined her in the kitchen, coming up behind her to wrap his arms around her. He bent to kiss her neck and run his hands along her body, stopping briefly to let them caress each breast and slip between her legs. The fact that she was wet again made his cock start to harden.

Norris responded by leaning back into him and turning her mouth up to his for a kiss. “My demands? As I recall, you and that battering ram you keep between your legs were the ones doing most of the demanding.”

He chuckled as memories from the night before and her passionate responses came flooding back. His cock began to throb, wanting to get free from its confines and back into her warm, responsive pussy.

“Careful, sweetheart, the battering ram I keep between my legs wants back into that silken sheath you keep between yours.”

She moved the frying pan full of shredded potatoes, onions, and garlic off the heat and turned in his arms. “What’s stopping it? Certainly, my sheath is feeling very empty and could use some attention.” She reached down to unbutton his fly. It pleased her that his fly was the button kind and not the zipper.

As his cock sprang free, he surprised her by lifting her up onto the counter and then mounting her without further ado. She gasped at his swift and sure possession of her. He tilted her back so that he could rip open the chambray shirt she had borrowed. Beneath the fabric, her nipples were erect, begging for attention from his mouth. He began to suck greedily as he thrust in and out of her. She climaxed quickly and wrapped her legs around him with his name on her lips before he silenced her with his mouth, his tongue working in perfect unison with his cock. He could feel her need begin to rise again and increased his tempo so that he might finish with her. This coupling was quick, intense, and just as satisfying as the night before.

“Oh, God, Ian.” She would have said more, but he claimed her mouth for another kiss as he lifted her down from the counter and turned her back towards the stove.

“You’d best feed me, woman. I’m famished.”

God, he loved the sound of her giggle. The sound was half playful nymph and half well satisfied woman. He rubbed his beard-stubbed face along the length of her neck and shoulder and kissed her. “You sure you have to be gone for a few days? The idea of not being able to hold you or touch you...”

“Or fuck me?” she interrupted with a grin.

He smiled and said, “Yes, and fuck you. It’s almost too much to bear.”

“You’ll live. Now go take a shower while I finish this.”

“I’ve got a better idea. I’ll go set the table on the balcony. We can have breakfast out there; then we can shower together.”

“Think we’ll get clean?” she teased.

“Eventually,” he said and swatted her pert backside. With a last lingering look, he left her to get the table ready.

She joined him with two plates that contained a seafood hash which used up the last of the fish they had not eaten the night before. Norris was captivated by the view and looked across the harbor at one of the small islands. A small vessel had been pulled up on the sand. She turned to ask Ian about the possibility of renting a boat to explore them. As she glanced over at him, she could see that his attention was focused on her. “Do you ever look at this breathtaking view?”

Ian continued to look at her. “I’m looking at the view I want. Only thing that would make it better is if you didn’t

have my shirt on—not that it’s hiding much without being buttoned up.”

“And whose fault is it that there aren’t any buttons? And you called me incorrigible! Now, about those islands. Do people ever go out to them?”

“Only the tourists and treasure hunters.”

“Treasure?”

“Yep. There are some who say that there’s all kinds of pirate booty out there—some of it buried on those islands and some sunken in the wrecks that get covered and uncovered by the ocean. Usually, you don’t see anyone out there until much later in the morning and generally not this late in the year.”

Norris pointed, “Apparently, someone wanted to begin looking before it got too warm.”

Ian looked to where she indicated. He pulled up a small antique spyglass he kept on the balcony and focused on the boat. “Yeah, that guy has been here for a couple of months. He’s an odd duck. He goes out really early in the morning when there is barely any light, and then he’s gone before mid-morning. I’ve watched him a couple of times and he is conducting a thorough search of the area.”

Norris was fascinated. “Really? Maybe we should go out one morning and ask him what he’s looking for.”

Ian shook his head. “Not a good idea. Serious treasure hunters are very secretive and don’t much care for people poking around their digs. It’s best to leave them alone. Don’t tell me you want to search for buried treasure.”

“Kind of. There’s a family story about our being related to Anne Bonny.”

“The pirate, Anne Bonny? You know they say she left the pirate life and settled down here in Charleston.”

Norris nodded. “I know. Legend within the family is that she buried a large cache of gold, silver, and other valuables out there,” she indicated the harbor islands with a wave of her hand, “in order to ensure the generations of women who followed were never trapped in an unhappy life. Each eldest daughter has in turn told her eldest daughter and it’s been passed down to successive generations.”

Ian was intrigued. “Was your mother the eldest daughter? Are you?” Norris nodded affirmatively.

“Whoa. And did your mother tell you?”

Again, Norris nodded. “I’ve often thought that some time I might try to figure it out. Might be a fun way to have a mini-vacation. Interested in trying to find pirate booty with me?”

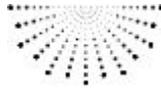
“I found and claimed the only booty I want last night. And again this morning.”

She laughed at him but leaned across the table to kiss him lightly. “Last night was kind of spectacular, wasn’t it?”

He cupped her head, pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. “Nothing short of, yes.” He sighed and said, “I suppose we have to be adults and start our day.”

They took their dishes back inside, cleaned up the kitchen and adjourned to Ian’s large steam shower after first detouring for one more brief, but passionate, interlude in his bed.

CHAPTER FIVE



After reluctantly leaving Ian, she headed towards her friend Judy's house to pick up Nell and Dudley. While she was looking forward to seeing Judy and retrieving her dogs, she knew she was going to miss sharing a bed with Ian.

“Call me when you get there, please,” he said, taking her hand in his and brushing his thumb over her knuckles. “And again when you leave.”

Norris laughed lightly, more to hide the lump in her throat than anything else. “You know I've been taking road trips with my dogs for a long time now—”.

He simply pulled her close, silencing her small tirade by kissing her until she went weak in the knees. He then swatted her butt. “Mm. See that you mind.”

Norris eyed him askance and climbed in the Rover. Something in the way he'd delivered the command made butterflies take flight in her stomach. She'd never had any inclination to hook up with a man that thought she ought to “mind” and it bothered her to think that the idea wasn't completely irritating to her...that, in fact, it made her nipples harden and the place between her legs moisten.

Oh, for heaven's sake, Norris, don't go all googly over the idea of him bossing you around. And yet...just maybe she

wasn't as opposed to the idea of being dominated as she might have once thought. Maybe a part of her actually even wanted... what? What did she want?

Norris wasn't sure. She just knew something in her felt... calmed...by the thought of giving over a bit of her control to Ian. It was something worth considering.

The coastal highway in South Carolina was a lot more scenic than the massive freeway system in Chicago. The twinge of guilt she felt at betraying a city that had been so good to her faded as she drew closer to Judy's place and her beloved hounds. The cacophony of howling and barking that greeted her as Nell and Dudley recognized her car made her heart happy. They loved visiting with Judy and her miniature dachshunds, whom they treated the same way they did their many squeaky toys, but it was nice to know they had missed her.

She jumped out of the Range Rover and ran straight through the gate into the backyard. Nell was jumping and spinning around. Dudley just knocked her off her feet and landed his near-seventy pounds in the middle of her body. As soon as he had her pinned down, Nell joined him. Between licks, wagging tails, and sniffing every inch of her, Norris missed that Judy had joined them in the yard.

"See? I told you mommy hadn't abandoned you. You know, girlfriend, most people come through the front door to say hello."

Norris laughed. "But would you have kissed and sniffed me all over?"

Judy laughed, as well. "Probably not."

“Well, there you have it.” Norris sat up and took Judy’s extended hand to get to her feet.

She winced a little as she did so.

“Too long a drive?” Judy asked, concerned. The sly smile Norris gave her indicated that sitting in a vehicle for several hours had not been the source of her discomfort. “I see. Well, don’t just stand there, let’s get your stuff, make some margaritas, and you can tell me all about him.”

They joined arms, walked out to her Range Rover, and did just that.

During Sam Harris’ research on Anne Bonny he had put together a family tree. Sitting smack dab in the middle of it was Norris Wingate—the last eldest daughter of an eldest daughter who was a direct descendant of the pirate. He’d spent the better part of the past week following her around. She visited several museums which housed a great deal of the knowledge known about the pirates of the area. He’d watched her look at various documents and maps.

He didn’t like it one bit. He’d seen her with some contractor who was working on restoring her house. She’d spent the night with him after only meeting him a few days before. Apparently, the great-many-times-over acorn didn’t fall far from the proverbial tree. After all Anne Bonny had left her husband for Calico Jack after knowing him for about the same length of time. Harris had been by Norris’ bungalow a couple of times. It didn’t look like anyone was living there yet. As he was casually walking by one afternoon, he’d talked to one of the workers, who let him know that the new owner was

currently out of town but planned to be back and moved in by Sunday.

“That is, of course,” the young man had said with a smile, “unless the boss has anything to say about it.”

That meant that Saturday night was the last time he could safely search her home. He meant to see if she’d left anything worth finding. Friday night he had managed to get access to her room at the hotel and had found nothing. Either her laptop was with her or at the bungalow. He knew she’d rented a small, quaint office in one of the trendy parts of Charleston for her business, but he was fairly certain she had yet to move in.

Harris had found several references to a riddle that Anne Bonny had told her eldest daughter, who in turn had told her eldest daughter and so on until Norris’ mother had ostensibly told her.

He would have to find out.

Norris gave Judy a hug. “Don’t forget to call your hunky contractor before you leave,” Judy had teased her. “He didn’t sound too pleased with you that you forgot to call when you got here.”

Norris laughed. “I know. I’ll have to make it up to him. I may end up buying a new bed for my house. Something tells me that Ian, Nell, Dudley, and I won’t fit well on a full-size blow-up mattress, and even if we fit, I think we’d pop the damn thing.”

“Enough of you and your bragging.” They embraced, and Judy looked her oldest and dearest friend in the eye.

“Seriously, Nor, I’m happy for you. He sounds divine. But if he doesn’t adore Nell and Dudley, kick his ass to the curb.”

“Absolutely. Nell has always looked at my boyfriends with what I interpret as an I-was-here-first-and-if-you’re-not-careful-I’ll-be-here-long-after-you’re-gone look. Dudley just rolls over for a belly rub, typical basset boy.”

“Basset boy? Don’t all men like their bellies rubbed?”

“Judy, darlin’, if it’s their belly you’ve been rubbing, we need to have a long, long talk.”

Nell and Dudley used the portable ramp and put themselves in the back of the Range Rover. Norris kept the backseat of the Rover folded down flat with ample padding and soft quilts to snuggle in—not that her two hounds were spoiled. She waved one last time at her friend and then headed back towards Charleston.

Her phone rang and Norris used the automatic pick up. “Norris Wingate. May I help you?”

It was Judy. “Call him. Remember, he expects you to mind him, fool that he is!”

Norris laughed and hung up. Then she used the voice activated feature of her Range Rover’s communication system to call Ian.

Ian’s familiar voice came through from the other end of the line. “Hey, you. I was hoping you wouldn’t forget to call. I have far more pleasurable things in mind to do to you when I get my hands on you. I’d hate to have to get after you for forgetting again.”

Norris felt the now familiar butterflies in her belly take flight. “Really? You’re going to have to tell me what that ‘getting after me’ might look like, and what the alternative is,

of course. The hounds and I aren't going to get in until late. How about you meet us in the morning at the house, instead? They're dying to see their new digs. If you aren't too busy, we can go to breakfast and maybe on a brief shopping spree. I still need to get things for the house."

"But you're spending the night at the hotel, right?"

"Yes. I have nothing at the house yet."

"Okay. How about I pick all of you up about 7:30?"

"Let's meet at 7:30, but we need to take my car—its set up for the hounds. Trust me, you don't want basset hair all over your nice, clean truck."

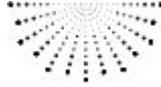
"Sounds good. I've missed you."

She smiled. "Me, too." She hung up and looked at Nell and Dudley who were stretched out in their couch on wheels. "You guys had better be on your best behavior. Mommy really likes this one."

Dudley thumped his tail and Nell's look said that Ian was the one who needed to be on his best behavior. Norris kind of agreed with her as more than one man had been given the boot when he'd mistreated or refused to understand the importance of her hounds to her.

Maybe, though, Ian might just be looking to fall madly in love with some crazy basset lady and would understand they were part of the deal.

CHAPTER SIX



Harris parked his nondescript car several blocks away from Norris' house after he was certain the construction crew was finished for the day. He'd driven past the bungalow several times, impatience riding him hard.

He'd already been by the hotel and finagled his way into her room with the assistance of a helpful maid, conducting a thorough if hasty search for something...anything...he could use to pinpoint the location of Anne Bonny's buried treasure.

He'd found exactly nothing.

The field trip had resulted in a mess on Norris Wingate's bathroom floor and a space that had been undeniably ransacked. He would need to capitalize on the understanding that there would be no going back from this point and move forward with searching her house and office. Wingate would know someone wanted something she had, and if she was smart, would be taking measures to protect it.

On the last pass by her house, he saw the general contractor carrying a floral arrangement into the house emerging shortly with empty hands. Harris waited for more than an hour after that, watching the sun sink slowly past the horizon before slipping over the fence and picking the lock on the back door.

He could see the job was in full construction mode. The floors were partially finished at the back of the house. The area just inside the back door was obviously going to be for laundry. Its tile floor gave way to wide planked hardwood in what would be the kitchen, leading onward into what Harris assumed would be the woman's primary bedroom and bath.

The contractor had left the flowers on a folding table by the window where a comfortable-looking office chair had been set. There was no laptop. He checked in both the small walk-in closet and in the primary bath. He was surprised to see no tub, but rather a large, glass enclosed shower, some kind of antique piece made into a vanity with a sink, and a vintage-styled toilet. The pretty wood floors transitioned back to tile, leaving Harris surprised at the amount of work that had been accomplished.

It did him no good, though.

Damnit to hell.

Frustrated by once again finding nothing, he swept an arm out and knocked the heavy glass cube with flowers off the table. Then, after one last look around, he began retracing his steps toward the door.

He had just let himself out and was crossing the fence along the side-yard when the Wingate woman's Range Rover pulled up. Taken by surprise, he dipped low to the ground, barely breathing until her headlights cut off and she was safely inside. Then he slumped against the fence in relief that she hadn't seen him.

Only a second, though. Gathering himself, he rose and walked swiftly away before she emerged again. It wouldn't take her long, he knew, to discover someone had been in her home. He didn't want to be here when the cavalry showed up.

Norris pulled up to the hotel and got out to let herself in and put her weekend bag inside before taking Nell and Dudley to the hotel's designated dog yard. They would take a few minutes and she didn't want to have to return to the parking lot afterwards. Pushing open the door, she flipped on the lights.

What the...

She stopped in the threshold, fear clenching her throat like a vise for an instant. Her hotel room had been burglarized. The bed had been torn apart, drawers were askew, and the things she'd left on the bathroom sink had been knocked to the floor. Whoever had done this must have been angry. Maybe because there was nothing of value to steal?

She stood, completely bewildered, and then shook her head. It wasn't the brightest move, perhaps, but she was simply too tired to deal with all of this tonight. She would close the door on it, go to her little house, and return in the morning.

It would be as though it had never happened.

Closing the door carefully behind her, she went back out to the Range Rover, throwing her bag onto the passenger seat. She let Nell and Dudley out to use the dog yard, but then herded them back into the Rover. "Okay, kids, I guess we're going to the new house. No hotel tonight."

Norris thought briefly about calling Ian but decided to avoid the argument she knew they'd have about the hotel and where she and the dogs would be spending the night. Her plan was to put the dogs in the yard, grab the padding and quilts from the back and make a make-shift bed in the bedroom.

As she pulled into the driveway, Nell and Dudley looked up, excited to see where they were. Norris got them out of the vehicle and unlocked the back gate, taking them off their leashes so they could explore their new surroundings.

She went into the house and flipped on the light in the back yard as well as the one in the laundry room. The house felt different, but she chalked it up to it simply being the traipsing in and out of construction workers while she was away. It didn't feel like *hers*, as weird as that thought felt.

Shaking the idea away, she focused, instead, on the work that had been done in her absence. The vintage tile she'd selected had been beautifully installed. She brushed a finger along its cool surface, her lips curving. She'd done enough tile work to know that he'd gone to a fair amount of trouble to ensure it was perfect.

She turned on the light in the kitchen, thrilled when she saw finished floors. The rich medium stain was just what she'd wanted. Ian had tried to get her to go with one of the more popular dark stains. She'd pointed out that a medium stain would show less wear and tear from two rambunctious bassets, not to mention hide their ever-shedding hair. It had given her an inordinate amount of happiness when he'd commented that he had a lot to learn about living with basset hounds. She'd been quick to assure him that Nell and Dudley would be happy to give him detailed instructions.

She dragged the pads and quilts into the darkened primary bedroom and dropped them to the floor, then turned to flick the light switch.

When she turned around, she felt sick to her stomach.

She'd known from the moment she entered—the feeling in the house was off, and this just confirmed it—someone had

broken in here, also.

Shit.

Arranging her keys between her fingers as a weapon just in case, she took a tentative step into the hallway. She didn't think anyone was still here...there was a sense of emptiness, rather than the expectation she fancied would linger in the air if someone were waiting.

But still. The keys made her feel just slightly better.

A heavy glass cube that had been filled with cut flowers, presumably left there for her by Ian, had been knocked off her make-shift desk and onto the floor. She quickly exited the house, went to her Range Rover and retrieved her handgun as well as some towels to wipe up the spilled water.

As she went back into the house, she called to Nell and Dudley. They joined her but when they crossed the threshold, her order to "seek" turned her happy-go-lucky babies into serious tracking machines. Immediately their noses went to the floor, and they began to thoroughly investigate the entire house. Norris stayed just inside the kitchen with her back firmly against the back wall. Both dogs had both been trained in search and rescue and would alert her if anyone remained hidden in the house.

The two hounds split at the kitchen, Dudley going forward into the remainder of the house, and Nell diverting into the primary suite. Norris glanced up to see that the attic access was still locked from the outside. As soon as she was finished with her investigation, Nell joined Dudley to finish the search. Finding plenty to sniff, but no humans other than their mistress, they came trotting back to her, tails wagging in the air. Norris relaxed, tucked the gun away and lavished affection on them.

“Okay, let’s get set up in here.” Norris was bone tired. She knew that she should probably call the cops either now or in the morning but dealing with any of that tonight was more than she wanted to take on. She didn’t have the energy or mental capacity to figure any of this out. So, instead of focusing on why this was happening, she chose to focus on things she needed to do.

She sopped up the water with the towels and was glad to see the heavy square glass vase had not been damaged. She put the flowers back in the vase and went into the bath to see if the vanity had been installed. As she filled the vase with water, Norris was happily surprised to find the entire primary bath had been completed. It was gorgeous, even better than she had envisioned. She set the vase on top of the taller part of the chifforobe.

Norris set up the makeshift bed, which was not as easy as it might have been without basset help. She took the time to set her laptop back up and hang the wet towels over the installed drying rack in the laundry room. Finally, she closed the bedroom door and propped her office chair underneath the doorknob. If nothing else, no one was going to sneak in on her. Getting through the door would wake the hounds, who in turn would wake her. Settled for the night, she curled up with Nell and Dudley, her gun nearby.

Her eyes searching the darkness, she reached out and touched the cold metal of the gun beneath the pillow for a second before resting the back of her hand beneath her cheek. She would never admit it, but she might be a tiny bit nervous. What if whoever had broken in decided to come back? If it had just been the house, she could have more easily dismissed it. After all, this wasn’t, as Ian had said over and over, the safest of neighborhoods.

But it wasn't just her house. It was her hotel room. She had to assume she was being targeted for some reason she was unaware of.

Nell nudged up against her, snuffling and interrupting her train of thought. Slowly she faded to sleep, the dogs lulling her with their warmth and heavy breathing.

Definitely going to need a king-size bed. Bet I'm still going end up stuck in the middle.

Ian parked his truck on the street outside Norris' bungalow. He was happy to see the Range Rover there but intended to speak to her about not calling the night before to let him know she'd returned to Charleston safely. He entered the back gate and was confronted by two bassets, the 'hounds,' as Norris called them.

The larger of the two, who Ian recognized as Dudley from the pictures he'd seen, stayed on the deck outside the back door and barked loudly. The smaller, Nell, had come forward silently with her hackles raised. Ian stood still and spoke to them in a quiet, but firm voice.

"It's okay guys. I'm the nice guy who's fallen for your mom. We're going to be the best of friends." That seemed to be enough for Dudley, who blew past Nell and bounded up to Ian, tail wagging, boisterous in his greeting. Nell had relaxed somewhat but approached him more cautiously. Ian looked up to see Norris opening the back door. All she had on was a t-shirt that reached mid-thigh.

"Nell, sweetie. It's okay. That's Ian."

Nell looked between her beloved owner and the man who was rubbing Dudley affectionately. When the second fifty-pound plus dog jumped up to brace herself against his legs, Ian took a staggered step backward. “Good lord, I had no idea these dogs were so big. It’s okay girl, I’ve got enough love for the both of you.” He reached down, lavishing Nell with the same affection he had Dudley.

Norris laughed and crossed the yard to him. “I felt the same way the first time I saw your cock,” she whispered as she put her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Ian’s hands left the dogs and pulled her closer. He cupped her ass and pulled her to him so that she could feel the erection that had begun the moment he laid eyes on her. “As much as it likes you to look at, it much prefers to be hidden away in your warm pussy.”

She giggled and nestled close to him. “How long until the crew gets here? We could go inside, and you could put that nice hard thing in its soft sheath.”

Ian scooped her up and went into the house, the dogs tagging along, tails wagging their excitement at having company. Ian’s delight in having her back in his arms was instantly erased when he saw the makeshift bed. He set her down firmly and nodded his head toward the rumpled quilts. “And just where the hell did you sleep last night?”

“Obviously here. Don’t fuss. When I got to the hotel, it had been ransacked.”

“Ransacked? And you didn’t bother to call?”

“Don’t fuss, Ian. It was late, and I didn’t want to deal with it. So, we came here.” She moved away from him, not quite sure whether to be angry with him for taking her to task over

not calling him or pleased that the level of his irritation seemed to back up his claim to the dogs that he'd fallen for her.

She retrieved her gun and went into the bathroom to put it next to the flowers. She came back through the door saying, "By the way, the flowers are beautiful and such a lovely gesture. I just wish whoever broke in here hadn't knocked them onto the floor."

Clearly annoyed with her, Ian asked, "Do you have treats for the dogs in that bag?" She walked over and took them out and tossing them to him, curious as to what he had in mind. "Come on guys, let's go outside."

Nothing about Ian raised their hackles or their protective instincts. So, as dogs are wont to do, they trotted after the guy with the treats, their dearest friend of the moment. After treating each of the dogs to a chew toy, he returned, but not before securing the doggy door. Dogs out. Ian in. Norris in trouble.

Norris wasn't overly concerned when he took her by the arm and led her back into the bedroom.

"Let me see if I have this right. You felt like you were being stalked by a person or persons unknown before you left; your hotel room was ransacked; someone broke in here; and you didn't think to call me?"

"I think you're overreacting."

"Really? You felt concerned enough to get a gun and keep it close to you, but not concerned enough to let me, or better still the police, know what happened?"

Norris was trying to hear the concern he was expressing without letting it irritate her. "It was late. I was tired." The

excuses seemed weak even to her and were obviously doing nothing to placate Ian.

“Jesus, Norris. First, you don’t call when you get back to town and the couple of calls I made went straight to voicemail. Then you come over here to spend the night after you agreed to stay at your hotel. I told you I didn’t want you here by yourself before the security system was installed.”

“Listen up, buttercup. You don’t get to tell me what to do. You are not the boss of me.”

“Do you hear how childish you sound? And for the record, from this point forward I am the boss of you. If I can’t trust you to exercise a modicum of common sense to keep yourself safe, then—”

“Oh, my God. Do you hear yourself? What the hell do you think you’re going to do to enforce being the boss?”

“You may be from good Irish pirate stock, and while my mother’s people may be from Ireland, my father’s are highlanders from way back. Highland men know how to make their women mind.”

“Mind?” Norris barely had time to consider what he might be hinting at before Ian seated himself in the armless office chair and she found herself face down across his knee, her backside bared. She had barely registered any alarm about what he might have in mind before his hand connected with her right butt cheek in a less than affectionate or teasing manner.

“Ouch. Damn it, Ian, that hurt!”

“I got news for you, sweetheart, it’s going to hurt a lot more before I’m finished.”

With that, Ian began to spank her in earnest. Norris struggled, but Ian was far too strong for her to get away from the punishment he meant to deliver. He alternated between the right and left side of her bottom and watched as her pretty backside went from its normal pale ivory to pink and then to red. The sound of his hand connecting with her ass was punctuated by her curses and name calling, which as the spanking went on, turned to crying and pleading.

Even though her derriere felt like it was on fire, the butterflies that had accompanied Ian's mild threats before about spanking her, had launched themselves into flight and gone to play between her legs. She could feel herself becoming wet and her nipples seemed to harden with each slap.

When her bottom was red and very warm to the touch, Ian stopped. "Had enough?" She began to kick and struggle to get up and he went back to spanking her. "Apparently not. The next time I pause, you might want to think about behaving when I give you a chance to do so."

Her submission to the spanking was much quicker the second time, probably having more to do with how much it hurt as opposed to any kind of true surrender. "That's better. Now have you had enough?" Norris nodded, and he allowed her to get to her feet but did not release her. He stood beside her and watched the emotions play across her face.

He anticipated her taking a swing at him and was prepared to respond if she did so. She would learn with this first spanking that making a move like that would only get her spanked harder and longer. He tilted her face towards his, and he used the hem of his shirt to dry the tears from her eyes. She didn't move.

Ian pulled her close and kissed her. She resisted at first and tried to squirm away, but one hand wrapped around her upper back and the other placed lightly on her offended backside convinced her to allow herself to be drawn in closer to him. As she softened, his lower hand pressed her more firmly into his groin.

“Now, you be a good girl and go stand in the corner by the bathroom door.”

“I will not be sent to the corner like a child.”

Ian swatted her sore bottom and was rewarded when she winced. “You, my girl, will not be telling me what you will or won’t do, especially when you’re in the midst of being punished. When I have to resort to spanking you to make you mind, you’ll do as you’re told, or find yourself face down over my knee again. Is that what you want?”

She looked up at him and answered quietly, if not meekly, “No.”

“Then what are you going to do?” Ian waited patiently for her to answer.

“Go over to the corner.”

“That’s right. You’re going to go over and face the corner. Then you’re going to pull your night shirt up so that it’s at your waist and I can see the evidence of my loving discipline on your pretty bottom.”

She shook her head.

“What did I just say about minding me?”

She looked up at him, anger flaring in her eyes. He watched her fight her own instinct to go on the offensive.

Hoping he could help her make the right choice, he lightly squeezed one of her lower cheeks.

She flinched and said, “That it was a bad idea not to do so.”

Ian nodded. “That’s my girl. You think you can mind me and go stand in the corner and show me that pretty red bottom?”

She nodded and went to the corner and stood facing it.

“Get that t-shirt hitched up.”

She made no move to comply.

“I won’t ask you again. If I get to you before it’s up where it should be, I’ll strip you naked and give you another spanking.” He chose to suppress a chuckle as he watched her do as she was told. “Now you stay there and think about why you got spanked.”

“Because you’re a bully?”

This time Ian laughed out loud. “No. Because you disobeyed me and put yourself in danger. Do it again, and next time I’ll make this spanking feel like an affectionate love pat in comparison.”

Ian walked outside, ostensibly to check on the dogs, but in actuality to give Norris a few moments to collect herself and adjust to her new reality. He wasn’t overly concerned; he’d noted how aroused she was. Ian came back in the house after a few minutes, keeping the dogs outside. He smiled at the picture she presented, standing with her nose in the corner with her well-spanked backside exposed to his gaze.

Ian joined her there and ran the back of one of his hands down her smooth skin. She shivered, not from cold or fear, but

rather from desire. He chuckled quietly in her ear as he ran one hand up under the knotted t-shirt to play with a pert nipple that seemed to be calling his name. He ran the other hand down the front of her body to slip between her legs and play with her engorged clit. Slipping his hands down, his fingers found the true testament to her arousal.

Slick with her desire, she moaned. “Oh, God Ian, I’m a pain slut.”

Ian laughed out loud and nipped the space where her neck joined her shoulders. “Hardly, sweetheart. Your body is just reacting with an age-old response to a show of dominance by your man. And mine, in case you can’t feel it, is responding to both your response and to that same show of dominance.” He nudged her sore backside with his fully erect cock. “You want to be done with being punished for disobeying me?”

“Yes,” she murmured with a voice that held more than a hint of desire.

Ian pulled the t-shirt over her head with one hand as he freed his cock with the other. “Would you like it if I showed you how a good girl would have been greeted instead of getting a spanking and spending some time in the corner?”

“Yes,” she breathed on a sigh.

Ian turned her around and lifted her up by her thighs, easily parting them so he could thrust his cock into her wetness. He began to stroke in and out and could feel her orgasm beginning to start almost immediately. His plan had been to love her as gently as he could, given the constraints they were under. But the combination of her having been gone and then disobeying him made him change his mind, and he started to hammer at her core. Instead of fighting him, he felt her surrender to his dominance. He reveled in her submission.

He brought her to several more climaxes before he finally spilled himself within her.

He lowered her until her feet could once again connect with the floor. He wasn't quite sure how she'd respond in the aftermath of their loving, but when she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down to kiss him deeply, he responded in kind.

"I really am sorry," she whispered.

"You ever do something like that again, and I'll make sure you're a lot more than sorry. You hear me?"

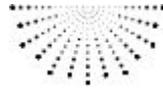
She hugged him close, nuzzling his chest with her face. "Yes, Ian. I hear you. I also hear what sounds like some of the crew getting here."

"Shit!" he said under his breath, and she giggled. "I don't know what you're giggling about. If somebody walks in, they're going to know that you just got your ass spanked and your pussy fucked."

"And is that a bad thing?"

Ian shook his head. "I don't care if they know, but I'd really prefer that they not see the evidence of either. Now go get cleaned up and dressed, and I'll take you to breakfast."

CHAPTER SEVEN



Ian gave Norris some time to get dressed while he greeted his crew. Warning them to brace themselves, he opened the doggie door, letting the hounds burst in. They ran first to the bedroom door, knocking it open. Having ensured that Norris was all right, they bounded to the front door to greet the crew.

Norris was just pulling up her leggings and pushing her feet into a pair of slide-on sandals as Ian joined her in the bedroom. He couldn't help himself from smirking as she got her leggings up and grimaced when they made contact with her punished backside.

“Not one word, Ian Hunter. Not one laugh or chuckle. And wipe that smile off your face.”

He walked over to her and wrapped her in his warm embrace. “Shh, sweetheart. It should only hurt for the rest of the day. That is, unless you decide to do something that warrants another trip over my knee.”

“No.” She stomped her foot.

Ian whispered in her ear. “Another display of bad temper and I'll decide we need to go to the loft for a refresher course in doing as you're told. Do we need to do that?”

He was gratified when her body lost its stiff posture, and she hugged him back. “No, Ian.

I’ll behave.”

Kissing her, he said, “See? I knew we’d reach a reasonable compromise.”

“Compromise?”

“Sure. You do as you’re told and behave yourself, and I won’t have to put you over my knee and spank you until you decide to do so.”

“You’re too good to me.” She rolled her eyes dramatically.

“I know. But Highland men also know how to treat their women when they’re being good girls.”

“And how is that?” She responded with amusement to his easy way of bantering.

“We take them to bed and give them multiple orgasms. Doesn’t that sound better than a spanking?”

“Much.”

Ian was about to kiss her when they were interrupted by a discreet knock on the door. When Ian called for the person on the other side to enter and it opened, Nell and Dudley rushed in, edging Beau out of the way and nearly knocking him over.

“Hey, boss. Sorry to interrupt, but I have a question. Do you want that tile in the powder room laid in brick pattern or herringbone?”

Reluctantly, Ian let her go and turned to go back out to his guys.

As Ian walk by, Beau added, “And boss? We wanted you to know we think your lady is pretty special.”

Ian smiled. “That she is, Beau. By the way, you asked about renting the loft if I move. When do you need to know?”

“Our lease is up at the end of next month. You think it might be available?”

Ian glanced back at Norris with a wink. “It just might be.”

Norris walked Ian out to the Range Rover and replaced the padding and quilts. She showed him how to deploy the ramp for the dogs to climb into the back. Ian was impressed at how well-behaved the dogs were, waiting until the ramp was down before loading themselves into the vehicle.

“I propose that we go for breakfast, then head over to your hotel, settle the bill, and let them know what happened. I don’t suppose I’m going to talk you into staying at the loft?” Norris merely gave him a look that spoke volumes, and he continued. “With Nell and Dudley, I agree the house would be easier. That means the main topic for discussion at breakfast is, are we disassembling my bed to move into the bungalow? Or do we need to buy you a real bed?”

Norris was afraid to take her eyes off the road and instead stared straight ahead. “Are you suggesting that we move in together?”

“I am. And I can be okay if you need more time. But it would be nice to have a decision on that before the end of next month.”

This time she glanced over at him “Why is that?”

“Because if I’m moving in, Beau and his new bride want to rent the loft. Their lease is up at the end of next month.”

“I see. Well, I’d hate to inconvenience Beau. After all, he’s doing such a good job on the tile work.”

Ian laughed. “So, in order to maintain Beau’s excellence throughout the remainder of the job, you’re willing to let me move in?”

She giggled and nodded.

“Hear that, guys? Your mom is going to let me move in.” The dogs shoved their heads between the bucket seats and got Ian to love on them.

They made a change in plans and went by the hotel, which was on the way to the place they’d first had breakfast. Norris settled her bill and told the desk clerk about the break-in, who apologized profusely in between stammering attempts to figure out what had happened. Norris assured her it wasn’t their fault and nothing of hers had been damaged. By the time she got back to the car, Ian had loaded all her things and had taken Nell and Dudley over to the dog yard.

She walked up behind him, wrapped her arms around him and laid her cheek against his back. “And do Highlanders know the way to an Irish pirate’s heart is to be kind to her dogs?”

“And here I thought it was through the judicious application of his hand to her backside and his cock in her pussy.”

Norris kneed him in the ass. “Neanderthal.”

Ian turned, pulled her close and kissed her thoroughly. “Honest.”

“The desk clerk said I should file a police report. Do you know where the closest precinct is so I can do that?”

“At the risk of royally pissing you off, I’ve arranged for a buddy of mine who’s a cop in Robbery/Homicide to meet us for breakfast. He’ll bring the necessary forms and we can do it there.”

“Thanks, babe. That’s one less thing we have to do. I suggest we get some packing boxes and go by the loft to pack things up and arrange for someone to move your stuff into our home.”

He liked how the bungalow had gone from ‘my’ to ‘our.’ “And how much of my bachelor pad stuff am I allowed to bring?” he asked her teasingly. “And before you get concerned, you need to know Beau is open to keeping whatever I don’t want to take, and I have zero emotional attachment to anything.”

“Not even your steam shower?”

“Apparently you didn’t check out the shower in the primary bath at the bungalow. It’s even better than the one in the loft.”

“A bit presumptuous, don’t you think?”

Ian shook his head. “Not really. I told you the other night, there wasn’t anything sudden about my interest in seeing you naked. I may have been kind of planning this since the first day we met. Besides, who doesn’t want a steam shower? The presumption may have been installing the plumbing under the decking for a large hot tub.”

Norris laughed. “Presume away, you Scottish beast. Presume away.”

They walked back to the Range Rover and she tossed him the keys.

“You’re trusting me with driving your Rover?”

The bright smile she sent his way rivaled the rising sun.

“Hey, I trusted you with the keys to my home before I even knew you. What’s a set of car keys?”

He took hold of her arm and spun her around to look at him “What about the keys to your heart? Any chance I can have those?”

She stepped forward and kissed him. “You’re not paying attention, buttercup. You already have them.”

She turned away to deploy the dog ramp. Ian stopped her progress with a hand on her arm, whispering to her, “I’d be careful giving me any sass, little girl. What normally would feel like an affectionate love tap will be a whole different thing when you’ve been soundly spanked.”

She blushed and then playfully elbowed him in the ribs.

He laughed. *Mom and dad are going to adore you.* For now, he kept that thought to himself.

They drove to the restaurant talking about what they would need to pack and move today and what they could do more leisurely. Norris told him she had the bulk of her belongings in a storage container in Charleston, but they could move them when the house was ready to truly move into.

“How do you feel about bringing my bed or is it too masculine for you?”

Norris thought a minute. “Not too masculine. I love the kind of medieval architecture of it. And I love that it has a pewter finish. It’s a king size which we’re going to want. I figured I’d take my queen bed and put it in the guest room. Would you mind if I got more feminine bedding?”

“Not at all. I’m just glad you’re okay with taking the bed. I really didn’t want to give it up.”

“Too many memories of too many girls?” she teased.

Ian pulled the Range Rover into the parking lot and stopped her before she got out. “The only memory I have of that bed and the reason I want to keep it is because it was the first place I made love to you. It and the house are where we started. That’s important to me.”

Norris couldn’t help the small tears that sprang to her eyes. She touched his face and he moved her hand so that he could kiss her palm. “And I suppose you want to keep that office chair I have because it’s the first place you ever spanked me.” Ian grinned. “You’re impossible.”

They opened the moon roof for the dogs and went into the restaurant.

Ian introduced Norris to his friend, Dan Livingston. The detective shook Norris’ hand and with a perfect Charlestonian accent said, “Pleased to meet you, Miss Wingate. Any friend of Ian’s is soon to be a friend of mine.”

Norris noted the correct cut of his suit and said, “Somehow I think taking attempted petty theft reports is a bit beneath your pay grade.”

Dan laughed. “Nah, the missus just makes me look good when I’m going to be in the office and around civilized folks.”

“So normally you don’t dress that way around Ian? I’ve found he’s just barely civilized.”

Dan laughed harder. “Oh, I like her. Cindy is going to want to meet this one.”

As they sat down, Ian slid into the booth next to her and suppressed a smile at hearing Norris' attempt to muffle the sound of her discomfort.

“And have there been a lot of them from which to choose?” Norris was finding this discussion with Dan quite enlightening.

Before Ian could respond, Dan answered, “Actually, not any at all. My friend Ian here, although voted one of the most eligible bachelors in Charleston last year, is kind of picky about with whom he keeps company. Cindy will be delighted to hear he introduced you as possessively as he did.”

Norris was impressed. While the accent might say *good ole boy*, she realized Dan was every bit the astute cop. Nothing seemed to slip past his notice, and he had noticed that she and Ian were more than just contractor and client.

“What do you suppose Cindy will think when she learns we're going from here to the loft to pack some of his things so he can move in with me?”

Dan leaned back. “Well, now. There's going to be an awful lot of boo-hooing amongst the eligible belles here in Charleston. But I rather imagine Cindy is going to love hearing that. However, on second thought, I don't think you and Cindy should ever meet.” Ian and Norris glanced at each other and then at Dan, who looked Ian directly in the eye before saying, “I don't think either of us needs the two of them to become thicker than the proverbial thieves.”

Ian laughed out loud, and Norris just barely managed not to spit out the sip of water she'd just taken. Apparently, the way Norris had lowered herself into the booth had not gone unnoticed.

Ian hugged her close. “He’s a Highlander too, but his pretty wife is a born and bred southern belle. One of those women often referred to as a steel magnolia.”

“Doomed. I’m doomed.”

“No, sweetheart, just well-loved and occasionally well-spanked.”

Norris hissed at him. “Shh. It’s bad enough that Dan figured it out. You don’t need to let the whole damn world know.” Both men laughed.

“Now, why don’t we get down to business and you tell me what happened.”

Norris explained that she’d come back to the hotel after being gone and found it ransacked. “I wasn’t even going to report it, but the desk clerk suggested it. And your buddy here took it upon himself to involve you.”

Dan reached out and patted her hand. “You’ll get used to it. We Highland Charlestonians tend to look after our women whether they like it or not.”

Norris rolled her eyes.

Ian said, “But here’s the thing, Dan. She failed to mention that last week she kept getting the feeling that someone was watching her, and I’m pretty damn sure I saw the same compact car drive by the bungalow several times. And when she went by there last night, it, too, had been ransacked.”

Dan raised his eyebrows as he took notes. “That’s a little too coincidental for my liking. Any idea what they might be looking for?” Norris shook her head. Dan closed up his note pad. “Normally I’d tell you to move out of that hotel and check in someplace else under an alias, but I think Ian can keep you safe.”

Ian nodded in the affirmative.

As Dan started to leave, Ian stopped him. “I’m not sure if this will mean anything but Norris is a direct descendant of Anne Bonny. She says there’s a family legend about a buried treasure Anne left behind and the location is only passed from the eldest daughter to eldest daughter.”

Dan glanced at Norris before looking back at Ian. “And I take it Norris is one such eldest daughter?”

“Yes, but do you honestly think it has anything to do with this?”

“Could be. If there’s a serious treasure hunter out there that knows the story and knows of your relationship to Anne Bonny, your moving here might seem too coincidental to them. They may well have been looking for some clue to the whereabouts of the treasure. Do you have a map or any kind of clue as to where it is buried or what it might be?”

“Not really. There’s no map and it was never to be written down. But it was drilled into my head as a child. It’s a riddle or a rhyme. Let me see if I can remember it. *“On a bonny island in the sea; A treasure was laid upon the lee. For those who follow she left it there; So a painful life they would not have to bear. Across from Charles Town the past was laid to rest; Beneath the first will be found the best.”* Norris paused. “Seriously, why couldn’t she just leave a well-drawn map with a large X—would have been so much easier.”

Dan and Ian laughed. “I’d keep that information to myself and I’m not going to make note of it anywhere. Ian, you keep her out of trouble. And you, pretty lady, best learn to do as he tells you. I suspect this first spanking won’t be the last, but it’ll damn sure be the easiest you ever get. Why don’t y’all plan to come to supper next weekend?”

They agreed to do so, and Dan left them to finish their breakfast.

Norris turned to Ian, “You don’t really think this is all connected or has anything to do with Anne’s treasure do you?”

“I think, sweetheart, that it’s one too many coincidences. I don’t want you wandering off until we find out more. Do you think you can work in the bedroom while we continue to work on the house?”

“Yes, but I do have work to do outside the house.”

“You can take a bit of time off. And if you have to go do something, either Beau or I can drive you.” He held up his hand to ward off her protests. “No compromise on this one. You’re going to stay where I can keep you safe. The only question for you is are you going to be able to sit down comfortably while you do so.” She rolled her eyes at him, and he kissed her on the tip of her nose. “Let’s head over to the loft and get some things put together. I’m going to have a couple of the boys come over so we can take the bed apart and then get it set up at the house. Do you want to go buy new bedding?”

“Deft change of subject.”

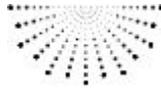
Ian shrugged as he put the money for the check on the table and helped her out of the booth. “What can I say, I’m a *sub*-tle kind of guy.”

She snorted at him. “Yeah, you’re about as *sub*-tle as a freight train.”

Ian leaned in close to her and whispered, “Considering the shade of your ass, I would have thought you’d have said fire engine.”

Norris thought about making a stinging retort and then thought of the residual sting in her backside and thought better of it. She'd bide her time; Ian would learn that for every action there was an opposite and equal reaction.

CHAPTER EIGHT



They returned to the Range Rover where Norris gave Nell and Dudley the small bites of her leftover breakfast. They both looked at Ian to see if he too had brought them a treat. Disappointed in him when he failed, they curled up in the back with heavy sighs.

They headed to Ian's, stopping at one of the local moving companies to purchase a few boxes. As they pulled into the underground parking of Ian's loft, he was impressed again by how well-behaved Dudley and Nell were, walking quietly on leashes and going up in elevators as naturally as any two-legged being. Once inside the loft, Ian unleashed them and laughed as their noses hit the ground and they immediately began a systematic search of the space. "They're quite impressive," he said to Norris.

"This is nothing. They're actually certified search and rescue dogs. I've always specialized in finding children. I figured what kid is going to be frightened by a cartoon dog?"

Ian's eyebrows lifted.. "Very true."

"If I tell them to 'seek' they'll get serious about finding a live body. If I give them a scent object, like a sock or underwear, they can track even through shallow water."

"That's incredible. Do you do that often?"

“Thankfully not too often and luckily, I’ve only located one child that wasn’t still alive. Wait until Christmas gets here. The kids they’ve found, and their families, send presents.”

Ian’s phone rang. It was part of his crew come to get the bed. Ian buzzed them up and let them in. The bed was systematically pulled apart and loaded down to the truck in the loading zone. Norris loaded one of the boxes with the bedding in case they didn’t get to the store or didn’t find something they liked. She also grabbed towels and some of Ian’s personal and grooming items.

“I’d suggest plates and glasses but as you discovered, I don’t have much that’s matching and we don’t have a dishwasher yet,” Ian said.

Beau looked at Ian and grinned. “I take it the place is going to be for rent?”

Norris responded. “Yes, please let the rest of the crew know that the boss is sleeping with the client and is moving in with her.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Wingate, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

She smiled at him, “No offense taken. I was just teasing you. Sorry.”

“No worries. We’ll get the bed set up. Know where you want it?”

Ian nodded toward Norris. “That one falls within the scope of her responsibility. If you get it set up, we can move it around if we need to.”

Norris said, “Won’t be necessary. It goes on the wall that abuts the kitchen. And the cool chandelier you just installed in

there, needs to come down and be moved into the front bedroom.”

“Got it. It’ll be ready when y’all get back.”

The crew left to head back to the bungalow and Norris glanced at the clock on the microwave. “Hard to believe it’s not quite 10:30. Been a busy morning.” Ian looked at her questioningly. “Had a fight with my new lover; he spanked me, fucked me, and introduced me to a cop who’s as bossy as he is. Then to top it all off, his entire crew is aware of the fact that he’s fucking me and moving in.”

“Are you done?” Ian asked softly. “I can’t tell whether you’re angry, still fussing about the spanking, or just feeling a bit overwhelmed. Let me caution you, that last one is the answer you want to choose.”

She walked over to him, and he folded her into his embrace. “It is. I don’t suppose it would do much good to talk about the whole spanking me thing, would it?”

“Babe, I’m always willing to talk, but no, it won’t change how things are. We can talk if it’ll make it easier for you to accept. But you’re going to mind me. And when you don’t, you’re going to find yourself getting a spanking to help you remember why you should. I’m not going to try and control your life, but I will make sure you’re safe and when I do give you an order, you’re going to follow it, or suffer the consequences.” Ian liked the fact that she hadn’t made any move away from him. He squeezed her gently. “I think it’s just a better way to live. We have a disagreement; it gets settled; we re-establish good feelings and move on.”

She looked up at him and smiled. “Just that easy?”

He nodded. “Just that easy. Isn’t that what happened this morning? You did something I told you not to. I expressed my displeasure at your bad behavior by spanking that sexy ass of yours; disagreement got settled and then I let you know you were forgiven and how much I want and need you to be safe.”

“What happens if you do something I really don’t like or I have a serious objection about being spanked for something because I think I’m right and you’re wrong.”

“Everything comes to a screeching halt and we talk about it. D/s isn’t a one-way street. Part of the beauty of it is that for it to work for *both* people, there has to be a lot of honest, open communication.”

She didn’t say anything, but he could see her replaying the morning’s events in her head. “Does it make me weird that I actually agree with you? Are you sure it doesn’t make me a pain slut?”

He chuckled, hugged her and kissed her. “Did you enjoy being spanked?”

“Well, it certainly got me aroused.”

“But was it the pain or was it that there was someone who cares enough to hold you accountable? I can tell you that from my point of view, I don’t like having to cause you pain, but if it means you’ll think twice before doing something you aren’t supposed to do, then I’ll do it. And it isn’t seeing your ass turn red that gives me a hard on. It’s feeling you give yourself over to my authority. Well, that and knowing you’re getting aroused.”

She slapped at his arm. “You’re terrible. Does your mother know you believe in using corporal punishment as a means of keeping your woman in line?”

“We’ve never discussed it, but my parents have been happily married for almost forty years and I’d bet every last dime I have that my mother has spent more than her fair share of time over my dad’s knee.”

She looked up at him. “What makes you say that?”

“Small things I’ve observed over the years. The way my parents interact.”

“What small things?”

“They’ll have a fight, but the next morning, peace is restored, and my mom is even more affectionate than usual. And I’ve seen her reaction after a fight when my dad runs his hand across her bottom. What about your parents?”

“My dad is out of the picture. Has been since before I can remember. My mother was killed a couple of years ago by a drunk driver.”

Ian hugged her close. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

“It’s okay. Only hurts now and then. I had a great relationship with her. The year she died, we’d planned to come down here and look for Anne’s booty. We thought it would be a great lark. When the opportunity came up for me to leave the Chicago winters behind and move to Charleston, I took it.”

“What was the opportunity?”

“You know the Selbourne place?” When Ian nodded, she continued, “I put together the sale for a couple that I’ve worked with before. But Ian, I’ll need to put the job out for bids, and I can’t give you any inside information. In fact, I feel I need to disclose to Ted and Nancy that we’ve become a couple.”

“Sweetheart, I completely understand. And if it’ll make your life easier, I won’t even bid on the job. You, we, are far more important than a renovation job. I have more work than I can handle. In fact, I’ve thought of seeing if my brother would like to leave the job he hates and come down here and learn to be a contractor.”

“But Ian, I know how much you want that job. But more than that, I know you’d do a great job. I think we can set it up so Ted and Nancy feel comfortable and I’ll have them make the final decision about to whom to award the job. Thank you, though, for understanding.”

“Always. I will always put you, us, ahead of any job.”

She kissed him deeply. “Me too.” Suddenly Dudley barked loudly. Norris looked up to see him standing on his hind legs looking out into the harbor. Nell had made herself comfortable on one of Ian’s lounge chairs. “I probably should mention, the dogs are allowed on all the furniture.”

“I can live with that as long as they don’t sleep with us.”

“You’ll have to take that up with them. They’re generally really good about staying off the bed if there’s any amorous activity going on, but once we settle in to sleep, they’re going to get up on the bed.”

“We can just close them out of the bedroom.”

Norris giggled. “You really have a lot to learn about bassets. They don’t do separate. You lock them out of the bedroom, they will howl their fool heads off. And Ian, I could never tolerate you spanking either of them.”

He looked her directly in the face. “I think any man who raises a hand to an animal or a child ought to have that hand

cut off for doing so and the other one cut off to prevent him from doing it again.”

“But—”

“You’re an adult woman with a fully developed brain and the ability to understand actions and consequences.” He felt her relax and went on, “But that doesn’t mean we’re through talking about where the dogs sleep.”

She giggled. “Like I said, you’ll have to take it up with them. My money is on them.” She let go of him and went to see what Dudley was barking at. “What do you see, baby?” The big dog wagged his tail, looked up at her and then back out at the harbor.

Ian joined her and picked up the spyglass. “I agree, Dudley. He’s an odd duck and I’m beginning to wonder about him.”

Norris took the spyglass and looked out. “Why do you say that?”

“That guy who searches that island so religiously...” He trailed off into silence. “The bonny island...”

“The bonny—” Norris repeated. “Like the—”

His expression was faraway, his eyes narrowed on something outside the window. “Yes. The ‘bonny island,’ from the poem. Was it a reference to beauty, or to Anne herself? An island owned by a Bonny? On the ‘lee?’ That’s the leeward side of the island. And it faces Charleston. I think I’d like to go down to the docks and see what kind of car he drives and if possible get a plate number.”

“Oh, a pirate adventure. Argh, matey!”

Ian looked down at her. “You’ll stay here. He knows you.”

“If he’s been staking out the house, he knows you too. And if he’s as smart as you think, then he also knows that we’re a couple. We’re better and safer together. And if you don’t take me with you, I might just go by myself.”

Ian put his arm around her waist and then let his hand slide down to her ass. She went absolutely still. “Want me to tell you again about putting yourself in harm’s way?”

“Come on, Ian. We’ll be safe in the Range Rover. I promise, I’ll behave if you take me with you.”

“You’ll behave regardless of whether or not I take you. And if you choose not to, I’ll rewarm that pretty little butt of yours to the point where you won’t sit comfortably for a few days. Got it?” He patted her rump softly.

“Okay. But please? We can load up the dogs and go down to see if we can see him come in. Look! He’s headed back. After we see what we can see, you can call Dan and we can go home.”

“Home? I like the sound of that.”

“Okay, you’ll probably have to take me to a high-end linen store for sheets and a blanket. I think I have the perfect quilt and shams in my storage unit. Maybe one day this week we can go there and grab a few things.”

Ian smiled. It made him happy to see her happy about small things like linens and side tables. “You certainly change gears quick—from spying on a treasure hunter to buying linens and getting all domestic on me.”

She reached across to put her hand in his lap and gave his package a little squeeze.

“Jeezus, Norris.” She giggled. “New rule, no groping the driver.”

She giggled again as the crotch of his jeans started to get tight.

“Think that’s funny, do you?” he said with mock severity. “Wait until I get you home and you have to take care of the problem.”

“I don’t know how to tell you this, buttercup, but that’s not much of a threat. That sounds more like a reward than a punishment.”

He glanced over at her “Right. I forgot you’re a pain slut.”

She giggled. “Apparently. Good thing I found a Scottish Charlestonian who likes to beat his woman.”

He smiled broadly. “We do aim to please.”

Ian cruised the harbor parking lot, trying to find the car he’d seen several times. They had about given up when Ian spotted it almost hidden beside a big dually truck. He was certain that it was the car he’d seen repeatedly on Norris’ street. He had Norris jot down the license plate number and then moved the Range Rover to the upper lot where they could watch the car without being seen.

It didn’t take too long for a man of medium stature with graying hair, glasses, and a full beard to unlock the car, get in and drive off. Norris had managed to take a picture with her cell phone, but only a profile shot.

Ian called Dan and gave him the information. Dan cautioned them about doing anything further and asked that they return home and let the police take it from there.

They pulled up to find the crew breaking for lunch. Norris asked Ian if they could offer to have pizza delivered as a thank you for all the hard work they'd been doing. "You're going to spoil them."

"Maybe, but I'm willing to risk it."

Ian loved the way Norris just seemed to fit in. Granted the crew were on their best behavior, but still she made all of them feel at ease and seemed to genuinely enjoy their company. Nell and Dudley were having a field day, scoring pizza crusts from everyone.

As they were finishing up, a Cadillac Escalade pulled up and a well-groomed couple got out. Ian figured they were probably in their mid to late 50s and suspected they might be the Watsons. He directed his crew back to work and left with Norris to meet with her clients. Dudley and Nell greeted them like long-lost friends, but as Ian was learning, they greeted most everyone that way.

The woman briefly embraced Norris and Ian saw in that gesture a real friendship, not a social custom. "Ted and I dropped the boys off at the community pool and we thought we might come see if we could find your place. Is this it?"

Norris nodded. "It still needs a lot of work, but I had them focus on getting the primary suite useable and then they're going to get the kitchen installed. Come on in. I can't wait for you to see the great work Ian and his crew do."

Ian busied himself at the other end of the house. He didn't want to appear to be hovering or looking for an introduction.

They walked through the house while Norris explained her plans. Ian watched as her clients asked intelligent questions and seemed to grasp just what she was planning. He had to

admit she had a gift for painting a picture for people who didn't necessarily see it for themselves. They walked into what would soon be the kitchen, from there onto the deck and through to the back yard.

They came back inside, and she led them into the bedroom. Nancy looked at the unmade but large bed. "New bed?"

Norris nodded. "Yep. Needed to upgrade from a queen."

"Planning to have more company than just Dudley and Nell?"

"Nancy. You can't just ask her that!" admonished Ted.

"Don't be silly, Ted. Of course, I can. Norris is a good friend and good friends are nosy. So, have you met him yet, or are you just planning ahead with your usual Norris efficiency?"

One couldn't stay angry with Nancy—not that she'd been angry to begin with. She was just too direct and too genuine. In spite of that, Norris had no intention of sharing her private life with the world just yet. It was more than enough that all of Ian's crew knew about them. She'd tell them soon enough, when she introduced them to Ian. She winked and sidestepped the question, saying, "Let me show you the primary bath, complete with steam shower."

Ted perked up. "A steam shower? I've wanted one of those for years. Can you put one of those in our new primary bath?"

"But of course."

Nancy looked around and said, "No big soaking tub for two?"

Ted gave his wife a look and said, "Nancy!"

Norris looked at her archly. “Not inside, but I’m planning for a hot tub off the deck.”

She escorted her friends back out into the main part of the house. “Ian? Let me introduce you to Ted and Nancy Watson.”

Norris watched as Ted sized up Ian with an almost brotherly demeanor. It wasn’t the first time. He had never been good at concealing his thoughts and it was written all over his face that he was putting two and two together and figuring out that this might be the man with whom Norris was planning to share a bed. “You’re the general contractor?” he asked, extending his hand.

“Yes, sir. Ian Hunter. That’s a gorgeous home you purchased.”

“I told him you bought the Selbourne place. He wants to be included on the proposed bidders list,” Norris said. “He’d be perfect for the job.”

“Ahhh,” Ted said. “Excellent news.”

“Your work is quite impressive, Ian.” said Nancy.

Ted looked at Ian consideringly and then turned to Norris. “Mid-level bid?” When she and Ian both nodded, he added, “Your work here really is outstanding. I’m very impressed by the quality and your ability to get the job done quickly. I know how hard Norris presses once she has her mind set to something. Nancy? Do we really need to go through the bidding process?”

Before Nancy could respond, Norris waved her hand to insert, “Ted, I think it’s only right for me to tell you that Ian and I are in a relationship. In fact, he’s in the process of moving in.”

Ted waved her off. “Did you start sleeping with him before or after he started working on your house? Actually, that’s a rhetorical question. I know the answer—after.” Ian was fascinated by the older man’s audacity.

“No offense, Ian, but I know Norris well enough to know if you were a lousy or even mediocre contractor she wouldn’t have given you the time of day.” He looked directly at Norris. “Am I right or not?”

She grinned. “You are indeed correct.” She looked up at Ian, hooking her arms around one of his. “And he’s right, buttercup. Not that it’s the *reason*, as far as *reasons* go, if you get my drift—” she batted her eyes flirtatiously—“but if you weren’t the best contractor I’ve ever worked with, you wouldn’t be gracing my bed these days.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “Norris. Hush. You’re going to embarrass Nancy.”

Nancy laughed. “Never happen. I find all of this absolutely fascinating. And I’ve known both of them longer than you. Every once in a while, Teddy gets a bit big brother-ish with her and she indulges him.”

Ted spoke up. “This is all beside the point. I appreciate that you and Norris wanted us to know about your personal relationship, but you strike me as man who gives a fair bid and then brings his jobs in on time and on budget. Am I right?”

“I pride myself on that.”

“Do you want the job? And when can you get started?”

Ian smiled broadly. “I do, indeed. It’s actually been a dream of mine to work on the Selbourne house. I can get a crew started no later than the first of next week. Do you want a bid, or would you rather just do time and materials?”

“The latter works for me if it works for you.”

Ian shook Ted’s hand again. “That works fine for me. I promise you won’t be sorry. I’ve been itching to get my hands on one of those gorgeous old houses and turn it into a home again. If you want, we should be done here in a few more weeks. I can run a double crew and get it done more quickly so you can get moved in.”

The two men headed out towards the Escalade. When they were out of earshot of the ladies, Ted said, “Sounds good to me. And Ian? There’s a bonus in it for you and your crew if you can get it done before the Christmas holiday.”

“That isn’t necessary, Ted.”

“Maybe not, but I like to reward good work. And unless I’m mistaken, you may need that money for a little bit of bling for a certain interior designer we know.”

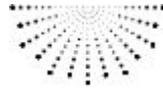
Ian smiled, liking Ted more and more. “Yes, sir. That’s the plan.”

Ted and Nancy drove away. Ted glanced in the rearview mirror and smiled as he saw Ian put his arm around Norris’ waist and pull her close. They gave a brief wave before heading back into the bungalow.

“You know what, Nancy? I think Ian might just be what our Norris has been needing for a long time. What do you think?”

Nancy smiled. “I like him a lot. I think we might start having to think not only about what we’re going to get them for a housewarming gift, but for a wedding gift, as well.”

CHAPTER NINE



After running a few errands on her list, Norris and Ian stopped by his other project so that Ian could check in with the crew and let them know as soon as they were finished, they'd be starting on what had been the Selbourne house, but would now be the Watson project. His men seemed genuinely excited about the prospect.

As they pulled away from the jobsite, Ian asked "Want to go out or pick up something for dinner?"

Norris put her hand on his thigh and purred, "It isn't food I'm hungry for."

Ian chuckled. "Ms. Wingate, are you propositioning me?"

"No. I'm telling you I want to go home and fuck your brains out. If we're lucky we might even get the sheets put on the bed some time tonight."

"Sweetheart, if you want to fuck my brains out, getting 'lucky' is a foregone conclusion." He lifted her hand from his thigh and brought it to his lips before returning it to her. "Remember? No groping the driver."

"I didn't grope. I'll admit you're hung, but it's not like the damn thing reaches halfway to your knees."

Ian laughed again. “Ms. Wingate, proper southern belles do not notice such things, much less talk about them.”

“Good thing for you I’m a Yankee pain slut who wants nothing more than to have your nice, hard cock out of those jeans where it can do me some good.”

She hadn’t even touched him, and Ian could feel the beginnings of his arousal. “You’d better hope the crew has already left. If they haven’t, they’re going to see you slung over my shoulder as I carry your ass into our bedroom to have my way with you. If they have left, you’ll never make it that far. The second I get you inside the house, I’m stripping those leggings and sandals off and having you up against a wall.”

“Hmm, interesting choice. Wonder which it will be?”

Ian glanced over at her and was thrilled to see his own lust reflected in her eyes. They pulled into the driveway and Ian was glad to see the crew had cleared out. Norris jumped out of the truck and went into the yard to greet Dudley and Nell. He followed her and then scooped her up, depositing her over his shoulder while she giggled like a mad woman. He unlocked the back door and took her to the bedroom, dumping her unceremoniously on the bed where he proceeded to remove her leggings, sandals, and the rest of her clothing until she was naked to his gaze.

He smiled lasciviously. “God, you are beautiful—and mine.”

“Think so?”

Ian rid himself of his clothes next, then grabbed her legs and pulled her to him. Still standing, he brought her legs up and over his shoulders, placing one on either side of his neck, and then dipped his head to her glistening pussy. Ian’s tongue

dipped into her slit to taste her before his mouth moved up to pay close attention to her throbbing clit. Norris arched her back in response. She breathed out his name as he plunged his tongue into her and lapped up her honey.

She started to squirm, trying to get away from him. Ian wrapped one hand around her middle to pull her into his body and prevent her escape. With the other, he reached down to play with her nipple. She bucked and writhed against him, but his tongue's onslaught never ceased. He did change hands so that her other nipple received his attentions, but he gave her no relief until she came, screaming her pleasure as she did so.

As he let her body back down, she put her foot in the middle of his chest and pushed. He laughed and caught her leg before she could draw it back and get away from him. "Oh, no you don't."

"Oh, yes I do."

He let her think she was escaping as she flipped over to crawl across the bed. He followed her, landing behind her on his knees and grasping her hips, pulling back so that he impaled her lower lips on his shaft until he was seated in her molten core.

Again, she gasped his name as he held her tight and started to thrust into her slowly and softly. He waited until he could feel her body accept his invasion and begin to respond. As he felt her begin to climax, he increased the speed and strength of his thrusting and felt her quicken and tighten around him.

"Oh, my God, Ian," she cried.

He chuckled deeply as he continued to pummel her from behind. She came again and as she did, her body surrendered to his mastery of it. He lowered his upper body so it now had

contact with her back and moved his hands from her hips to her breasts so that he could offer her even more pleasure. He liked the fact that she was strong enough to hold herself on all fours and support some of his body weight while he pleased them both. As her response began to build again, Ian felt his own release approach. Moving his hands back to grasp her hips and hold her still, he brought the world crashing down around them and they collapsed on the bed.

He rolled over on his back and looked at her sprawled on the bed next to him. She moved her body so that it was lying half on his. “See? I told you I liked that thing out of your jeans where it could do me some good.”

Ian laughed and hugged her close. “What do you say we go try out that steam shower?”

Sometime later, Ian watched Norris feeding the dogs. Wearing only the shirt he’d had on earlier, she bent over to put their food down and he smiled as her backside and what lay between her legs was revealed. “Talk about having something where it can do me some good.”

Norris turned and smiled at him, looking directly at his crotch. “I don’t know. I may have worn that thing out.”

He crossed the distance between them and pushed her back against the wall, hiking her shirt over her hips, then unbuttoning his fly. He nuzzled her neck as she reached between them to help with his jeans. He was just lifting her off the ground when his cell phone rang. Much to his frustration, she reached into his back pocket to turn it off but changed her mind when she saw it was Dan.

“Ian Hunter’s phone. I’m sorry Ian is busy right now trying to make up for being a brutish

Highlander. Can the object of his bad behavior help you?”

Ian grabbed the phone. “Give me that. Hey, Dan. What’s up?”

Dan was laughing so hard, he could scarcely breathe. “Yeah, no way I’m introducing her to Cindy until you get some more ladylike behavior beaten into her.”

Norris stuck out her tongue at the phone, clearly overhearing.

“In that case, dinner next weekend is definitely off, and they may never meet.”

“I may be okay with that, but it’ll never fly with my better half. She’s already thinking she should give Norris a call and they should go do girlie things together.”

Norris called out, “Give her my number and tell her to call me.”

Ian interrupted, “Did you actually want something or are you just calling to prevent me from ravishing my woman again?”

“Right. Ah the throes of new love. It’s been so long I can scarce remember.”

Ian snorted.

Dan hadn’t said so directly, but it didn’t take any great deductive reasoning skills for Norris to figure out that he and Cindy enjoyed an active sex life. “But yeah, I got some information back on that plate. That car is registered to a Sam Harris out of Florida. I checked with some friends from the Florida State Police who referred me to—”

“Hang on a sec, Dan.” Ian interrupted him as he felt Norris’ body go completely still and he saw the color drain out

of her face. “What is it, sweetheart?”

She shook her head and held up her finger to ask him to give her a moment.

“You guys okay? Norris, do you know this guy?”

She found her voice again. “Uhm, yes. I think he may be my birth father.”

“But your last name is Wingate.”

“Yes. My mother took back her maiden name when he deserted her when I was a little girl. She told me that jumping through all the legal hoops to divorce him when he couldn’t be contacted made her decide to get her own name back, terminate his custodial rights, and have my last name changed legally to Wingate. Is this guy old enough to be my father?”

Dan answered that he was. He added, “He’s known by the Florida State Police, but even more so by the Coast Guard. He plays real fast and loose with the salvage laws and those that cover found treasure. He’s been suspected in several shady deals and loosely associated with some disappearances in that area. I’m sorry to say, but if this man is your birth father, your mother did the right thing. Any chance he knew about the family legend?”

Norris smiled wryly. “Oh, yeah. My mom always suspected that was his real motivation for marrying her and getting her pregnant. She used to say it was a good thing I had been born a girl or he’d have stayed longer. She always felt we were well rid of him. He knew there was a riddle, and she always worried that he may have overheard parts of it.”

“Ian, don’t let her out of your sight. This guy is bad news.”

“Dan,” said Norris, “I’m not a shrinking violet. I know how to take care of myself, and I have a carry permit.”

“Glad to hear it. Ian? She goes nowhere without you. And if you leave her at her house, your whole crew needs to be there. Like I said, this guy is bad news.”

Ian nodded. “Consider it done. Thanks for the call, Dan. Let us know if you hear anything else.”

“Will do.”

Norris was annoyed, which Ian felt was better than frightened. He wanted to keep her that way. Cupping her ass, he brought her into contact with the front of his jeans, which held the evidence of the rekindling of his desire for her. “Now, where was I?”

She reached down to open his fly and pull out his cock, which had quickly regained its rigidity. “Something about ravishing your woman. That would be me, right?”

Sensing she needed more reassurance than she was letting on, he lifted her in his arms, and carried her back to their bed, where he laid her down. Joining her, he made slow, tender love to her until she was exhausted, and they both fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.

Ian began to awaken and reached to pull Norris’ soft body close to him. But all his hand encountered was a furry muzzle, a wet, cold nose, and floppy ears. Dudley wagged his tail lazily. The hound belly-crawled his way up to Ian and snuffled his face. “Sorry, buddy but fooling around with you isn’t what I had in mind.”

Ian looked over to Norris' make-shift desk. Her computer was up and running, but she wasn't there. He glanced over his shoulder. No, she wasn't in the bathroom. Pulling on his jeans, he wandered out into the kitchen. It was still dark out and he couldn't hear her or Nell. He looked out into the backyard. Empty. As he glanced at the driveway, he swore. The Range Rover was missing. "Damn it."

Ian went back into the bedroom and dialed her cell phone.

"Hello, lover. Nell and I are—"

"Don't you 'hello, lover' me. What part of Dan's not wanting you to go anywhere alone did you fail to understand?"

"You and Dan are overreacting. Is my father a dirty bastard? No doubt. But he's always been a dirty bastard and he's always known how to locate me. The only thing that's changed is that I moved from Chicago."

"Yeah, right back to where he's looking for a fortune in pirate treasure. And right where he's been, at the very least, keeping an eye on you. I doubt it's been out of the goodness of his heart. Now where the hell did you say you were?"

"Actually, I didn't. And if you keep talking to me that way, Nell and I won't be back until noon. You and Dudley will be on your own until then."

He could hear the heat rising in her voice. "Norris, you get your tail back to this house right now. You don't stop; you don't pass go, and you don't collect two hundred dollars."

"Two points for the board game reference. Nell and I will see you for lunch. Bye, lover."

Ian was surprised that she'd hung up on him, but not surprised when she let his calls go straight to voice mail. She was going to find out that your lover having a cop for a best

friend had certain advantages when looking to curb the foolish inclinations of one's mate. He dialed Dan.

Dan picked up quickly despite the early hour. "You guys okay?"

"I am, but she won't be when I get my hands on her. Can you run some kind of GPS trace on her phone and tell me where she is?"

Dan came fully awake. "What the hell, Ian? I told you to keep her close."

"My bad. I failed to realize she'd get up and leave at o'dawn thirty."

"I suggest handcuffs—either attached to you or to your bed." Ian could hear Cindy swat him and hiss his name. He could also hear him kiss his wife soundly and tell her to behave. "I can get that trace. Give me a minute and I'll get right back to you."

Dan rang off and Ian got dressed. On the way to his truck, he almost tripped over Dudley. "Guess you'd better come along, huh?" Dudley happily wagged his tail. When he opened the door, the big basset stood up on his hind feet, resting his front ones against the driver's side, looking at Ian expectantly. Ian hoisted the heavy dog into his truck. "There you go, Dud. Move on over. I have to drive." Dudley moved to the passenger seat and sat down like he'd been doing so all his life. Ian recognized Dan's number and picked up. "Find her?"

"Yep, and you're not going to like it. Looks like she's sitting up at the harbor marina where you guys got the picture of Harris."

"Shit."

“I said you weren’t going to like it. I can pull a favor to locate her, but I can’t send a unit to pick her up.”

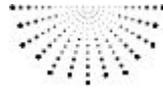
“I’m already headed that way. I had a feeling that’s where she might go. Do me a favor and tell the cops in the area if they get any reports of a woman caterwauling and cursing my name to just ignore it. That will be me making her rue the day she decided to go gallivanting off into who knows what kind of trouble.”

“I’m heading your way. And Ian, make sure she can’t sit down this time. At all.”

“That won’t be an issue. She’s not going to be able to sit for a couple of days.”

“Good man. Call me if you need anything. If, by chance I get there first, I’ll make sure she doesn’t leave even if I have to handcuff her to her vehicle.”

CHAPTER TEN



Norris parked parallel to the curb in the upper lot hidden by some over-hanging trees. She figured someone would have to be actively searching to spot her. A casual visual survey would not reveal her hiding place. She turned off the engine and headlights. Having not spotted his car, she figured she'd arrived ahead of her father. Nell raised her head once and seeing nothing of interest, curled back up to sleep.

Norris knew she wasn't really mad at Ian. Sure, he was being bossy and over-protective, but she kind of liked that. She knew her slight irritation had been magnified by the sudden appearance of a father she'd never known and about whom her mother had never had a good thing to say. He hadn't even bothered to contact her to suggest finding the treasure together. No, instead he was trying to steal Anne Bonny's legacy—her mother's legacy. And Norris would be damned before she allowed that to happen.

Ian and Dan arrived at about the same time as each other at the far end of the upper parking lot. The sun was just beginning to banish the darkness of the night. They could see the Range Rover and could also see Harris' car pulling into the lower lot.

They parked their respective cars out of sight, opting to wait until he went out in his boat before confronting Norris.

Ian was a bit surprised to see Cindy sitting next to Dan. Ian called Dan's mobile. "And you brought Cindy because?"

"Reluctantly on her part. I figured she could drive whatever vehicle you wanted back to wherever you wanted. You're probably going to need a bit of time to straighten your lady out. I thought you might want to go back to your loft so you have some privacy. I'll follow Cindy and then take her to breakfast and back home. Make sure your girl understands why this little stunt was a truly bad idea. I don't have to be at the office until mid-morning and I had plans with Cindy that didn't include traipsing out here and pissing off my wife who wanted no part of Norris' getting punished."

Ian heard Cindy in the background saying, "You got that right."

Dan turned his attention to his wife. "One more word, little girl, and Norris won't be the only one who gets her bottom spanked this morning. Is that what you want?"

"No, sir."

Dan gentled his tone, "I know you don't want Norris to think she got ganged up on, but what she did was dangerous. Ian needs to get it nipped in the bud right now. Maybe tomorrow Ian will let you call her and the two of you can talk and you can offer her your insight on why minding your husband is a much better idea than doing stupid things."

"I would point out, husband mine, that Norris is not Ian's wife."

"Not yet. But as you might recall, you got your backside peppered on more than one occasion before we said our

wedding vows.”

Ian grinned at Cindy’s silence before he spoke. “Cindy, I think it might be good if you and Norris talked tomorrow. It’ll be good for her to have a friend with whom she can process all of this and bitch about what bastards you put up with. I’ll give her your phone number and let her call you if she feels up to it.”

“Don’t be too hard on her, Ian.”

“Bullshit,” said Dan. “You already spanked her for disobeying you once, but apparently you didn’t get through to her. You make it count.”

“I intend to make sure she doesn’t forget any time soon or sit down with any degree of comfort for the next few days.”

Four sets of eyes watched Sam Harris park his car at the far end of the lot in a secluded spot and then walk down to the dock to take his small skiff out. They watched as he maneuvered out of the sheltered harbor and made his way to the small, leeward side of the island.

Norris was just about to open her car door when it was opened for her. Her initial alarm faded as she realized it was Ian, only to be filled with dread when she looked at his face.

“How did you find me?”

“It didn’t take a Mensa candidate to figure out where you were headed when you wouldn’t answer me. Plus, it helps to have a friend who can trace your GPS signal.” Norris glanced over his shoulder to see Dan with a lovely woman she assumed was his wife, Cindy, approaching. Ian offered Norris

his hand to help her out. “You and I are going back to my truck. I’ll get Dudley out and put him in the Range Rover and then Cindy’s going to drive it home for us.”

“I’m perfectly capable of driving back to the house.”

“Perhaps now, but not when I get through with you. And I think you’d prefer that the crew doesn’t hear you wailing away while I blister your backside.”

The set of Ian’s jaw told Norris he was in no mood to be trifled with or teased. Before she could reconcile her feelings and decide on a course of action, Ian continued.

“Now, you get your tail in gear or I swear I’ll put you over my tailgate and start your punishment right here.”

Norris thought about rounding on him but was stopped by Cindy’s gentle voice.

“Take it from me, the best thing you can do right now is just accept that you’re about to get spanked for disobeying Ian. If you fuss or fume at him, it’ll only get worse. I’m telling you this from my own personal experience.”

Dan chuckled, “I’d listen to her, Norris. Cindy didn’t have anyone to advise her, and she spent quite a bit of time during our first year together with a bright red bottom—not that I particularly minded—red is my favorite color on her.” Cindy blushed profusely. He hugged his wife. “See how pretty she looks?”

Cindy slapped at him, but Norris could see the great love they felt for each other.

Ian took Norris by her upper arm and led her back to the truck. Ian allowed her to greet Dudley then helped him out before putting her in the seat he’d been using. “You sit here and think about how comfortable you are. I guarantee you

won't be sitting this pretty for a few days by the time I'm finished."

He put Dudley in the Range Rover and showed Dan and Cindy how to deploy the dog ramp. "Just leave the keys on one of the side tables in the bedroom. I already let my guys know Norris is with me and that we may be a while. Could one of you give each of the dogs a cup of food and put down fresh water?"

Dan nodded in agreement and helped Cindy into Norris' car. As he and Ian walked back over to where Norris sat in the truck, Dan counseled his friend. "You make sure she learns her lesson this time. I'm not trying to get all involved in your relationship, but if she's anything like Cindy, once she's been spanked she'll be more than ready to be forgiven, if you know what I mean."

Ian laughed. "You're a piece of work. You're enough of a badass that you have no trouble telling me to give Norris one helluva spanking, but you're too much of a southern gentleman to tell me straight out she's going to get aroused, and I'd best fuck her good and hard."

Dan grinned. "Yep, that's me." He clapped Ian on the shoulder and said, "Well, I'd best leave you to it and then get Cindy home so I can tend to her—minus the spanking."

Ian walked over to Norris' side of the truck. He opened the door, turned her to him, and kissed her deeply. She responded and he was reluctant to break the kiss. "You know I love you, right?"

She smiled. "Well, you hadn't said it, but I was kind of hoping you felt the same as me."

He nodded. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t intend to set your tail on fire when we get to the loft. In fact, it’s the reason I’m going to make sure that this time you learn that when I tell you not to do something, you’d better do as you’re told.”

“But Ian, nothing happened. He didn’t even know I was up here.”

Ian shook his head. “I understand that. We were fortunate that nothing bad happened, but when you snuck out this morning there was no way for you to know that. I’m not going to argue with you. You’re going to sit there like a good girl and think about that.” She started to protest again, but Ian silenced her with another kiss. “Not another word until we get to the loft.”

They drove to the loft, parked the truck, and Ian helped her out of the car. He kissed her briefly and said, “I’m glad you’ve learned to wait for me to open the door for you. Makes me think that with the proper motivation, you can learn it’s best to mind me.”

They entered the loft and Norris turned toward him, wrapping her arms around his neck and seizing his mouth for a kiss, rubbing her body against his as she did. Ian returned the kiss and cupped her ass in his hands. Norris was quick to recognize that Ian’s body was as ready to mount her as she was ready to be mounted. She ran her hands down between their bodies and started undoing the buttons to his fly. She kicked off her shoes and moaned as his hands took hold of the waist band of her leggings and stripped her bare before lifting her and thrusting into her with a grunt of satisfaction. Their coupling was hard and frenzied and Norris gloried in it. He brought her to one climax before he started to rekindle her fire so that he could extinguish it with what she knew would gush

into her. They came together and she tried to keep him from slipping from her body.

She nuzzled his neck and murmured, “Remind me that having you do that is the real reason I don’t want to leave our bed.”

“If I thought that was enough to keep you from doing it again, I might be inclined not to make your spanking much worse than the first one I gave you, but we both know that isn’t true. You get naked and go stand in the corner by the fireplace.”

“What? You can’t be serious. You just fucked me.”

“And your point is?”

“My point is that you fucked me instead of spanking me.”

“When did I say that?” Ian couldn’t suppress his grin. “Did you really think that having a really good fuck was going to get you out of the spanking you have coming? Not bloody likely.” He turned her in the direction of the corner and gave her bottom an affectionate swat. “But for the record, I’m a whole lot less angry than I was before. Still doesn’t mean you’re going to be able to sit down any time soon, but I’ll never turn down an offer to avail myself of your charms. Now you take off the rest of your clothes and go wait in the corner until I’m ready to spank you.”

She stomped her foot. She knew it was childish, but she couldn’t think of anything else. “I will not.”

Ian spun her around and this time swatted her hard, three times. “You’re going to learn to mind me. Now get your tail in that corner before I decide to march you into it, setting your tail on fire while I do.” She looked over her shoulder at him and he nodded towards the corner. “Move it.”

She reluctantly walked towards the corner, pulling off her sweater and bra as she went. Ian smiled, retrieved his jeans and put them on. He knew she didn't want to do it, but he also knew she was starting to learn just who was or wasn't the dominant partner in their relationship. She stood in the corner and waited. He could see her apprehension gearing up. He joined her in the corner, embracing her.

“Ian, please? I won't do it again.”

“No sweetheart, you won't. I mean to spank you well enough that the next time you think about blatantly disobeying me you'll remember the consequences of that kind of behavior.”

He took her hand and led her to the couch, where he sat down, gently drawing her across his lap and rubbed her quivering bottom. He frowned as he felt her body start to resist.

“I swear Ian Hunter if you spank me...” the sharp application of his hand to her right butt cheek cut her off mid-sentence.

“Naughty girls who are about to get their bottoms spanked shouldn't make threats. Do you understand me?” he asked as he began rhythmically setting her backside ablaze. “I told you that you weren't to leave the house without me. Yet, you snuck out of the house to go do something you knew I wouldn't have allowed, didn't you?”

She wiggled and squirmed and tried her best to avoid his hard hand as he continued to paddle her ass. “God damn it, Ian. That hurts,” she cried.

“Good. Maybe next time, you'll decide that doing what you want isn't worth getting a spanking, especially when you

know you were wrong to do it. And you knew you were wrong, didn't you?"

"I hate you!"

Ian increased the strength of the blows he landed and moved them down her body to include her tender sit spots. "And you are not going to lie to me or say things like that to me, regardless of how hard you're spanked."

"What lie? I didn't lie!"

"Yes, you did. You told me you hated me, and we both know that isn't true. Is it?" She remained silent while he continued to spank her. "Is it?"

"All right! It isn't true."

"Say you're sorry."

"Fuck you."

"That comes after the spanking sweetheart, although I must say we may do it before and after because your pussy was awfully needy when we got here. Now, apologize to me."

"Ouch. Ian. Please?"

"Apologize."

"All right, I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?"

"Whatever will make you stop. Please stop, please."

"You need to be sorry for disobeying me and you need to be sorry for lying to me when you told me you hated me. That was a mean and untruthful thing to say."

"Okay, I'm sorry for disobeying you. God, please, Ian, you're really hurting me." He continued to spank her with

considerable strength. She realized that those strong arms that were capable of lifting her off the ground to carry her or fuck her were also quite capable of powering a hand that could deliver a nasty spanking from which she feared she might never recover. “I’m sorry for telling you I hate you. I don’t. You know I don’t.”

Ian stopped momentarily and wiped the sweat from his upper lip. Giving a woman a sound spanking was taxing work, but he didn’t think he’d point that out to her. He was glad to see she’d learned from the first spanking that she didn’t get up until he told her she could. He resumed her spanking with her crying and pleading for him to stop. Although he wanted to spare her, this time, he knew better. “I know you don’t. And you love me, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ian.”

“If you ever lie to me about anything or tell me you hate me again, I will wash your mouth out with soap before spanking you. Are we clear about that?”

“Yes, Ian. Please, baby, I’ll be good. I won’t disobey you again.”

He chuckled at her. “Oh, yes, you will, and you know what will happen when you do, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ian. Please?” She was so relieved when he ceased striking her that she almost cried with relief. She wanted desperately to get up but didn’t.

She felt his hand rest on her bruised and sore bottom and found it soothing. As soon as she was able to focus on something other than how much she hurt and how sore she knew she was going to be, she could feel that Ian once again had an erection, poking up through his jeans and into her belly.

She wasn't at all surprised when he slipped his hand between her legs and stroked her outer nether lips and slipped inside her to stoke the embers of her desire he knew he would find.

She purred and now her movements on his lap were those of a woman who was ready to be taken by the man who had just punished her. Her nipples were painfully hard, and she moaned with pleasure.

"I did some reading while you were gone. There's a school of thought that says you don't satisfy your woman's arousal when it is caused by a spanking. That it might confuse her as to whether or not she's been disciplined. But Dan is of the mind that re-establishing good, positive feelings is the best way to let your woman know you've forgiven her bad behavior and having paid the price for it, things are back to normal." He continued to plunge his fingers in and out of her as her body began to prepare to climax. "Do you think you'll be confused if I put you over the back of the couch and give you a nice hard fucking?"

"No, Ian. I will be very clear about why I was punished and that you have forgiven my bad behavior."

Just as she started to come, Ian withdrew his hand from between her thighs and she growled in frustration. One hard swat to her already sore backside reminded her that she was still across his lap. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

Ian grinned, glad she couldn't see his face. "Get up and come lean over the back of the couch."

She winced. Moving caused her bottom and her sit spots to reignite. She said nothing but draped herself as he'd instructed.

"Spread your legs. I want you to present that pussy to my cock for its use."

Mortified, she spread her legs and her aroused opening was displayed for him to see in all its well lubricated glory.

He stepped between her legs. “That’s my sweetheart. You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes, please, Ian.”

With that he steadied her with his hands on her hips and he thrust into her with considerable strength. She growled again but this time with intense pleasure as she came. He didn’t move but allowed her climax to embrace his length. “Never let it be said that I don’t indulge you when you deserve it.” He started to move back and forth within her.

He noticed the slight way her bottom recoiled as he stroked deep, and his body made contact with her bottom. He held her still while he pleased himself, which in turn brought her to the peak of her pleasure repeatedly. He could feel her body starting to build towards a final climax. He held her tight and thrust hard, gratified by the sounds of bliss his movements were giving her. As she neared her release, he moved faster and harder until he met her in one final moment of blinding joy.

He leaned over her, trapping her beneath him, spent from his exertions. He nuzzled her neck and ran his hands down her arms intertwining his hands with hers. “I suppose we can’t stay this way forever, can we?”

“Maybe just a bit longer? My ass is so sore and I’m afraid when you pull out of me, my pussy is going to be sore, too.”

He nuzzled her again, “And is that a bad thing?”

She turned her head and kissed him. “The sore ass? Yes. I’m going to try and avoid that as much as I can. The sore

pussy? No. That I could get used to.” He chuckled quietly in her ear.

“Ian?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I really am sorry about saying I hate you. I don’t. I love you more than I thought was ever possible.”

“I love you the same way. But don’t think it escaped my notice that you didn’t tell me without having your bottom spanked that you’re sorry you disobeyed me.”

She kissed him again. “That’s tougher. But I am genuinely sorry I worried and upset you.”

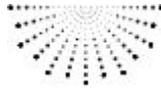
“And got your ass spanked for your trouble?”

“That, too.”

He slowly pulled out of her and noticed that the uncoupling did seem uncomfortable for her. He took her by the hand and walked around to the front of the couch. Stretching out on his back he drew her to lie on top of him. He cradled her in his arms as they both drifted off to sleep.

He wanted to think this would be the last time he had to discipline her but knew it wouldn’t be. Norris was intelligent, beautiful and stubborn, but he was certain they were perfect for one another.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Norris woke snuggled next to Ian on the couch. Sometime during their nap she'd slid towards the back of the couch and now found herself wedged between it and his hard body. She looked up to see him smiling down at her. He kissed her softly and ran his hand down her back to gently stroke her ass. Her sharp intake of breath made him hope that the spanking had been effective. "Hungry?"

She nodded. "Will you be upset if it's food and not you than I'm hungry for?"

He laughed. "I'll live. What do you say we go out for breakfast?" Getting up, he extended his hand to help her rise, suppressing a smile when she cringed as her backside made contact with the seat of the couch.

She looked at him with a mock scowl. "You laugh at me, Ian Hunter, and I swear I'll kick you in the shin."

He hugged her close and avoided the temptation to rest his hands on her ass. "I would never!"

"The hell you wouldn't. If you wanted to make sure I couldn't sit down comfortably, you accomplished your goal."

He tilted her face to his "My goal was to ensure that the next time I tell you to do something, you do as you're told."

Before she could protest, he kissed her deeply. “And if you’re waking up in the mood to argue, I have to tell you that I’m inclined to believe that your spanking wasn’t as effective as I hoped.” He allowed one of his hands to move down to her bottom where he let it rest.

Norris was quick to rub up against him and whisper, “No, baby. It was very effective. It hurts. I know it’s supposed to. But this much?”

Ian turned her around and looked at her bottom. “Most of the color has faded, but it’s going to be sore for a few days. I’m hopeful I won’t have to put any more color on it anytime soon.”

“Yes, Ian. I’ll be good.”

Ian snorted. “Doubtful. Just to be sure, why don’t we say that you don’t leave our bedroom without telling me.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t want to have to be launching out of bed worried that you’ve gone running off to get yourself into trouble. You can be in the primary bathroom or closet, but if you go out the bedroom door to the rest of the house, you’ll find yourself getting put across my knee and your butt spanked. Are we clear?”

“What if...”

“What if, nothing. I don’t mean to hold you captive in our bed, although Dan suggested handcuffs.” He laughed as she slapped at his chest, “but I mean it. You leave our bedroom even to go to the kitchen without telling me first and I’ll spank you. Is that clear?”

She looked in his face. The man was not joking. “I really scared you, didn’t I?”

Ian's mouth was set in frustrated lines. "Ya think? I come awake thinking I was going to pull my sexy woman back underneath me to find out that not only isn't she naked in our bed next to me, but that she's gone off to do some amateur police work—after she'd been specifically told not to. Sweetheart, if Dan Livingston says your father is bad news, he is."

She kissed him. "Okay, I won't do it again."

They retreated to the shower where Ian made slow, deliberate, and soft love to her as the water cascaded over their bodies and the steam saturated their skin. Norris was less stiff when they got out but was very careful to avoid rubbing her backside with the towel too vigorously. Ian refrained from commenting on that or the way she gingerly eased her way onto the seat of the truck when they left the loft.

Sam Harris was frustrated. He was fairly sure he remembered the rhyme correctly, but all of his searching had led nowhere. He was no closer to finding Anne Bonny's treasure today than he was when he'd arrived in Charleston, or for that matter, when he'd been married to Maggie Wingate decades past. Maybe it was time to stop searching for the treasure itself and concentrate on following Maggie's daughter.

And she was definitely Maggie's daughter, he thought with a sharp bark of laughter as he lit a cigarette. Not his. She may carry his genetics, his blood, but that didn't make someone family, now did it? Things like loyalty did. Love.

No, there was no way on God's green earth Maggie's daughter would be loyal or loving enough to just hand over

Anne Bonny's treasure to dear old dad.

And he didn't believe... not for a hot minute... that she just happened to leave Chicago to move to Charleston. His lovely daughter either knew where the treasure was or knew something that would help him locate it.

He meant to find out what she knew, and to see that he was the one who found the treasure.

It was his, Anne Bonny and her eldest daughters claptrap be damned.

When Ian and Norris arrived at the bungalow, Ian joined his crew who were installing the kitchen cabinets and counters.

Norris went into their bedroom/home office and began putting together a design plan for the Watson project. They planned to head over there this afternoon for her to walk him through it and she wanted to have something down on paper. After not being able to find a way to get comfortable on her office chair, she resorted to lying on her belly in the middle of their bed. She worked on her laptop there surrounded by Dudley and Nell, who occasionally got down to either go outside to nap in the sunshine or to see if they could score any treats from Ian or the rest of the crew.

When Ian found her stretched out on her belly, he wisely chose to say nothing. "We're making great headway in the kitchen. I think it'll be fully functional in a couple of days—certainly by the weekend, at the latest. The laundry room is ready if you want to have a washer and dryer installed."

Norris looked up at him. “Oh, that’s nice, first you ravage me in bed, then you beat my ass for no good reason, and now you expect me to cook for you and do your laundry.”

Ian smiled. “Well, yeah. What’s your point?”

She threw a wadded piece of paper at him. “Neanderthal.”

“Have you ever noticed that I call you nothing but your name and terms of endearment while you lob insults at me on a regular basis?”

“I’m the aggrieved party.”

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “And if you don’t continue to behave, you’ll be even more aggrieved than you are right now.” She reached out to slap his thigh. Ian glanced at her computer screen and saw an aerial shot of Charleston’s harbor, as well as the island Sam Harris had been searching and some old maps of the same. “Norris—” Her name on his lips was a warning she didn’t miss.

She sat up, forgetting for a moment why she’d been lying on their bed in the first place.

“Damn it, Ian. My ass hurts.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t do things that make me have to spank you.”

“And I wasn’t doing anything but a little online research. I also have some scanned documents passed down in the family about where Anne might have lived. It seems to me that as untrusting as Anne was, she would have wanted to keep an eye on her treasure. I thought if I... we... could figure out where she lived, we might be able to figure out which island the treasure is on. I think you’re right that the treasure is most likely on the leeward side, and I think it’s within spyglass distance of where she lived.”

Ian nodded. “That makes some sense. But anything we find; we’re going to run through Dan. I won’t have you go out hunting for a treasure that has attracted a guy like Sam Harris’ attention.”

“You can refer to him as my father, you know.”

Shaking his head, Ian replied “He’s not your father. He’s a guy who got your mother pregnant. That’s all. And don’t change the subject. You are not to go out treasure hunting. Do you understand me?”

“I wasn’t going to go alone.”

“Damn it, Norris. You’re not going at all. And let me remind you, sweetheart, until we figure out what’s going on, you’re not to go anywhere without my permission and without either me or one of my guys with you.”

“Okay. Okay. I get it. I’m effectively grounded.”

He kissed her again. “Pretty much. Do you want to go get some lunch and then head over to the Watson’s?”

“Sounds good. Can we run by some place to order a washer and dryer? I sold mine with my row home in Chicago and I noticed you don’t have one at the loft.”

“Not true, but it’s a stacked set and tucked away in the hall closet. I thought I’d leave it for Beau and Jill.”

“Sounds good. Let me just grab my shoes.” She stood stiffly, moving at a snail’s pace, and glowered when she caught Ian covering his mouth to hide a grin. She was finding that not only was the residual heat from the spanking painful, but it made her slower. She glared at Ian, who simply kissed her.

Deciding loving on Ian was more fun than being angry, she embraced him and kissed him back, putting more heat in her

kiss than he had in his. Ian responded by pulling her closer and thrusting his tongue past her teeth. Sore ass be damned, she was wildly attracted to her hunky contractor.

“It’s not too hot out. Let’s take the Rover so Nell and Dudley can go with us. Would you mind driving?” She called over her shoulder as she left the room.

“Not at all. Want me to grab a pillow?” She turned and scowled at him. He laughed and kissed her again. “I’ll take that as a yes.” She grabbed the pillow from him and hit him with it, causing him to laugh even harder.

They loaded up the dogs and Norris placed the pillow on the passenger side seat. Beau was in the yard and noticed. Ian said to him, “Clumsy here tripped this morning at the loft and hit the ground hard. Luckily for her, she didn’t break anything, and she has some nice padding in that area.”

Beau laughed.

As they backed out of the driveway, she said, “Calling me clumsy is a term of endearment?”

Ian reached across to take her hand and bring it to his mouth for a kiss. “Would you have preferred I tell him that the real reason you need a pillow is that you were a very naughty brat and I had to put you over my knee and spank you?”

“Hmm. I guess not.”

They went to lunch and then headed to the appliance store where Ian knew he could get a good deal on the washer and dryer. They argued about who should pay, finally settling on using his contractor discount with him paying the difference between the smaller set she had planned to buy and the larger one that he preferred because it could steam clean clothes.

“Do you think we could stop by the Old Exchange? They have a couple of artifacts I want to take a look at.” Seeing him arch his eyebrow in question she said, “I’m just doing a bit more research. I won’t do anything but look.”

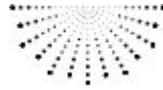
At least at this point.

“Sure, we can do that,” he agreed.

A Charleston landmark for centuries, the Old Exchange was a historic building that had served a variety of civic institutional functions, including notably as a prisoner of war facility operated by the English during the Revolutionary War and as a depository for notable historic documents and artifacts.

Turning into the parking lot, they were able to find a spot under a tree and Ian helped her out of the Range Rover. Wrapping their arms around each other, they entered the building that housed one of the city’s best pirate museums.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Sam watched them enter the building. *I knew it.* Convinced that Norris had in fact come to Charleston to steal the treasure, he thought of following them at a discreet distance. His worst fears were confirmed when he saw Norris talking with one of the curators and examining old maps and other documents. He barely had time to duck behind a bookcase before Ian and Norris spotted him. He turned away so they couldn't see his face. He overheard them say something about Anne's home, and then they wandered off, to a different part of the museum.

What the hell does it matter where she lived?

Sam walked over to the same clerk.

"I'd like to see the same documents as the couple who were just here."

"Ah...okay..." The young man looked at him as though he had asked to see the color of his underwear.

Sam blinked, a long, slow, completely bored flex of his eyelids. "I work for them. Ms. Wingate asked me to check something she forgot. So, if it's not too much trouble, could you let me look at those documents?"

"No trouble, sir." The clerk pulled a stack of brittle, timeworn paper from beneath the counter that separated them

and laid it in front of Sam. “Let me know if I can be of further assistance.”

Without saying thank you—really, the kid was rude—Sam carried the stack to the end of the counter and flipped through what Norris had been looking at. What was all this crap... harbor map, city map... He stopped. Went back. The old city map was interesting in that it showed the location not only of roads and thoroughfares, but also of several houses that had been there since the 1700s.

He tapped his fingers on the counter, his mind working busily.

What the hell did his daughter need that information for?

Norris was thrilled with the information gleaned at the Old Exchange. “Do you think there’s any possibility that Ted and Nancy’s place might have been Anne’s home? Wouldn’t that be great? Nancy would love it.”

Ian had to admit that more and more he was becoming as captivated with the idea of solving the riddle of Anne’s treasure as he was with her eighth great-granddaughter.

Norris caught him smiling at her. “What? I’m rambling again?”

“No, sweetheart, I just enjoy learning how you think. You’re more interested in learning the legacy than actually finding the treasure itself. In fact, you might be more like Anne Bonny than you realize.”

“Pfft. Anne, by all accounts, was gorgeous, red-haired, buxom, and a pirate, for heaven’s sake. A pirate in a time

when women were nothing more than broodmares, bedmates, and housekeepers.”

“And yet, she provided for her descendants. She gave all of that up for the sake of her child and all the children to come. And there’s nothing wrong with a woman settling down and remaining with one man for the rest of her life,” Ian said.

“I’ll bet she didn’t hook up with some guy who thought spanking her was a major turn on.”

“I’ll bet she did. Men have been spanking their women since the dawn of time. And I am sure most get aroused by it.”

“Well, we both know you don’t.”

“As I recall, sweetheart, the two times I’ve spanked you, when I reached between your legs, you were more than ready to be bedded.”

“I know. I’m a pain slut.”

“You’re an incorrigible pain slut, and you’re mine,” he laughed.

“I am, you know,” she said turning suddenly serious.

“What?”

“Yours—if you want me.” Norris held her breath.

Ian said nothing but found a place to pull the Range Rover over to the curb. He turned and leaned over to her, winding his fingers through her hair behind her head and pulling her close. He looked directly into her eyes and said just as intensely. “I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.” He kissed her and would have deepened the kiss had it not been for Nell sticking her nose between their faces. He kissed her snout instead. “You and I are going to have to come to a serious

agreement about where that nose goes when I'm kissing your mother."

"Good luck with that," Norris teased. "So, you want me to be your girl?"

Again, Ian said nothing and started up the engine pulling away from the curb. "Not really."

What had seemed like one of the best moments of her life now turned dark. "What is it you want, then?" she asked, afraid of what his answer might be.

"I want you to be my wife. I'll settle for fiancée for a bit, but, ultimately, wife."

Norris was shocked. "Is that your idea of a romantic proposal? Cause I have to tell you, buttercup, if it is, it sucks."

"Do you want a romantic proposal?" he looked at her with deadly seriousness.

Norris had sudden visions of the most embarrassingly romantic proposal ever given in the history of Charleston. "No, I just want a really big diamond," she quipped.

Reaching over, he took her hand and brought it to his lips before saying, "Sorry. You're going to have to settle for my Grandmother Hunter's Victorian wedding set. She gave it to me before she died."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oh, Ian I was just teasing about a big diamond. I'd be honored to wear your grandmother's ring. But isn't your family going to think this is a bit sudden?"

Ian shook his head. "Nope, runs in the family. My grandfather ran away with my grandmother within days of meeting her. My mom and dad were married within six weeks and only waited that long because my mom wanted a big

wedding. I used to think I wasn't destined to have someone with whom to share my life. But my father always told me that one day the right girl would come along, and God would drop an anvil on my head and say pay attention, stupid, there she is. Go get her! When you walked out on the deck that first day I met you, I might not have felt an anvil, but I sure as hell heard God whispering in my ear."

For a moment, Norris could say nothing. Her throat was too full of emotion. She cleared it, surreptitiously wiping the fluid that insisted on collecting in the corner of her eye.

"So, what kind of wedding do you want, big or small? Church or civil ceremony?" Norris could scarcely believe she was talking to a man she'd known little more than a week about their wedding—and feeling as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Up to you. All I want is two things. As long as I get them, we can do whatever you want."

"What do you want?"

"I want it legal. I don't want any question about that. And I want it within a reasonable amount of time."

"Define reasonable."

"End of June?"

June? It was already October. Did he have any idea the kind of time it took to plan and pull off a wedding? Probably not.

"As in next year, right? What, are you afraid I'll change my mind and run off?"

"You forget I have a cop for a friend. You run, I'll find you and drag you down the aisle that same day. I'll get you bedded

good and proper so there's no question of the marriage having been consummated. And after that, I'll put you face down over my knee and spank that pretty ass of yours until you can't sit down on the honeymoon," Ian said, only half joking.

"Are you kidding? You have a very successful and thriving business and are one of the most eligible bachelors in Charleston."

"Was," Ian corrected.

Norris smiled. "Was. You, buttercup, are quite the catch. I'm just an interior designer with one client and—"

"A pirate treasure. Argh!" Just then, Ian's phone rang, and the communication system identified the caller as Dan.

Norris hit the pickup button. "Good afternoon, Detective Livingston. The future Mrs. Ian Hunter here."

"Well, now," he drawled, the huge smile on his face evident in his voice. "That must have been one helluva spanking."

"It wasn't pleasant, that's for sure. I'm having to sit on a pillow because of his assault on my posterior. Aren't you cops supposed to protect innocent women from being assaulted by big, brawny, sexy contractors?"

Dan laughed out loud. "Only if the woman in question is innocent of wrongdoing and didn't do something foolish enough to warrant some old-fashioned discipline being applied to her bottom."

"Well, it wasn't the spanking. It was the fucking things back to normal that you told him to do that did the trick."

Norris and Ian both laughed as they heard Dan spit his drink.

“I never said that to him, not quite that bluntly, anyway. But I guess you can’t argue with success. Say, where are you two? Not eloping, I hope. Cindy would kill all of us.”

“No definitive plans except for no elopement. Cindy would have to get in line behind my family and my crew. We’re headed over to the Watson place.”

“Watson place? I don’t think I know that house.”

“It used to be the old Selbourne house on the harbor. Nice couple named Watson bought it. Norris is doing the interior design and Ted Watson gave me the contract for the renovation.”

“Congrats on that. Would you mind giving me the address? I have a bit more information on Sam Harris and a couple of questions for Norris.”

Ian gave him the address. Only a few minutes separated their arrivals.

No one spotted Harris hanging back, following the newly engaged couple. He parked well away, hidden behind some overgrown trees, and then stealthily approached the house.

Nell and Dudley were busy playing in the yard when Dan got out of his car. They challenged his approach until Norris joined them saying, “That’s Dan. He’s a friend of daddy’s.”

Dan looked over Norris’ head at Ian, who shrugged and smiled. He could tell that her inclusion of Dan into her little family meant a lot to his friend.

The small group—three humans and two bassets – went into the big house. Ian and Norris had opened windows upon their

arrival, as the house had been closed up for too long and the fresh air was a welcome addition.

Sam Harris crept up to the house, close enough to hear what was said, but careful to avoid being seen.

“I had a couple of rookie cops looking to make points tail your boy, Harris. It would seem he’s mighty interested in what the two of you are doing. He also may be onto the fact that we’re interested in what he might be up to. He’s left the one hotel he was registered in, and we haven’t found him anywhere else. To top it off, one of the cops that tailed him was on a break and thought he saw his car at the Old Exchange Building.”

“What time?” Ian interrupted.

“Shortly before I called you. Why?”

“Well, we’d left there just a bit earlier. Right when you called, I’d just proposed, and Norris had said yes.”

“First off, Ian Hunter, you never proposed, and I certainly never said yes.”

She has her mother’s sassy mouth.

The thought was a bitter one. His memories of his brief marriage to Maggie Wingate were not pleasant. Rather, they were filled with recollections of frequent arguments, shrewd understanding of his motivation, and refusal to fall in line.

Dan looked at Ian with concern. “But I thought you said you were the future Mrs. Hunter?”

“Oh, I am. I just want to set the record straight that he never proposed, and I never said yes.”

Dan laughed. “Consider it straightened. This one’s going to keep you on your toes, Ian. Perhaps I should get you a

bundle of switches for a wedding present.”

“You wouldn’t,” Norris said.

“He might.”

“Nah, Cindy would never let me do that. But I will make sure you’ve got at least one good bush from which to cut switches in case your hand doesn’t prove up to the task.”

Norris sputtered, not knowing quite how to respond while Ian and Dan laughed in that way men do that annoys most women.

Maybe that’s what I needed with her mother, some switches with which to beat her. Maybe then she’d have shared the secrets of Anne’s treasure.

Sam was glad he’d switched hotels and gone to one where identification was requested, but not mandatory for the right price. And then he felt it...that persistent prickle at the back of his neck that told him he was being watched. As unobtrusively as possible, he cast a glance around.

There.

A couple on a nearby verandah. They were the only ones around...they had to be the ones watching him.

“I really don’t like how this is shaping up, Ian. You keep the future Mrs. Hunter close.”

Ian hugged her. “No need to worry about that. And the future Mrs. Hunter now knows better than to leave our bedroom without permission. I don’t think we’ll have a repeat of her foolishness from this morning, now will we, sweetheart?”

Norris blushed; Dan squeezed her arm with affection and looked at Ian. “Glad to hear it.”

Sam pushed closer to the house behind the bushes to avoid being seen. As soon as he could, he pressed closer to the window. The couple had gone out onto a different part of the veranda, one with a spectacular view of the harbor.

“If this is really her house, then I think Harris is looking on the wrong island. Isn’t that the one he’s been searching?”

Harris was shocked to learn that they knew which island he was searching. He needed to get closer. He needed to hear this. As he started to creep forward, he heard a low growl and then a loud bark. Those damn dogs! He made his escape before Ian and Norris could find him.

Ian quieted the dogs and called them to come join him and Norris. “Do you really think she wanted to be able to see where she buried it?”

Norris nodded. “I’m sure of it. If I was her, I would. That way if anyone got too close, she could dig it up and bury it again, somewhere more secure. But the last line is the one that’s always intrigued me the most. ‘Beneath the first will be found the best’. What the hell did she mean by that?”

“No way of knowing. Maybe something at the bottom of the chest that she thought was the most valuable?”

Ian’s phone rang again, but the caller wasn’t identified. “Ian Hunter.” He laughed and then hit the speaker button.

“I understand I’m talking to the future Mrs. Hunter? This is the present Mrs. Livingston! Dan just told me the news. We are so happy for you two. I told Dan I’m not taking no for an answer. We’re going to dinner. How about High Cotton?”

“Cindy, Ian and I really aren’t dressed for dinner.” Norris grimaced.

“Nonsense. High Cotton is pretty casual. I asked Dan what you had on and it sounds fine.

Besides the chairs are really comfortable—nice and padded.”

Ian laughed as Norris blushed and took over the conversation. “We’d love to meet you. It’s almost five now. Why don’t Norris and I check on my crews, then swing by and pick you up? Then we can meet Dan at the restaurant.”

“That sounds great. See you soon!”

“Why don’t you go check on your crews, drop off the dogs and give them some food. I can stay here and make a couple more notes. I’ll close up the house, and you can pick me back up on the way to get...” She stopped mid-sentence when she realized Ian was frowning.

“Did you not just hear Dan say you were to stay close? Or are you just being deliberately obtuse? Do I need to rewarm your backside?”

“Ian, what could happen? We’re in one of the best neighborhoods in Charleston. I’m perfectly safe and perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“I’m starting to think I’m going to need to have a much more in-depth discussion with Dan about the fine art of cultivating a proper switch.”

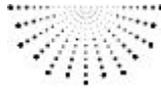
Norris could tell he was serious. “No, you don’t. I just thought it was more time effective, but if you aren’t comfortable doing it my way, we’ll do it yours.”

Ian kissed her. “There’s a good girl. Maybe that botany discussion can wait until a later date.”

“Or forever.”

Grumbling, she walked out behind him to the car. In this, she’d let him lead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Dinner at High Cotton had been as advertised. Great food, casual atmosphere, and comfy chairs. Cindy had made Norris feel comfortable from the get-go. She was genuinely happy to see her husband's best friend in love and offered any and all assistance Norris might need with the wedding.

The only even slightly awkward moment had been when Ian mentioned to Dan that he was going to need his help with some of the landscaping. Norris mis-swallowed her water and started coughing. The two men grinned like a couple of Cheshire cats, alerting Cindy that something was up, but nothing further was said.

Dan looked at Norris with interest. "And why might we be talking about landscaping?"

"Because my beloved here thought this afternoon I ought to leave her alone at the Watson house and then come back to get her."

Norris interjected. "It seemed to be a more efficient use of time." Saying it aloud, she realized how lame that sounded even to her.

"Dan, Norris thinks Harris is looking on the wrong island. Some of the research she did today has led us to believe that

the Watson place might have been Anne's home when she settled down."

Cindy looked at Norris. "You're related to Anne Bonny?" Norris nodded. "Well, I'll be damned, that makes us related. My people can trace their roots back to her. But the home she shared with the man her father basically sold her to belonged to a Selbourne." Seeing three sets of eyes focus on her, Cindy said "What?"

"The people who bought the Selbourne place are my clients, the Watsons. Dan, why didn't you tell me your wife was a descendant of Anne?" There was more than a hint of accusation in her voice.

"I'm not sure I ever knew that. Did I know that?" he said to his wife.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I did some genealogy research last year but didn't really pursue that as my people are several times removed not only from the Anne Bonny line, but from the Selbourne line, as well. I was more interested in ancestors that were closer. For instance, I have a several times removed grandmother who was an integral part of the Charleston Underground Railroad." She turned her attention back to Norris. "Isn't Anne Bonny supposed to have buried treasure in these parts?"

Norris nodded. "There's a family riddle about it. It's been passed down from first daughter to first daughter. I'm the latest first daughter."

"No pirate map with a large X marking the spot?"

Ian, Norris, and Dan laughed together. Norris explained, "I just said that to Dan and Ian yesterday. It would be so much

easier to find. But then again, maybe that means it's still there."

"Oh, girl. We are going to have to go treasure hunting one day."

Dan squeezed his wife's hand and lowered his voice. "You go off with Norris looking for pirate booty and it'll be your and Norris' booties that pay the price. Do you understand me, little girl?"

"Yes, sir," Cindy said demurely.

Norris was fascinated by Cindy's reaction to her husband's threat. Her response was one of equal parts respect and desire. There was not even a hint of fear. Clearly this lifestyle worked for them. Norris had taken an immediate liking to Cindy sensing a kindred spirit. She was no shrinking violet.

Detective Dan Livingston wasn't the only one who'd been doing some investigation. Sam Harris had been further refining his search and gathering information on both Maggie's daughter and her new man. Learning that he might be looking on the wrong island had infuriated him. He knew he had to come back to the big house before construction got started to see if he could see a more likely place for Anne to have buried her treasure.

He'd tried the bungalow again, but when her damn dogs' loud barking caused a few lights to blink on, one by one, in the houses to the right and left, he had left in a hurry. Maybe he'd have better luck at the Selbourne house.

He needed to get inside and see if he couldn't figure out which island was the right one...see if he couldn't salvage at least some part of this incredibly shitty day.

Having finished dinner and agreeing to meet for brunch on Sunday, the couples headed to their separate vehicles.

Ian held the door for Norris and helped her into the truck. She marveled that she had become so used to Ian's old-fashioned manners and rather liked them. Ian got in on the driver's side, saying, "I'm so glad you seemed to get along with the Livingstons."

"Not 'seemed.' I like both of them a great deal. And regardless of what you and the other wife beater say, Cindy and I determined we're going to be the best of friends."

"I don't think either of us has a problem with that, sweetheart. But best the two of you don't make plans that your pretty little backsides will have to pay a price for."

They drove home talking about the further plans for the bungalow. Norris commented that she was glad they seemed to be on the same page about decorating. Ian had laughed and admitted that as long as he had her, a bed, a kitchen, and a great shower, he had all he needed. He had reached across and rested his hand on her thigh. Norris felt her nipples tighten and the all-too familiar butterflies take flight in her groin.

They entered the house and greeted the dogs. Norris preceded Ian into their bathroom. She came out wearing just a t-shirt. Ian took immediate notice of how her nipples poked through the thin material. She saw the lust ignite in his eyes

and stared at his fly, satisfied that she had the same effect on him that he had on her.

“Planning to get that thing out and put it to use?”

“I thought I might. How do you feel about sleeping naked?”

“I usually leave the t-shirt on the foot of the bed so I have something to grab and throw on if I have to leave the bedroom in the middle of the night.” She stretched languidly and drew the t-shirt over her head. The grin on Ian’s face spread from ear to ear. “You seem to be a bit overdressed, buttercup. Do you need me to help you with those clothes?”

“Oh, I think I can manage. You want a pillow under your butt or your hips?”

She blushed. Even knowing that having sex was not going to be altogether enjoyable, nevertheless Norris was incredibly aroused and wanted Ian.

“Probably my hips. Are you ever going to apologize for spanking me so hard I can’t sit down with any degree of comfort? For what it’s worth, with the exception of the food and the company, dinner was a less than enjoyable event.”

She pulled back the sheets and slipped between them, being careful to stay on her side and position her body so that her backside would not have to make contact with the mattress.

As Ian drew back the sheets on his side, he held them up to gaze at her body. “I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for an apology on the current state of your pretty behind. The only thing I’m sorry for is that you felt the need to test my resolve to keep you safe. Hopefully you learned from the spanking you got this morning, and I won’t have to repeat that lesson any time soon.”

Ian rolled up one of the bed pillows into a nice bolster and positioned her on her belly with the pillow under her hips lifting her into a comfortable position for him to mount her from behind. He knelt next to her and began to rub her back and shoulders, kneading and stroking as he went. As he worked his way down her body, he trailed kisses down her spine. She stretched and moved under his hands like a cat as she purred with desire.

He skipped over her punished bottom and then continued to massage her legs. His kisses, however, did not ignore the area on which he had inflicted his discipline earlier that day. He blew kisses across it as he continued to stroke her. She moaned and felt her body come alive under his attention. Ian brought his hands back up to massage and part her thighs. He positioned himself behind her and she couldn't stop the gasp of carnal pleasure when he reached her labia and parted it with his fingers, ensuring that she was wet enough to take him easily. He nuzzled her neck and whispered in her ear. "Do you want me to mount you?"

"Yes, please. My pussy feels so empty without you."

Ian lifted her hips and slid deep within her, loving the way she closed around him, exhaling his name on a sigh. He moved slowly but with deliberation, trying to avoid too much contact with her backside. Her first climax was drawn out and powerful and yet at the same time quiet. He could feel his own need building and knew that he wanted desperately to bury himself balls deep when he finally came.

"You all right, sweetheart?" he asked as he began to thrust with more deliberation and power. He knew that the contact he was now making with her ass had to be less than comfortable,

but he could tell her body was more focused on the sexual satisfaction she was both giving and receiving.

“God, Ian. Take me hard, please. I won’t break.”

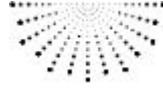
That was all he needed to hear. He grasped her hips to hold her in place and began to hammer within her. She wanted to move with him to meet him stroke for stroke, but he held her still for his use and brought her to a shattering climax that was anything but quiet. “Jesus, I want you.”

“You have me. Please let me move with you.”

“No, I just need for you to let me fuck you.”

He increased his tempo as he felt his own release building. He drove into her one last time, feeling his balls release all of his seed into her. He stayed buried deep within her until the spasms from her climax ceased. As he pulled out of her, some of his semen dripped out of her pussy and off his cock. He collapsed to her side, trying to avoid making contact with her ass. He rolled over onto his back drawing her off the pillow and onto him so that he could cradle her in his arms. Sleep claimed them both within moments.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Sam Harris slid down the long driveway to the Selbourne/Watson house hugging the trees to the left to conceal his approach. He needed to get to the back. He wanted to see if he could figure out which island that contractor and Maggie's daughter thought was a more likely prospect.

A part of Sam was angry that he'd found nothing, that he had apparently been wasting his time and that the girl was after the treasure as well. But another part recognized that there was something to be gained from her arrival. He now had a clue where to search next.

He just had to get there first.

The next few days passed quickly and were filled with plans. Plans for the bungalow and the Watson project, as well as plans to meet with Ian's family. They had sounded truly overjoyed when Ian called his father to ask him if he could get his grandmother's ring from the family safe deposit box.

As he had predicted, his family was not at all surprised that Ian had settled on Norris so quickly. They had all been so welcoming. Ian's father, Malcolm, had suggested that the

family come for the weekend, saying it was best that Ian “get that ring on her finger sooner rather than later.” Each of them took the time to talk to her. After the call, they all sent text messages offering their congratulations and any assistance she might need.

Ian had been afraid that his boisterous family might overwhelm Norris. After all, he had reasoned, it had always been just her and her mother, and for the last several years just her. She had assured him she looked forward to having not only a family of their own but becoming a part of his.

Gradually sitting and lying on her back had once again become comfortable for Norris. Ian had found it difficult not to smile or outright laugh when she would be reminded that her backside was not completely recovered. This prompted Norris on more than one occasion to throw something at his head.

Ian had teased her one night after a particularly exhaustive sexual encounter that he feared that he was never going to be able to make love to her without having to be careful of her bottom. That comment had earned him not only a pillow fight but being momentarily kicked off the bed, much to Nell and Dudley’s delight.

On Saturday morning, Ian woke with his arm wrapped around a warm body. It took him a minute to realize the body had fur and was not nearly long enough to be human. He opened an eye to find Nell snuggled up to him. As he lifted his head, both she and Dudley wagged their tails lazily and he could see Norris at her computer. He rolled over on his back and stretched. Taking that as a sign that he was awake, the hounds pounced, momentarily knocking the wind out of him.

He locked eyes with Norris who was smiling him. He noted that the bedroom was filled with light. “What time is it?” he asked.

“Early.”

“Really? Then why don’t you bring that sexy body back to bed and we’ll kick the dogs off.”

Norris smiled and approached the bed. “It’s not that early, buttercup. The crew should be here in about fifteen to twenty minutes. So far you haven’t given me any indication that you can get the deed done in that short a time period.”

“Complaining?”

She shook her head. “No, but I’m thinking I probably should have awakened you a couple of hours ago.”

He grinned. “Don’t make that mistake again.” The thought crossed his mind that her smile was brighter than the sun streaming through the window and that he was going to get to wake up to it most every morning for the rest of his life. She leaned down to kiss him. He reached up, cupping the back of her head to prevent her from moving away. He deepened the kiss. “Good morning, beautiful.” He swung his legs off the bed and stood, never once letting her go. “Care to take a shower with me?”

She shook her head. “I have things to do today, and so do you. Can I have a rain check?”

“As many as you like.” He kissed her again and caressed her backside. He was glad to see that it no longer caused her any pain. He turned and went in to take his shower.

He was drying off when he noticed her leaning against the door frame. “Hey, lover, please take note that I am letting you

know that I am leaving our bedroom. I've got some calls and other work to do and plan to set up on the deck."

He crossed the very small distance between them and kissed her again. He wondered if he'd ever tire of kissing her and feeling her lips part under his. "Okay. I'm going to spend part of my day at the other jobsite so I can get it finished up and be ready to start on the Watson project first part of next week." He moved past her to grab a pair of jeans and a work shirt, putting them on before he sat on the edge of the bed to put on his socks and work boots.

"I need to go to my new office and take some measurements. I thought I might call Cindy to see if she wants to meet for lunch. Do you want me to swing by the loft and get anything for you?"

He stood and pulled her to him. "You'll do nothing of the sort. You stay where I know you'll be safe with my crew, or you come with me. You do not go gallivanting off by yourself. And, no, Cindy doesn't count."

"Ian, I have things to do. Harris has done nothing he hasn't been doing for weeks except follow me around for a bit. You and Dan are being paranoid and overbearing. If you're going to start on the Watson project, I need to get things finalized."

"Then you work here while I'm with the other crew and we can go down there together."

Frustrated, Norris stomped her foot. "I am trying to be reasonable, but you have got to give some, as well."

Ian could hear the crew arriving, making more noise than was probably necessary. He appreciated that they were trying to respect that he and Norris might still be in bed. He took her head in both of his hands and kissed her, silencing any further

argument. “You are probably right, but that doesn’t change anything right now. You stay here or go with me. If you have things to buy for this house or the Watson house, I could be okay with you taking Beau with you. But you do not, and let me repeat that, do not, leave this property by yourself.” He ran his hands possessively down her back letting them stop suggestively on her derriere. “Do you understand me?”

“I speak perfectly good English. You need to learn to compromise.”

“I think I’m doing pretty well in that department. After all, I haven’t handcuffed you to the bed yet.” He gave her a brief kiss as he ran his hand under her shirt and tweaked a pert nipple. “But you misbehave and that could change.”

Ian left the room to join his crew and outline the work he needed to have them accomplish that day. He also gave them a heads up about Sam Harris as a possible stalker or threat to Norris. He then instructed Beau that if Norris needed him to go with her to pick things up for the bungalow or any other project that he was to go with her.

Beau’s response had been, “Not a problem, boss.”

Norris expressed her irritation and turned to go out on the deck. Ian laughed. “She’s not a big fan of this plan, but just ignore her. Any questions or problems, you call me.”

“Are you expecting trouble?”

Ian shook his head. “I really don’t know. What I do know is that I love her, and I need to keep her safe.”

Several hours had passed when Beau stuck his head out into the backyard to let Norris know he was going to make a lunch run and to ask if she wanted something. She declined but thanked him for the offer. Norris waited until she heard him and several of the others leave before retrieving her keys and her purse from the house. She exited through the back gate and got into her Range Rover.

As she backed out of the driveway, she rolled down the passenger side window calling to the remaining crew. "I'm headed out for a bit." Feeling very proud of herself, she headed to her new office.

The office was in the heart of Charleston in a converted factory. It was a mixed-use building with a combination of professional offices, small retail boutiques and bistro-type restaurants. The office supplies, furnishings, and equipment she had ordered had been delivered and she spent several hours working and felt it was coming together quickly. A couple of more hours and she would be able to start meeting with clients. She was just putting the finishing touches on her office, when she looked up to see Ian coming through the door. He did not look happy.

"Now, Ian..."

"Don't you 'now, Ian' me. You didn't even have the damn door locked. You know my family will be here in a couple of hours. I guess it's a good thing I made the reservation at High Cotton. You're going to need those comfy chairs. Get your things. We need to make a little trip to the loft."

"You wouldn't."

"Oh, I think you know better than that. Now get your stuff. Today was going to be tight as it was to get everything done. Having to take the time to try and spank some sense into you

wasn't supposed to be part of the equation. When we get in the truck, you're going to call Beau and apologize for ditching him."

"What about the Rover?"

"We'll pick it up on our way back to the bungalow. I'll give my dad the keys to it and they can use it to drive around while they're here."

"I need a vehicle."

"No, you won't. Until Harris leaves the area and we've put some distance between whatever he's up to and you, you'll be with me."

"That is ridiculous."

"I am not going to argue with you, Norris. Get your tail in gear or I swear I'll put you over my knee right here and I won't much care that your new professional neighbors hear what you sound like when you're getting punished for disobeying me. Move it."

The stern look on his face told her that he had no intention of backing down. She gathered her things and they walked to the truck hand in hand. He said nothing further as he helped her into the truck and drove to the loft. She tried several times to engage him in conversation but after all her attempts failed, she sat quietly in the truck.

He pulled into the underground parking lot at the loft and walked around to open her door.

"Ian, please, will you just talk to me?"

"What would you like to talk about? That you disobeyed me? That you had Beau scared half out of his mind? That you could have been hurt? That I really prefer to fuck you when I

don't have to be concerned about hurting your ass because I spanked you? Tell me, sweetheart, what exactly is it that you want to talk about?"

"Okay, I get that you're angry, but you have got to see it from my point. We haven't seen hide nor hair of Harris in days. You said he's not even skulking around the site he had staked out. For all you—we—know, he's not even in Charleston. You can't keep me under lock and key forever."

"Can't I?"

"No. You're right. There is nothing to talk about. You're being impossible. And if you think I'm going to go up to the loft so you can spank me, you are sadly mistaken."

"And that's your final say on the matter?"

She nodded.

"Okay then, good talk." Before she could respond in any way, Ian had pulled her out of the truck and tossed her over his shoulder.

Norris tried to get away, but he had her positioned so that he had all the leverage and she had none.

"Put me down, you mother fucker."

Ian delivered one hard, sharp swat to her backside, causing her to yowl, partly in outrage and partly in physical distress.

"And that will be enough out of you unless you want me to put down the tailgate and start your spanking right here and now."

Norris thought she would die of embarrassment when the elevator door opened to other tenants on their way out. They looked a bit askance at Ian but said nothing. He got to their floor and keyed in the code for the door lock. He closed the

door and put her down. “I’m only going to say this once. Get yourself naked and go stand in the corner by the fireplace.”

“Ian, please. Your family is going to be here this weekend.”

“I can’t decide if you convinced yourself that I wouldn’t spank you because of that or not. Doesn’t really matter; you were wrong. Naked, corner, fireplace, now.”

“I am not going to meet my future in-laws if I can’t sit down.”

“Think not?”

She searched his face for any sign that she might escape his discipline and found none.

“Can’t you wait until tonight after we all have dinner?”

“Why would I do that? Did you wait until my parents had been and gone to misbehave?” “No,” she said softly.

He noticed all the fight seemed to drain from her body.

“You’re right. I disobeyed you and I know you’re going to punish me, but I’m begging you to wait until tonight when we’re home. Please? I just want to be able to focus on making your parents think you made a good choice.”

“Are you going to try and tell me that you misbehaved because you were nervous about meeting my family?”

“Not exactly. I didn’t disobey you because I was nervous, but of course I’m nervous. This is your family; they love and adore you. I’m some girl from Chicago they’ve never even heard of and now I’m engaged to their son.”

He searched her face for any sign of deception. He saw only tension stemming both from the knowledge that she was

going to be punished and the thought of meeting his family. “I told you to get naked and go to the corner, didn’t I?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And have you done that?”

“No, sir.”

“Now, Norris.”

She turned and headed towards the corner stripping as she did so. He could see by her body language that she had surrendered to his authority. She stood in the corner bared to his gaze. He rolled up the sleeves to his shirt and walked up behind her. He knew she needed to be spanked; knew that she needed to know that he would hold her accountable.

But he also knew she seemed genuinely remorseful for having acted out and was more nervous than he’d ever seen her. The latter he suspected had more to do with meeting his family than the spanking she knew was due her. She’d learned that being spanked was painful, but that there would always be forgiveness, not to mention great sex, on the other side. So, while he felt he needed to punish her for disobeying, he also felt she needed to know that he could bend when the circumstances warranted it.

He embraced her from behind, his hands reaching up to her cup her breasts and tug on her nipples that had become hard and sensitive as they always did.

She was surprised. In the past, when he meant to spank her, he might run his hands down her body to offer reassurance that she would be fine after it was over, but he never deliberately fondled her.

“You were very naughty this afternoon, weren’t you?”

She tried to stifle her moan of pleasure but couldn't do so.
“Yes, Ian. I'm so sorry.”

“You know, I should put you over my knee and turn your tail bright red, don't you?”

She nodded and sighed as he continued playing with her breasts. He rubbed his groin against her backside and he felt her stifle a sob. He reached down with one hand to free his hard cock from his jeans. It nudged between her legs expectantly, which seemed to part of their own accord. He continued alternately to roll and pinch her nipples between the fingers of one hand. He ran the other hand down the middle of her torso, dipping between the juncture of her thighs. As he reached her clit, she brought one of her hands down to caress his.

“Put your hands against the wall and brace yourself,” he growled. “You are not allowed to touch me. If I could fuck you without bringing you pleasure I would. But part of my pleasure I derive from having you respond to me and feeling you come as I take you. So, I'm going to mount you and fuck you hard. You're going to stand there and have your very angry fiancé work off his anger at your behavior. That ought to give your body a little release from your stress. Then we're going to take a shower, get dressed and go pick up my family. We'll have a nice dinner. When we get home, you're going to get the spanking you deserve.”

“Yes, sir. Ian!” She cried as he thrust into her without further conversation or preparation.

She was more than wet enough for him to slide into her easily without any discomfort, but it was still a surprise. He pulled her back from the wall so that she was positioned for

him to get the most depth as he stroked and so that he could pummel her pussy as he did so.

She came for him, crying his name once again. He didn't let up. He held her tight so that she could not move. Norris knew that he wanted her to know that she was there to serve his need. She tried to reach one of his hands with one of her own, only to have his hand deliver a stinging blow to her bottom as he continued to fuck her. She moved her hand back to the wall. She felt his pace change as he started to reach his own climax. He did so, pumping her full of his cum.

When he finished, he quickly disengaged instead of remaining inside her until he sensed she was ready to uncouple from him as he usually did. He then took her by the hand to the shower. The shared shower was strictly to wash the sex and the day from their bodies. There were no kisses or other loving touches.

She was putting on her clothes when she finally broke the silence between them. "Ian, please don't treat me this way. I know I disobeyed you. I know you're angry. And I know when we get home, you're going to spank me, but I don't want your family to worry about us. I know you don't believe me, but I really am sorry and not just because I know I'm going to pay for what I did this afternoon."

Ian turned to look at her. He could see that she was hurting. He pulled her to him. "I love you. I will keep you safe. You are not going to continue to disobey me. I know you think I'm overreacting and maybe I am, but if something had happened to you this afternoon, I don't think I would ever have forgiven myself. As for sorry," he lightly patted her bottom, "not as sorry as you will be when I get done with you tonight."

She brought his head down to kiss him deeply and was gratified when his tongue pushed back against hers and took control of the kiss. They finished dressing and walked to the parking lot arm in arm. He helped her into the car. “Do you have any idea how hard you’re going to get fucked after your spanking? I’m going to make sure your pussy is as sore as your ass.”

She smiled. “Yes, sir.”

They retrieved the Range Rover and drove to the bungalow to see to the dogs. They left for the airport in her car, leaving the truck to be picked up later.

Ian’s younger brother, Liam, preceded his parents to the meeting area by a few moments. He hugged Norris and then turned to his brother “Leave it to you to find the prettiest girl in the South. You lucky bastard!” He turned to his soon-to-be sister-in-law. “You do know that I’m the much better choice, right? There’s still time, we can run off and get married before he drags you down the aisle.”

Norris found herself immediately at ease and laughing at his silliness. She first spotted Ian’s parents approaching, arms around each other. They exchanged hugs with their sons and then it was Norris’ turn. She already felt a part of the family.

When his father hugged her, he said, “So, you’re the girl my son thinks deserves his grandmother’s ring?”

Norris wasn’t quite sure how to respond but before she could say anything, Ian’s mother pushed at her husband, hugging Norris warmly.

“Don’t you pay any attention to him. We couldn’t be happier that Ian has finally found you. Now if my other son could get his head out of his ass and quit fucking anything that’ll have him, he might be able to find one of his own.”

“Colleen Hunter, you hush. Southern ladies are raised to be more genteel.”

Norris dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “Don’t let it get around, but I’m a born and bred Yankee.”

Malcolm Hunter put his arm around his son’s intended. “You don’t say. Any chance your people are from Boston?”

She shook her head, “Chicago. But my ancestors were from here in Charleston.”

The family collected their baggage and headed to the restaurant. Dinner was a loud and lively affair. Ian was happy to see that Norris immediately accepted them as family and they did the same for her. Poor Liam took the brunt of his mother’s sharp tongue on the subject of women. Ian drove his family to their hotel, offering the Range Rover for the length of their stay. When his mother asked if Norris wouldn’t need it, she had quickly explained that she and Ian were working on a project together and would most likely need to be in the same place at the same time. Norris didn’t miss the look exchanged between Ian and his father but hoped his mother and brother didn’t pick up on it.

Ian pulled out of the hotel loading zone and headed back to the bungalow.

“I think your family is wonderful.”

“They are. I could see they feel the same about you. They’re a bit...”

“Perfect. They are simply perfect. Our mothers would have gotten along like a house on fire.”

“I’m glad you had a good time, but...”

“I know, when we get home, I’m getting the spanking you put off this afternoon. Thank you for doing that. I only have one request.”

Ian glanced at her. “And what might that be?”

“When you fuck me afterwards? Can you stay inside me like you usually do? I swear this afternoon when you just finished and then withdrew, it was the worst feeling. Not just physically, but emotionally.”

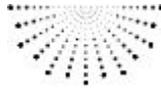
“I can do that, sweetheart. Truth be told, I didn’t much care for it either. I always enjoy that closeness we share after we’re both spent.”

She leaned across and kissed his cheek. “I really do love you, you know.”

“I know, but I’m still going to blister your ass.”

When they got home, Ian delivered on his promise. After it was over, he wasn’t sure which had caused her to make more noise: the spanking or the vigorous love-making afterward. He knew which one they enjoyed more. He also knew that having dealt with her punishment, they both felt better.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Ian's family's visit had passed much too quickly. They had, of course, met Nell and Dudley and seen the bungalow and Norris' office.

The highlight of the trip, though, was when they had gathered at the Livingston home for a traditional low country meal. Norris had not expected to see the Watson family but was genuinely happy they had been included. Cindy was an exceptional cook and although the food was casual, it was sumptuous. Afterwards, they all gathered around the fire pit and talked like old friends. Dan had clinked his long-neck beer bottle to get everyone's attention and then turned the floor over to Ian.

Ian, who was standing next to Norris, dropped to one knee and pulled out an exquisite antique Victorian emerald and diamond ring that had once belonged to his paternal grandmother. Norris' eyes filled with tears as she waited for him to formally ask her to marry him.

"As you know, the tradition in my family has always been when a Hunter finds his mate, he makes her his as soon as he can convince her to abandon all reason and take him on." Everyone laughed. "Seems I'm much better at this than dear ole Dad. It took him six weeks to get mom to say yes."

Norris flashed him a cheeky grin. “Technically speaking, you haven’t asked me anything yet, and I haven’t said yes.”

“I’m getting to that. When I was thinking about how I was going to say this, I thought I’d tell you that I loved you from the first moment I saw you, but that isn’t true. I think I loved you, or at least the idea of you, before we ever met. I think I’ve always known I’d find you. And that afternoon in your backyard it was like There she is. The one I’ve been waiting for.”

“That is such a crock, Ian Hunter. You didn’t think that.”

“I did, too.”

“No, you didn’t. You don’t have those kind of romantic, flowery thoughts. I know you better than that.”

“You do, do you? Well, what do you think I thought?”

“Oh, that’s easy. It was more along the lines of ‘Where the hell have you been? I’ve been waiting for you, God damn it!’”

“She’s got you there, bro!” called Liam. The small group burst into laughter, some of it mixed with happy tears.

Ian smiled ruefully. “Well, that may have been a wee bit closer to my actual thought process.” Everyone laughed again. “Regardless, Norris Margaret Wingate, I am asking you in the presence of our friends and family, if you will do me the honor of marrying me and spending the rest of your life with me?”

“Only this one? I thought you were looking for a real commitment.”

“Okay, how about this lifetime and all the lives to come?”

She dropped to the ground to kneel beside him. Taking his face in her hands she replied, “Yes, Ian Malcolm Hunter, I will marry you for now and all time.” She kissed him to the cheers,

hoots, and congratulations of those who surrounded them. Before he allowed her to stand, Ian slipped his grandmother's ring on her finger.

Amidst a blur of tears, she looked down at the ring. It was a large oval emerald set in sterling silver, surrounded by diamonds both around the stone and then down the band itself. Ian explained that there was a separate double diamond wedding band that it slipped into and that his ring had been made to match.

The rest of the dinner was a grand celebration and Norris realized where Ian's sense of family came from. Even though they'd grown up so differently, it was easy to see they had both received the benefit of their parents' love. When dinner finally came to an end, Norris invited the rest of Ian's family to see their bungalow.

The next day, when touring the bungalow, Colleen asked about the staircase that led to the second floor. Norris explained that it hadn't been part of the original scope of work. Her plans were to complete the first-floor renovation to include an open space plan for the kitchen, dining and living room areas plus a separate office that could double as a guest space, a powder room and the master suite and laundry area. As the staircase had been in rough shape and was to be utilized down the road, Norris had opted to have it restored, culminating in a door at the top of the stairs. The second phase would be to complete two additional bedrooms and another full bath.

Upon hearing the plans, Colleen asked about the timing for the second phase saying, "You're not going to be wanting to renovate that space personally when you're pregnant. You'd better have Ian prioritize that."

Ian interrupted her. “Mom, we’ve talked about having a family, but haven’t decided when we’ll start trying.”

His mother smiled and patted his arm. “She’s a beautiful girl and I’ll bet you have trouble keeping your hands to yourself and your private parts in your jeans. The poor girl probably hasn’t had a full night’s sleep since you got together. I’m just saying that these things happen in their own time. You know the old saying, *man plans and God laughs.*”

Norris could scarcely believe that the man who could almost talk her to an orgasm was blushing. “Fact is Colleen, it’s not just at night that he has that issue.” Both women laughed, and Ian beat a hasty retreat from the room. She added loudly, “Not that I’m complaining, mind you,” increasing their giggle fit.

Ian joined his father and brother. Malcolm Hunter looked at him, “They run you off, son?”

“Not really. I just think they were headed into an area that I’m not sure I need Mom discussing in my presence.”

Liam shuddered. “Better you than me. Now, maybe she’ll get off me to find the right girl and settle down. When I get ready to look, I’ll find her.”

Father and elder brother looked at each other and then at him. “Don’t be surprised, little brother if God drops that anvil on your head when you least expect it. And don’t be fool enough to ignore Him.”

The ladies joined them, still laughing, and they went to grab a quick lunch before Ian’s family headed home to Boston.

The next morning, Ian woke to having his cock stroked by Norris as she slowly kissed her way up his throat to his mouth. As usual, she had awakened to find him aroused. As their custom had become to wake early enough in the morning to at least get a quick round of lovemaking in before the crew arrived, she, too, woke aroused with stiff nipples and a pussy hungry for what he had to offer.

She pushed him onto his back and quickly mounted him, sliding his erection into her waiting sheath. He reached up to play with her breasts as she started to rock back and forth, Ian watching with hungry eyes as he enjoyed her movements. Norris was relishing the moment, taking control of their pleasure for once. She moved her hips in a more circular motion, stretching her upper body, arching her back to grind further on his groin. Ian grasped her hips and began to direct her movements.

She linked her hands in his and impeded his movements. She went back to the circular motion, which wasn't as intense for her, but seemed to have a greater impact on him. He brought his upper body up onto his elbows and then reached around her waist, pulling them so they were in an almost V-shaped position. Before she knew what he had in mind, he had flipped her onto her back.

She only half-heartedly protested as he began to slowly stroke her. She had wanted to stay in control and to bring him to climax this one time.

Ian began to nibble on her ears, tracing his lips across her face and stopping only to kiss her deeply, playing his tongue within her mouth and mimicking the movements of his shaft

deep within her. Ian chuckled as her body gave in to his demands for her to respond and started to build towards her first climax. He continued to drive into her over and over until she called his name as she fell over into the abyss as she climaxed.

His tempo remained the same as he moved his head down to suck on her nipples. She came a second time, and he still showed no interest in building towards his own release. She raked his back with her nails, partly out of frustration at his unwillingness to be hurried and partly out of sheer need.

He let her fuss and just continued to use his cock to bring her to repeated ecstasy. As she raked his back again, he took her hands in his and positioned them over her head. She was, however, rewarded with feeling his hips start to move faster and with more purpose. He released her hands as he used his arms to lift his upper body off of hers to give him more leverage to drive into her. She grasped his muscled forearms and reveled in his mastery of her body. He plunged into her a final time as she reached her own finale.

He stayed deep within her as he leaned down to kiss her. “Good morning, sweetheart.”

“You know I could have finished us both.”

He grinned at her. “I’m sure you could have. Only problem is you would have brought us to only one orgasm. I, on the other hand, made sure I got to enjoy several of yours before letting you have mine.” He could feel her relaxing her muscles and slipped out of her. “Let me get a shower then get the crew here set. I’ll take you to breakfast before we swing by the Watson place to line out how we want to tackle that project.”

She giggled. “You aren’t deluding yourself that the boys don’t know you’re getting laid on a regular and frequent basis,

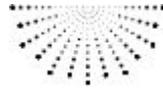
are you?”

“No. But no reason to give them auditory evidence to support their conclusions.” He felt a pillow hit him in the back of the head as he went into the bathroom and began whistling a jaunty tune.

Behind him, Norris shook her head and grinned. She used to hate those cold Chicago mornings. Now, despite stalkers and a crazy workload as she tried to get everything taken care of, they were looking pretty damn good.

She certainly couldn't complain.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Norris and Ian had found that they had a very collaborative way of working. Each respected the other's skill set and complimented each other's strengths. Norris was glad that Ian had relaxed some of his vigilance once Sam Harris had ceased his search.

Or appeared to, at least.

After an exhaustive search of Charleston's various hotels, and motels, Dan had concluded that he had most likely given up on Anne Bonny's treasure and moved on to another prize, or felt the weight of Norris' presence and felt it wise to move along.

They walked through the project and came up with a schedule that they both felt was ambitious but achievable. Ian had pushed his other crew hard last week to get their job wrapped up and so had given them the day off. They were scheduled to start the Watson job in the morning. Norris took a moment to call Ted and Nancy and give them an update. As she had imagined, they were happy to hear that the project was getting under way, and that they'd be moved in before the holiday.

"Dan just called. He and Cindy are going to Lowcountry Bistro for lunch and wanted to know if we could join them,"

Ian said.

“Sounds good. You think there’s any chance I can sneak away with Cindy if she’s free?”

“At the risk of annoying you, may I ask—to do what?”

Norris smiled “There’s supposed to be a wonderful wedding boutique in that area. I thought I might see if she’d like to go take a look at dresses. If you’d rather I didn’t work on the wedding...”

“I like the idea of wedding dress shopping. I know I’ve been a bit overprotective.”

“A bit?”

“A bit,” he admitted. “But Dan thinks Harris has likely moved on. Just promise me the two of you will stay together and stay out of trouble.”

“Now where’s the fun in that?”

The two couples met for lunch and enjoyed great food and good company. Cindy was free and was delighted to be asked to accompany Norris on her dress hunt. “Now let me see that ring. I hear it belonged to Ian’s grandmother?” Cindy arched an eyebrow in Ian’s direction and he nodded.

“It did,” Norris replied, holding her hand out for inspection. Cindy grasped it and bent over the ring, studying the intricate whorl of diamonds that surrounded the gorgeous emerald at the center of the ring closely.

“Oh...it’s lovely.”

“I love it. Even more, I love that it belonged to his grandmother and that he trusted me with it.” Norris sent Ian a soft look.

“It makes it so special.”

After lunch the two couples split up, both men giving the women stern instructions to keep a sharp eye out and refrain from any shenanigans. Cindy and Norris shopped in the same way—focused. Neither was much of a window shopper. And once Norris told Cindy what she was looking for, it didn’t take long for them to find a simple, sexy, bohemian bridal gown perfect for the wedding they were planning.

Ian and Norris had decided to hold the ceremony followed by a cocktail reception at High Cotton, and then invite everyone back to the bungalow for a casual bar-b-que.

“Mission accomplished. At least you have the three biggest pieces of your wedding figured out: date, location, and dress. Well, and the groom, of course.”

“True enough. Can’t forget that one. So. What trouble should we get into now?”

They laughed together like two women who had been girls together and then been parted for far too long. Each recognized in the other a spirit akin to her own—much like the men with whom they had chosen to spend their lives.

“Did you and Ian ever figure out where Anne’s treasure is buried?”

“Actually, we kind of did. I don’t want to talk to Ian about looking until a bit more time has passed. Harris really spooked him.”

“Dan was pretty freaked out, too,” confided Cindy.

“Anyway, I haven’t wanted to bring it up. I’m a bit surprised he gave me enough leash to go out on a girls’ afternoon with you. I do want to go back to the Old Exchange to check a few things. Want to come along?”

“And help you look for your long-lost inheritance? Girl, wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

Harris watched with great interest as Maggie’s daughter and the cop’s wife shopped for her wedding dress. They’d gone into several shops before finally getting down to business. He was sure they didn’t know they were being followed. When they headed into the Old Exchange, he knew he’d been right to keep an eye on them.

Stupid women.

They spent a little more than an hour in the Old Exchange. Norris checked old maps of Charleston’s harbor and where the Watson/Selbourne home was located while Cindy did some additional research on her ancestor who had risked all to help runaway slaves.

They walked to Cindy’s car and Norris asked her if she’d like to see the bungalow. Cindy’s broad smile was more than enough answer. “I thought you’d never ask.” Norris laughed with her and gave her directions.

When they arrived, Nell and Dudley were quick to greet them, but quickly returned to the construction crew who could usually be charmed out of something good to chew on.

Norris pointed them out to Cindy, “And Ian was originally worried his guys would want them crated and not even left loose in the back yard. Now the guys are lucky if they don’t stumble over them when they are sunning themselves. Those dogs are going to miss the crew when they are finished.”

“I have to ask: Where do they sleep?”

Norris giggled. “Well, that’s still under discussion. Ian insists they’re not going to sleep on the bed. But once they hear him start snoring, they hop up and make themselves comfy. What’s hysterical is if I get up first, one of them snuggles with him so he wakes up nose to nose with a basset hound.”

Cindy laughed. “Oh my God! Dan would kill me.”

“I told Ian from the first that he was going to have to work it out with them. I think he’s beginning to see that while he can trap me in the bedroom, he is not going to ban them from the bed.”

“Trap you in the bedroom? Now that sounds like fun.”

“Not so much. I kind of snuck out one morning so right now he wants to be able to see me when he opens his eyes. I’m hoping he’ll let up on that soon.”

“Sugar, don’t count on that. I have a sneaky suspicion that like Dan, he’s looking for a little bit of southern comfort first thing in the morning and I don’t mean whiskey.”

Norris feigned shock. “Why, Mrs. Livingston, whatever do you mean?”

She didn’t have to act surprised when Ian wrapped his arms around her. She had been so engrossed in her conversation with Cindy, she hadn’t heard him come up behind her. “She means, sweetheart, that Detective Livingston

likes to have his wicked way with her. Fortunately for him, she likes his wicked ways.”

Cindy shook a finger at him. “Not all of them. And I thought you southern gentlemen didn’t kiss and tell.”

Ian laughed. “It isn’t the kissing we brag about.”

“Ian!” the two women cried in unison.

“I don’t see any packages on the bed big enough for a wedding dress. Didn’t you find anything?”

“Ian, she found the most beautiful dress. You are going to cry when you see her.”

About that time Dan Livingston walked around the edge of the house. “Why’s he going to cry? From relief that she showed up? Or that he’s leaving behind his carefree bachelor days?”

Cindy scolded him. “That’s enough out of you.”

Dan hugged his wife and kissed her. “You’re right, of course. Our wedding day was the best day of my life.”

“And I am the best thing that ever happened to you.”

Dan laughed. “So, you keep telling me.” He laughed again and danced away from her as she batted at him.

“Ian, I need to take Norris shopping tomorrow for a few things for her trousseau. You don’t mind if I steal her early in the morning, do you?” Cindy asked sweetly. “I understand she has to get your permission to leave the bedroom.”

The look on Ian’s face was priceless. Dan laughed. “I’m telling you—handcuffs are cheaper and easier.” It was then Cindy’s turn to blush profusely. “Well, let’s head home, babe.

I’ve had a long day.”

Ian spoke to Dan, “Anything more on Harris or his whereabouts?”

“No, looks like he’s gone. Hasn’t rented a boat and if he’s in Charleston, we can’t find hide nor hair of him. I offered dinner for two at High Cotton to any patrolman who spotted him. Those guys don’t get paid what they’re worth.”

Norris and Ian waved them off, and then Ian supervised his crew in packing up for the evening.

Morning dawned with a light, cool breeze coming in from the ocean. Cindy and Norris had planned to meet for breakfast and then go shopping. Shopping was out of character for her new friend, but Norris had time and motivation and she thoroughly enjoyed Cindy’s company. She was getting ready to leave when Ian wrapped her in his arms and dipped her back for a dramatic Hollywood style kiss to the applause of his crew. He sent her on her way with a quick pat to her bottom, which he was glad to say had not had anything but loving and fun attention from him in the past several days.

As agreed, Norris swung by Cindy’s to pick her up and they headed to the Hominy Grill. It wasn’t until they were more than halfway through breakfast that Cindy grinned at Norris when she asked what exactly Cindy had in mind for her trousseau. “There’s plenty of time for that. You didn’t really think I wanted to go shopping, did you?”

Norris laughed. “Well, I thought it was a bit out of character for you but figured what the heck.”

“That’s our cover story. I figure the boys will be so excited, that they wouldn’t really question what we were up to.

We probably ought to grab something somewhere before we head for home. Dan told me he knew we were going for you, but suggested I should pick up a little something for him. I told him ‘if I know you the smaller the better,’ and he had to agree. Don’t you just love how they’re so easily distracted?”

“Cindy Livingston. What kind of trouble are you going to get me into? You know Dan warned Ian the first day I met him that he wasn’t sure we ought to be friends. He seemed to think we would lead each other into all kinds of mischief.”

Cindy laughed. “He’s probably right about that.” She leaned in to whisper to Norris, “But you have to admit, the aftercare is almost worth it.”

“Is that what you call it? Aftercare? I call it getting fucked as hard as I got spanked, but yeah, it’s pretty amazing.” Norris rubbed her hands together. “So, what are we really doing?”

“Going to see if we can find Anne’s treasure, of course! It’ll be so much fun.”

“Ian and Dan will kill us.”

“Only if they find out! I won’t tell if you don’t. Come on. You know you’re dying to.”

“I know. Does that make me bad? The weird part is, I don’t even care about the money. I’d just love to be able to do it for my mom. We were going to come down here the year she died.”

“Bless. I didn’t mean to make you sad, hon.”

Norris reassured her friend. “You didn’t. She’d have loved all of this. Would have adored Ian and never in a million years would she have believed I would consent to let him spank me.”

“Did you actually get a choice? As I recall with Dan, I got told I was either going to behave or I was going to get spanked and that we both knew I wasn’t capable of behaving all of the time.”

“Our conversation was of a similar nature. But the sex aside, you have to admit, things get settled, no one stays angry.”

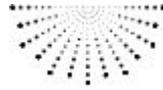
“I couldn’t agree more. I see some of our friends and they’ll have a fight and won’t speak for days. They treat each other so poorly. But if Dan and I argue, we get it out on the table, we deal with the problem and if my bad behavior was the cause or I behaved badly when we were talking about it, he spanks me, then he forgives me, and life goes on.”

“That’s what happens with me and Ian. My butt may get bruised, but my feelings don’t.”

“Okay, enough of this serious, philosophical talk. Let’s go treasure hunting.”

They paid their bill and headed toward the marina to pick up the boat Cindy had rented. Neither saw the compact car pull out of the restaurant parking lot to follow them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Cindy had rented a small powerboat to take them to the island where Norris was certain Anne had buried her treasure. She'd also brought along bathing suits, towels and other things they might need. They anchored an easy distance from the deserted beach and then swam to the island. Norris had been impressed that Cindy had managed to find some clam digging shovels and a metal detector to spirit away for their use.

“All right, Captain. You're her descendant and our resident expert on this treasure. Where do we start?”

Norris turned and looked back across the harbor, searching for the old Selbourne place, now the Watson place. Even though it was a workday, she noticed several other pleasure crafts making their way around the island. One had seemed headed directly towards them, but then veered off as if to go around the island all together.

Finding the house, Norris oriented herself to be in alignment with it and then looked for a likely hiding spot. “I don't think it would be the open beach, but somewhere she could see from the house and have it still be sort of hidden.”

Cindy stood next to her and they surveyed the land around them. “But wouldn't the island's topography have changed at least somewhat in the last three hundred years?”

“You have a point. Wind and sea will always take their toll, but I have to believe Anne would have thought of that. Maybe something that’s more stable than sand, a small rock outcropping or...” She broke off, a finger to her lips, as she pondered the land. Then she saw it, a small mound where the wind had removed enough sand to reveal stone, “... Perhaps something like that.”

Picking up their shovels, they walked toward the outcropping of rock. Norris continued, “It wouldn’t have been the rock itself. Anne would have been heavily pregnant by that point. She trusted no one with her secret. Heck, even the message she left behind is ambiguous. I’m thinking that rock is a marker of sorts. Something she could easily see and bury the treasure near.”

Harris watched from the tree line as the two women seemed to find a likely spot and set off. How easily they appeared to find their spot. Surely it couldn’t be that simple.

His hand twitched, need riding him hard to pounce. Punish. He curbed the instinct with difficulty. He needed to let them do the work, and if they found something he could simply take it away from them.

They seemed to consider this a great lark, over there laughing and smiling...having a great time. Completely ignorant that he’d put the better part of his life into finding this treasure, that he had sacrificed so much, and waited so long.

His eyes narrowed to slits. Hands curled into fists.

No matter. They’d know soon enough.

As Dan Livingston returned to his desk after lunch, he had a message that one of the patrol officers to whom he'd offered a reward of sorts for information on Sam Harris had called and would like a call back. "Jack? Dan Livingston. What's up?"

"Not sure, sir. This morning I thought I spotted that compact you've had us keep an eye out for down by the harbor. I was on my way to handle a domestic call but came back to it when I was through, and it was still there. I went to the marina, located a boat rental place since he'd been doing so much on the harbor, and confirmed that the guy you're looking for rented a boat this morning. The guy keeps a GPS tracker on his boats. Turns out, it's been sitting out at one of the deserted islands for quite some time."

"Now that is interesting. Can you send me the coordinates? I may just go rent a boat myself."

"Well, I thought you might think that, so I asked him to hold a boat for you. But then he said that you should have just gone with your wife this morning." There was silence on the other end. "Sir? Is everything okay?"

Dan recovered and assured the young officer that everything was fine, but to ask the boat owner to please have it fueled up and ready to go. Hanging up the phone, Dan called Ian.

"Hey, buddy, what's up?"

"You have any idea where the girls are?"

"Not specifically, but they went looking for lingerie together."

“Oh, I’m aware that’s what we were led to believe.”

“And that isn’t true?” Ian cursed under his breath.

“No. Apparently the little darlings rented a boat this morning. Bad news is, so did Sam Harris. Ian, I don’t have anywhere near enough manpower to send units or the Harbor Patrol, but I don’t like this one little bit. I’ve got a boat being readied for us and I think you and I need to get out there pronto.”

“Roger that. I’m on my way.”

Taking a break, Norris and Cindy sat next to what felt like a small mountain of sand. “This treasure hunting is harder than I thought. How far down did that thing say it was?”

Cindy looked at the read out on the metal detector again. “It’s deeper than six feet, but probably less than eight. Can you imagine a pregnant woman doing all this digging?”

“Good lord. I mean...I’ve never been pregnant, but what a labor.”

“Plus, according to the detector, it’s pretty small.”

Norris grinned at her, “But it would be. It would only be the banding or the lock. The chest would have been predominantly made of wood.”

Cindy’s smile echoed Norris’. “That makes sense. Do you think we might actually have found something?”

“Something, yes. Is it the something we’re looking for? Who knows, but we’re almost three feet down. I say we keep

at it and see if we can't at least find what the metal detector says is there."

"Agreed. Well as Dan always likes to say, 'daylight's burning.'" With that, she got to her feet and helped Norris to hers. They couldn't help but giggle as they picked up their shovels and went back to the arduous task. "At some point, at least one of us is going to have to get down into that hole."

"I agree. And it may be that we have to start shoring up the sides, so it doesn't keep falling back in on itself. I hate to say it, but I don't know that we can do this by ourselves. I'm pretty sure Ian would know how to shore up the hole and these shovels weren't exactly made for this job."

"I think you may be right. And if that's the case, I think maybe we fill the hole back up, head into town and buy some really sexy lingerie. Because sharing with the boys that we decided to go treasure hunting will not be a pleasant experience."

Before Norris could agree, she heard a distinctive click. Both she and Cindy spun around to find themselves staring at the man they knew to be Sam Harris pointing a gun at them. "I think, ladies, you just need to keep digging."

They stared at each other, at the gun, and at the impossible hole in the ground. One thought whirled in Norris' mind.

Shit.

Ian and Dan lost no time in getting to the marina, getting the rented boat, and heading towards the GPS coordinates. Dan also thought to ask the rental operator for the coordinates of

the boat taken out that morning by Cindy and Norris. As he feared, they were around the same island.

As they untied the boat and headed out, Ian asked him “You don’t suppose it’s just a coincidence that it’s the same island, do you?”

“I don’t think there’s a snowball’s chance in hell that’s the case. I wish I could call in backup. Right now, we don’t have anywhere near enough hard intel to do that.”

Ian reassured his friend. “I understand. Do we confront the girls first and get them out of there or do we try to find Harris?”

“Given where they are, I say we try to ease in on Harris’ position first. He’s on the windward side of the island. This side is way too exposed, and anyone will see us coming. I don’t want to spook Harris. If he’s not at his boat, I say we disable both boats, then swim ashore. Tracking him in the sand shouldn’t be all that difficult. Hopefully we can take him out before the girls ever know they were in any true danger. I don’t need Cindy having nightmares about this. Although she will regret pulling this little stunt.”

Ian nodded in agreement.

“Come on now, ladies. You’re young and strong and this is a great lark for you. I’ve been searching for this thing for a long time. Even had to bed Maggie enough times to get her knocked up and then pray it was a girl. Not that I really minded fucking the bitch. She was a hot piece of tail, as I recall. Great big tits and a nice snug cunt—really liked it hard.

How 'bout you, girl? You like it when that big contractor gives it to you hard?"

The cold, calculating way he had set up her mother made Norris' blood boil. "Talk that way about my mother again, you worthless piece of shit and I'll—" Cindy's hand on her arm made her stop.

"No one needs to get hurt. We can just leave you the shovels and metal detector and get out of your hair. Keep in mind we only know that something metallic is down there. There's no way to know what it is. My husband's a cop and he's expecting me back this afternoon."

"Oh, I know exactly who your husband is, Mrs. Livingston. He's the bastard that's set his patrol boys on my scent. If it weren't for him, I could have been staying somewhere with a clean bed instead of either in my car or camped out on the ground. And there's a long time between now and this afternoon. So, dig." He turned his attention to Norris. "Tell me, what did I miss in the riddle? How'd you know it was this island?"

This time it was Norris who stayed Cindy's hand and mouth. "Just a logical guess and knowing how Anne's mind might work. But why should we help you dig? What assurance do we have that you won't kill us if we find something?"

Harris nodded. "You got nothing. Except for I'm not so stupid as to kill a cop's wife and her pretty little friend. You find me what I want, and I'll leave you girls with a dinghy and a couple of oars. By the time you get back to the harbor, I'll be long gone with the treasure. Now, dig."

Seeing no other choice and thinking to buy time, they dug, hoping Ian and Dan would come to the rescue. So, they set about first widening the existing hole and then digging deeper.

Dan cut the power to the engine and let the boat drift. Both he and Ian used binoculars to look over every inch of Harris' boat. They could see no sign of life or activity. Ian slipped into the water and swam toward the other boat. Dan kept close watch with his gun at the ready. He was impressed with the way Ian put his ear to the hull to try and detect activity below deck.

Hearing none he used the swim ladder to quietly board the vessel. Dan held his breath as Ian went below, but then wasn't sure whether or not to breathe easier when he came up on deck. If Harris wasn't on the boat, then logic dictated he'd gone ashore. And given his background, Dan was pretty damn sure he meant to go to the leeward side of the island where Cindy and Norris were playing treasure hunter.

Dan sidled his boat up alongside the other. He and Ian roped them together and Ian jumped back onboard with Dan.

"I disabled his. And I think your idea to disable this one as well is a good idea. Let's limit his means of escape."

Having accomplished their goals, both men entered the water and struck out for the island. Now to get the girls out of danger. Dan was right in that it was no trouble following Harris' path through the sand across the middle of the island.

"He must have planned all along to watch them and then surprise them if they found anything," said Ian.

"You think they might actually have found it?"

Ian nodded. "Maybe. Norris has been pretty keen on coming over here to find out if she's right. The story has been

passed down for more than eight generations. She doesn't even care about the money; she's more interested in proving that Anne was looking to provide for future generations. We've talked about getting the proper permits at some point and inviting you guys and the Watsons to come on a treasure hunt. Thought it might be fun. I'm a bit surprised she roped Cindy into doing it right now."

"Don't be assuming she's the one who did the roping. This is the kind of thing that Cindy would get off on. I should have known the whole shopping and lingerie thing was a smoke screen. She's going to wish she'd purchased something to protect her pretty little backside when I get her home tonight."

Again, Ian agreed with his friend. "And it appears Norris is going to get her first taste of soap for lying to me. Funny, but just this morning I swatted her playfully and was thinking it had been a while since I had to discipline her. Won't be able to say that tomorrow."

"No, sir, you won't."

They continued to follow the tracks as quickly as they could and remain stealthy. They agreed that what they didn't want to do was be surprised by Harris. They wanted to be the ones doing the surprising.

As they crested a small knoll in the midst of the island towards the leeward side, they spotted Harris pointing a gun at the girls while watching them dig an ever-widening hole. Ian and Dan got down on their bellies and began to crawl towards the scene.

Dan took hold of Ian's arm and whispered as he handed him his secondary weapon. "You let me take the lead on this, but if starts to go wrong, you don't hesitate to drop that

sonofabitch. The girls' safety comes first. There won't be any repercussions on you."

As they got closer, they split up so as to put Harris in their crosshairs. If he was going to shoot, they wanted him to have to pick which one of them to shoot at. Ian focused on getting close, willing Norris to sense his presence.

Hang on, sweetheart, I'm coming.

Dan saw Cindy stand up and stretch. He watched Harris look at his wife's ripe body outlined by the sun through her thin shirt. Was she doing it purposefully? That question was answered as Norris sat on the edge of the hole.

"Keep digging, girl," Harris snarled at her. Keeping an eye on Norris, he approached Cindy. "Maybe I'll play me a little pirate before I leave you girls. I can tie up Maggie's brat and give you a good ramming before I leave for South America." He grabbed his crotch suggestively. "That cop know how to give it to you good, baby? Or would you like a real man between your legs who knows how to get it done? I can get booty of both kinds," he said lasciviously.

Ian and Dan were taken by surprise, as was Harris, when Norris swung the shovel at Harris' knees, knocking his feet from beneath him. Harris' hands flew up as the gun went off, the bullet going wild. What he might have done Ian and Dan would never know. They sprang up from their hiding places only to see Cindy take the flat of her shovel and smash in the front of Harris' face, temporarily blinding him as blood rushed into his eyes and down his face.

Ian grabbed Harris' gun, which had gone flying, while Dan flipped him over on his belly and put him in cuffs. Subdued and neutralized, Harris could do nothing but watch as Maggie's daughter and her friend threw themselves into the arms of the respective men in their lives.

Dan caught Cindy in a massive bear hug. "Damn it, Cin, you scared the hell out of me. But good shot with the shovel."

She grinned. "Couldn't have done it without my bestie over there."

Ian was clinging to Norris even more tightly than Dan had embraced Cindy. "I thought I was going to lose you."

"Never," she whispered. "Thank God you two got here."

Dan shook his head as he dialed his phone to call for back up. "I don't know. I think the two of you had the situation under control."

"Yes, we did," said Cindy who appeared to be very proud of their ingenuity and daring.

Dan spoke into his phone. "I need the Harbor Patrol at these coordinates and then someone to meet them at the marina to pick up a perp." Dan continued to give instructions as to what would come next before turning to his wife. "You'd best enjoy what time you have left, little girl. When I get you home, you're going to cut a good switch for me to use. And when I'm done, you aren't going to sit for a week." He silenced any protest with a deep kiss.

Norris had been watching them the whole time from Ian's warm embrace. She dreaded looking at Ian's face but knew

what was inevitable. The look of concern that had been there had been replaced by one of a stern, dominant male who meant to punish his errant mate in no uncertain terms. “I don’t suppose there’s any talking you out of this, is there?”

Ian snorted. “Not likely. And until we get home, I want you to think about what I told you about lying to me. For that, I’m going to wash your mouth out with soap and paddle your backside. Once you’ve had some time in the corner to think about that, I’ll get down to the real business of blistering your cute little ass for putting yourself in danger. Dan may favor a switch, but my grandmother’s ring isn’t the only thing my dad brought down with him. Before he left, he gave me the hairbrush my grandfather used to use on my grandmother when she got sassy and disobeyed him. I figure tonight will be a good time to break it in.”

The sirens of the Harbor Patrol cut off any more discussion. Dan took on handling the official report as officers of both the HP and PD interviewed the witnesses and began to collect evidence.

Looking into the hole one of them asked, “What the heck were you digging for?”

“We were just keeping him busy until Dan and Ian could show up.”

Satisfied with their answer, the other officers cleared up the scene and took Harris into custody. Dan directed the Harbor Patrol as to where they could find the other two boats and requested that they return them to the rental boat operator saying all four of them would take the girls’ boat back in a bit. He intimated that the girls were upset, and he and Ian wanted to give them some time to compose themselves.

After everyone else had left, the two couples collapsed on the ground. After a bit of rest, Norris and Cindy exchanged a look that would have been more appropriate on a couple of naughty schoolgirls. Cindy grabbed one of the shovels left behind by the Harbor Patrol who asked that they replace the sand in the hole they had dug. Apparently digging on one of the islands without a permit was against the law. Cindy hopped in the hole and tapped the tip of the shovel down through the dark sand. A distinctive knocking could be heard.

Ian looked at Norris who nodded. “Yep, I think we found it.” She extricated herself from Ian and joined Cindy in the now almost five-foot-deep hole. They both began to dig like women possessed.

Ian and Dan could not help but to go stand as close to the edge as they could without caving in the sides of the hole. Slowly but surely, an old chest was revealed. As the girls were obviously growing tired, the men helped them out of the hole and began to dig themselves. They widened the whole even further until they were able to lift the ancient strong box from its resting place. The wood had rotted over the centuries and the bottom fell out revealing badly damaged and decayed books, clothing and a few luxury items from the 18th century.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Dan again reached out to the Harbor Patrol indicating they needed to come back, telling them they’d better bring the antiquity people as well.

Several hours passed as law enforcement personnel, city officials and local historians examined the hole, the chest and what remained of its contents.

Cindy leaned against Norris. “Not much for a woman to make an escape on,” she sighed.

Overhearing her, one of the historians, a local expert on Anne Bonny, corrected her. “Quite the contrary, what’s contained in the chest is everything a woman would have needed to start her life over: clothing, information, gold doubloons, pieces of eight, jewels. Pirating was never as lucrative as folklore likes to make out. Most of them were only part-time pirates trying to supplement their income.” She turned to Norris. “So, you’re a descendant of Anne’s?” Norris nodded affirmatively. The woman smiled. “The eldest daughter of the eldest daughter?”

Norris looked at her questioningly. “How’d you know that?”

“She’s one of my ancestors as well, although not along the female line. But we’d always heard the story that she had left a treasure behind that was passed eldest daughter to eldest daughter. It’s what interested me in history to begin with. Then I became fascinated with Anne, who not only left something to protect her daughters and all the daughters to come, but was responsible for alleviating the suffering of a lot of women in her own time. It’s said that she became something of a vigilante where abused women were concerned. No hard facts, mind you, but a lot of anecdotal evidence. If you can prove your lineage, you’re entitled to at least part of the proceeds from this find. But you’ve given a lot of us enough to study and catalog for years to come.”

“Do you think they’ll do some kind of exhibit like they did with King Tut? I know this haul doesn’t compare, but still...”

“Given the recent upturn in interest about the pirates of the Carolinas, I wouldn’t be at all surprised. I’m Susan Selbourne, by the way. I’d love to take you to dinner one night and

discuss how you figured it out. People have been looking for hundreds of years.”

Norris shook Susan’s extended hand. “That would be lovely. And Selbourne?” Susan nodded. “My friends just purchased your family’s historic home and Ian will be the contractor doing the renovation.” Susan shook Ian’s hand, as well.

“Good to meet all of you. Now I need to get back and at least get all of these things protected from the elements. We don’t want to lose anything more before we have a chance to study it.”

The sun had begun to set by the time they once again had the beach to themselves.

“Well, ladies, I know you’ve had a busy day, but there is still some business that needs to be attended to.” Ian held up his hand to ward off any protests. “I do, however, think we might postpone that until after we grab some dinner. What do you say, Dan? Should we let them enjoy a last supper while they can still sit comfortably?”

“Given that they didn’t actually get hurt and that I’m starving, I think I can be agreeable to that.”

Norris rolled her eyes. “I’m so glad you big strong men want to fill your bellies before you beat our asses.”

“Norris, now might not be the time,” Cindy tried to interject.

Dan grabbed one of the shovels. “We’d best get this hole filled in before it gets dark.” He tossed the other shovel toward

Ian, but Norris intercepted it.

Before any of them could guess what she had in mind, she hopped back down into the hole and began to attack the really hard-packed sand upon which the chest had sat for so many years. She looked up at Ian. “Don’t you remember the last part of the riddle? ‘Beneath the first, will be found the best’? What was in the bottom of that chest might be valuable to historians, but not to Anne. I think there’s another chest buried beneath the one we found.”

Cindy grabbed the shovel from Dan and jumped back in the pit. “Could you boys turn on those flashlight thingies on your phones and give us some light?”

Intrigued, Dan and Ian did as requested. After some time had passed, Ian and Dan pulled Norris and Cindy out of the hole and began to dig. The digging was easier now that they were in the hard pack sand. And then they heard it—the distinct sound of a metal shovel hitting something solid. They widened the hole and Norris tossed Ian one of the cell phones. Shining it down he let out a low whistle “Well, I’ll be damned. You were right, sweetheart, there’s another chest.”

“I knew it,” she cried gleefully. “Now what do we do?”

The four of them exchanged glances. Dan interrupted their silent musings saying, “As the representative of law enforcement, I think we need to call back the troops. But as Norris’ friend, I say it’s her call.”

Norris glanced at Dan, and said, “I think we leave it where it lays. I think we cover it back up, fill in the hole and live our lives knowing that we solved Anne’s riddle, but that we leave her legacy for those who come that might need it.”

Ian smiled, “And we’ll tell our first-born daughter?”

Norris nodded. “Is that okay with you guys?”

Cindy hugged her friend, “Honey, I was always in it for the adventure.”

Norris agreed. “Besides, I already found my treasure,” she said, as she embraced Ian and kissed him.

Across the harbor and through the winds of time, Anne Bonny stood looking through her spyglass. She smiled and then turned to her seventh great-granddaughter, Maggie. “She’s done well, our Norris. She’ll be fine, and the treasure is safe.” With their arms wrapped around each other’s waists, the two women returned to the shadows and evaporated into the night breeze.

THE END

ABOUT DELTA JAMES

As a USA Today bestselling romance author, Delta James aims to captivate readers with stories about complex heroines and the dominant alpha males who adore them. For Delta, romance is more than just a love story; it's a journey with challenges and thrills along the way.

After creating a second chapter for herself that was dramatically different from the first, Delta now resides in Florida where she relaxes on warm summer evenings with her loveable pack of basset hounds as they watch the birds, squirrels and lizards. When not crafting fast-paced tales, she enjoys horseback riding, walks on the beach, and white-water rafting.

Her readers mean the world to her, and Delta tries to interact personally to as many messages as she can. If you'd like to chat or discuss books, you can find Delta on Instagram, Facebook, and in her private reader group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/348982795738444>.

If you're looking for your next bingeable series, you can get a FREE story by joining her newsletter <https://www.subscribepage.com/VIPlist22019>

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Syndicate Masters

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The Agreement

The Understanding

The Pledge

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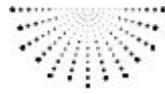
Reign of Fire

Dragon Storm

Dragon Roar

Dragon Fury

CLANDESTINE DADDY (A
CLUB ROUGE: LOUISIANA
DADDIES PREQUEL) BY
LINZI BASSET



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AUTHOR'S NOTE & BLURB

Dear Reader,

Since our aim with this anthology is to honor the first love of Maren, which is red hot Daddies with blushing subs, and old school domestic discipline, I am truly happy to be a part of the amazing authors in this anthology. A little different from my usual since I don't write Daddy books but never fear, it's filled with just as much suspense and heat. My story is a marriage between discipline delight at the BDSM club and Daddy domestic discipline, spankings, and much more!

BLURB:

Kaden Frazer

I'm a busy man. Running a black ops recovery and crisis management company is hard work, especially since I like to be out in the field getting high on adrenaline and chasing the bad guys. What I don't have time for is to babysit my friend's niece.

Kaden found balance in the demands of his job at Club Rouge, where he was one of the founding partners. Nothing beat the

thrill of watching open defiance turn into untethered submission as pretty cheeks bloomed whenever he gave a sub... the look. What he didn't expect was to be enamored with a woman worming her way into the club under false pretenses.

Sage Lewis

I'm done with it. Fed up. Sick and tired of overprotective men, my uncle included. I'm an FBI undercover operative who can take care of herself. I'm thirty-four-years old and have a black belt in Taekwondo, for heaven's sake. And I don't need a Daddy Dom... I don't!

Getting inside Club Rouge was easy. She had an inside contact. Getting her bottom blistered hadn't been part of the plan. Getting lost in the Dom demanding she call him Daddy... impossible! But it happened. All of it... which would've been fine, except now she was caught between a rock and a hard place.

A twist of fate brought them together when the case she was working on was leaked, putting her life in danger. Now, she had two battles to fight. Staying alive... and denying the man who kept insisting he was her Daddy.

I had fun writing this story, so much so, that there will be an entire Club Rouge: Louisiana Daddy series! I hope you enjoy reading it just as much!

Warm regards,

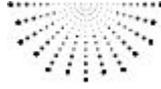
Linzi Basset

One of my favorite quotes is from Thomas A. Edison;

“Genius is one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration.”

Maren’s selfless dedication and support to the Indie Community and authors, to me represents everything in those words. To many of us she is that genius, an inspiration to do the best we can and never give up. It’s such an honor to be part of this anthology. A small token of reciprocation to an author we all love.

CHAPTER ONE



Club Rouge, Baton Rouge, Louisiana...

“Since it’s your first time with us, please pay attention to the orientation. You don’t want to be banned on your maiden visit, now, do you?”

Good Lord, this is a sex club, but the woman sounds like a drill instructor at an FBI boot camp.

Sage Lewis kept her thoughts from showing. She was already struggling to hold on to her patience. Her uncle neglected to mention the rigmarole to get inside the club. Time wasters, she preferred to call them. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t already spent an hour on the online application just to be approved as Master Z’s guest.

Master Z? I would love to know the story behind that moniker. She smirked quietly, picturing Slade Lewis in her mind. Tall, well-built for his age—not that he was old, she quickly reminded herself. He was her father’s youngest brother, born twelve years after him, which made him forty-seven, thirteen years Sage’s senior.

More than that, why would he bother to come all the way to Louisiana for his kinky pleasures when there was an

abundance of such clubs in Washington D.C.? Was he hiding his lifestyle from prying eyes? As the Deputy Director of the CIA, of course, he had to keep his slate clean, but as far as she was concerned, what a man did in his own bedroom was no one else's business.

Yeah right, which is why you're here, at this club, looking for dirt on none other than Congressman Beats.

Oh, shut up. We're discussing my uncle, not the case.

Same difference, just the names set them apart.

Sage felt like bitchslapping her conscience into silence, but she couldn't deny the truth. If Beats' kinky lifestyle was leaked, so potentially could her uncle's be, which was the one thing she would regret for the rest of her life if it happened because of her uncle assisting her.

Except there was one major difference between Slade Lewis and Congressman Beats. Beats was completely corrupt. She already had enough dirt to bury him, but instinct warned her that she had missed a key link—one she believed would be found here.

If the owners of Club Rouge allowed in characters like Beats, it stood to reason that the bastard involved in the financial banking scandal with the congressman was here as well. Another one who used the power of their position to screw the American People. That was who she was after. Beats was nothing but a big fish in a small pond.

Sage loved her job as an FBI Special Agent in Criminal Investigation. She took very seriously the responsibility of ensuring that the civil rights of citizens were protected by fighting public corruption and investigating criminal acts by politicians and law enforcement. Going undercover and

following the money and paper trails was part and parcel of the job.

Glancing around, she acknowledged that this was anything but a shady establishment. Stylish and elegant, the black, red, and silver foyer, portrayed a vision of indulgence, which she had no doubt was reflected behind the wide carved door leading to the entertainment area and the dungeon. The club was exclusive to members only, and the selection process was stringent. Since she couldn't approach the FBI for financial assistance until she had something concrete to justify the case she was investigating, she had to dig into her own pocket to pay for the entrance fee.

Lord, I hope they refund me once I crack this case! She cringed just thinking of the phenomenal amount she had to part with just to obtain entrance for one night. One single night, and a big chunk of her savings was gone. Membership would probably take half of her annual salary!

Luckily, I have no desire to become a regular at this sort of club.

Due to her ignorance of the lifestyle, Sage had done extensive research and was comfortable she would blend in as a submissive who knew the ropes... pun intended. She smirked at the vision.

Good luck to any man attempting to tie me up!

“And you, Miss? What name did you choose?”

Sage might be ignorant about BDSM, but one look at the stern expression on the woman's face warned her she was in the presence of a formidable Dominatrix, or Domme, as her research indicated they were called.

Digging deep into her subconscious, she searched for specks of the discussion that had been going on while her mind had wandered. Getting caught not paying attention wouldn't look good for someone claiming to be an experienced submissive.

Sub names! She wants a name I want to use while at the club. Shit!

“Patty Cakes.”

Grasping at straws at this moment wasn't ideal. Spurting out the first name that crossed her mind, even worse—if Mistress Winter's response was anything to go by.

“Well, I do believe there'll be a number of Doms here tonight who are going to enjoy you.”

Since it was the only pet name anyone had ever called her, *bless your heart, Grandma*, it was only natural to latch onto it. Now, she wished she'd paid attention to the orientation and picked something more subtle. Her research had shown all these kinds of clubs had one thing in common—their protocols had to be followed. Of course, since her mind had been on the case, she had missed the discussion about all the rules and requirements.

“Not a very good start to the night, Sage,” she berated herself sotto voce.

On the other hand, she wasn't too concerned. Participating or meeting a dashing Dominant wasn't the purpose of being there. Her only intention was to pretend to be watching scenes while instead, actively gathering dirt on Beats, in one way, by trying to get inside his head.

“Lucky me,” Sage responded with a forced grin as she realized the Domme was watching her expectantly.

“Luck would be pushing it, sub, particularly since you didn’t pay attention while I was discussing the rules and protocols. No, Patty Cakes, what I’m referring to is the brat in you. The Doms here have a love-hate relationship with that type. It’ll be interesting to see who you get paired up with for the evening.”

“Paired up? I don’t wish to be paired up. I’m only here to watch and see if I—”

“Then I’m afraid you’ve wasted your money. Tonight, is theme night and since we only invited the exact number to pair up everyone, no one sits out, or just watches. It’s Pair and Play night, my pet.” A sly smile brightened her face. “We use every application to attend this evening as a guide to find the perfect match. For your sake, I hope yours was based on your true needs. Believe me, being paired up with a sadist when you’re a newbie...”

Mistress Winter tilted her head. “So, Patty Cakes, are you leaving, or staying?”

Okay, so now I’m in trouble. The Domme’s smoldering eyes held Sage prisoner, so much so that she found herself incapable of blinking. It was an eerie feeling. As a woman who faced danger on a daily basis, could shoot like a sniper, and had a black belt in Taekwondo, she was stumped by the sudden desire to bend to that look of dominance.

Perhaps she had been naive to believe she could blend in, or worse yet, somehow play the role of an experienced submissive. If a Domme could tap into just a drop of submission frozen deep inside her, what would a powerful Dom to whom she might be attracted to wring out of her? Those fleeting thoughts were forcibly brushed aside.

Sage was unswerving, letting no one and nothing undermine the foundation upon which her resolute character rested—not even a Dominant. As a child, everyone who found themselves in her presence had commented on her nascent talent as an actress. Along life’s path, she had finely honed those thespian skills, mastering the art of improvisation. Tonight, she would call upon this particular courage.

“I’m staying, Mistress Winter.”

Of course, she was. This wasn’t the time to cut and run, wasting a one-off opportunity to get near Beats. The perfect scenario would be if she was paired up with him. Now that would make the buzzy cocktail of adrenaline and charged trepidation pulsing through her worth it.

“Wonderful.” The Domme turned to face the group. “I suggest you all read through the leaflet I gave you. We don’t want your first experience to turn into punishment, do we? I’ll give you ten minutes, and then we’ll go on a quick tour.”

Sage had no doubt that the punishment remark was aimed at her. Fully intending to avoid drawing unnecessary attention, she spent the ten-minute grace period studying the leaflet, ensuring she had all the rules down pat.

This entire night was quickly turning into something completely unexpected—being suddenly thrust into a role she never could have anticipated would require all her skill and courage to master convincingly. The novels she had read and the videos she had watched as part of her research had been enlightening. They even made her tingle all over at the conflicting aspects of domination. Stern, controlling, punishing, yet caring and loving. She hadn’t wanted to examine how aroused she had become watching and reading about erotic spankings. There was no way that having her

behind slapped red would make her climax like those women had in the videos. No way! Not ever.

A trickle of awareness crawled down her spine. She didn't have to look around to know she was being watched. She could feel it. Instinct whispered that it wasn't Mistress Winter. This time, it was intense, filled with sizzling heat that made her shiver. In a furtive attempt to casually survey the crowd, her gaze was caught in the grip of a pair of dark eyes that sparkled like diamond dust on a moonlit night.

With just one look, Sage became transfixed by the proximity of the dark presence who enjoyed the power of those hypnotic orbs. Dressed in tight, black leather with an open vest that embraced a muscular chest, he had a swarthy masculinity that captivated her imagination. She was incapable of moving. He stood erect on legs spread shoulder-width apart, with his large hands balanced easily on each hip. Ownership and confidence oozed from his every pore, quickly spreading to wrap around her mind, infecting her thoughts, reaching in for control—demanding she give in to his allure.

Suddenly, all she wanted was to submit to the sexual whims of this man. Tied down, spanked, her hair yanked while being fucked, yes fucked, not made love to, like she was the only one that mattered. For him, she would submit to all of it—the pain, the discomfort... Her mind searched for more, but all she could come up with was whatever else came with a scene.

Sage had always believed in the equality of sexual power in a relationship. Now, being pulled in by those magnetic eyes, all she could think about was that she would go down on her knees and crawl if he told her to. She wanted to be owned by

him. What scared the hell out of her was not giving him power over her body but instead, that of her mind.

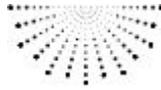
Complete submission.

An involuntary blink and the spell was shattered. His full mouth, gathered up into the slightest smile, briefly secured by unknown thoughts, stayed fixed at its corners while his eyes raked mischievously over her body. Then, without wasting another gesture, he turned and walked away.

“That man spells trouble with a capital T,” she murmured as her stomach began to unwind from a tangle of knots. Watching him go, Sage felt vulnerable and needy for the first time in her life—feelings that were foreign and uncomfortable. They did not sit well with her.

Not one little bit.

CHAPTER TWO



“I believe we have a full house tonight,” Kaden Frazer, aka Master Alpha, primary founding partner of Club Rogue, said as he gazed down into the entertainment area. He stood in front of the tinted glass wall of his office on the mezzanine level, a favorite vantage point from where he could evaluate the atmosphere of the evening and sort out the elegant from the demimonde.

Even though their selection process of members was stringent, pre-approved applicants or member guests were invited to join in the fun of open theme nights. It was usually on such occasions when trouble brewed due to Doms not taking the strict rules into consideration, or from bratty subs who pushed the club’s protocols to draw the attention of a specific member.

“We do,” Mistress Winter said as she joined him.

“How many guests?”

“Eight member sponsors and twenty-two one-nighters.”

One-nighters were those who applied for specific theme nights and were approved entry for only that night. Once they left, their profiles were deleted from the system. If they wanted full membership, they had to follow the detailed application process. Having achieved authorization for one

attendance didn't automatically offer anyone a free pass or special consideration. On that aspect, Kaden was immovable.

The club offered exclusivity for a reason. VIPs, celebrities, law enforcement, and high-ranking politicians were all part of the membership pool. Only those applicants who passed an in-depth background check and could be trusted to keep to the boundaries of the NDA were accepted as members. Confidentiality was key to ensuring no one's specific kink preferences were made known outside of Club Rouge. To date, the club's reputation remained intact, and rated as one of the top BDSM clubs on review sites.

"Anyone I should be concerned about?"

"Based on my assessment during the orientation, I think we have a good bunch tonight." Her eyes came to rest on a tall redhead leaning against the bar, sipping a glass of water. "Except perhaps one brat."

"You identified a brat this early in the evening?"

"Her attention drifted, and it was clear she didn't pay any attention to a word I said. To be honest, there's something about her that makes my left eye twitch. I can't put my finger on it, but I suspect that she's not as experienced as she claims to be. We might have to reconsider who we place her with."

"Your left eye?" Kaden smiled at the blonde Domme. "That's serious."

"I don't have to remind you that the very eye of which I speak has saved our butts in the field many times."

"Point taken." Kaden's chin dipped in acknowledgement. Zee DuBois, aka Mistress Winter, and his best friend, Slade Lewis, had been in the United States Marine Corps. A rapid-reaction force of which he had been a Sergeant Major at the

time. Marines were generally known as fierce warriors and his platoon had lived up to that name the entire time he was their leader. Being a combined-arms task force, they were known for their aggressiveness. Marines had been central in developing groundbreaking tactics for maneuver warfare. Kaden's platoon was the key driver in the development of helicopter insertion doctrine and modern amphibious assault. It had been a good career, but emotionally draining, which was why he had decided to resign from his position ten years ago. Of course, falling in love and getting married had been the main reason for that decision at the time.

Zee had a built-in intuition that never wavered. As she said, she had saved them from walking into ambushes a few times during various tours in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“File.”

Zee handed him a bright red folder that contained printed copies of the redhead's application forms, limit list, and an indication of the desires she wanted to be fulfilled at the Pair and Play theme night.

“If, as you say, she's not as experienced as she claims, then pairing her with the kind of Dom to fulfill the needs she listed could potentially end up a disaster.”

“Not to mention emotionally scarring her for life. What she's asking for is a sadist—one who is deaf to any outcry from his masochist.”

“Since the kind of scene such a sadist would require to achieve fulfillment is banned at Club Rouge, there is no such Dom with whom to pair her.” He closed the file. “Which is a small blessing.”

“True, but if she lied, why is she here? And why would she put herself out there as a masochist looking for trouble?”

“I imagine time will tell. I suggest you and the DMs keep an eye on her tonight. I don’t want trouble that we could’ve prevented, so let’s be proactive.” He frowned as a thought came to mind. “I noticed she is here as a guest. Who vouched for her?”

“I thought you’d know.”

“No riddles, please. Just spit it out.”

“Slade did. Didn’t he discuss it with you?”

“He usually does before inviting someone, but he’s in Seattle and we haven’t spoken for over two weeks.” Kaden handed the file to Zee. “I guess if he vouched for her, we should trust her not to be a terrorist.”

“Very funny.”

“With whom did you pair her?”

“Come now, Master Alpha. Surely, you of all people shouldn’t have to ask?”

Kaden frowned at her. “I might be strict and give harsh punishments, but I’m not a true sadist, Mistress Winter. Whoever made that call better fix it. I’m not in the mood for a lying brat tonight.”

“To the contrary, my friend, you are the perfect match for her, especially if she’s lying and needs her ass blistered. You have just the right amount of sadist in you for a sub like her. To be honest, I pegged her as a newbie. She has no idea what she has walked into. My brilliant instincts tell me the tall redhead is anything but masochistic, and instead, the perfect match for a Daddy Dom relationship. And since you’re

looking for a new Babygirl, why not one who you can mold to your hand?”

“My brothers talk too fucking much,” he muttered irritably. They were the only ones whom he had told that it was time for him to move on and start looking for a new sub. Not a little, but a woman who would fit into his world as her Daddy Dom. “Very well, Mistress Winter. Show me my pairing for the night.”

Zee pointed out the redhead, who had just burst into laughter at something the bartender said.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Kaden uttered incredulously. For the second time that night, his eyes wandered over the voluptuous architecture of the tall redhead. Upon arriving at the club, he had been struck speechless by her ethereal beauty, all sculpted together in a form of such sensuality, he could do no more than stare. What had surprised him was the feeling of possessiveness that rushed through him. Something he had only ever experienced once before... with his wife, Anna, who had died of pancreatic cancer seven years ago. Since then, he had never had the desire to replace her with another sub. Not until that moment when the deep mossy green gaze ensnared his eyes. A gaze that was at war with the internal conflict of confidence and insecurity she couldn’t hide from him.

If she had lied on her application, fear was exactly what she should experience. Anticipation tore open a seam of lust that settled in his loins. His intention not to be part of the theme play, evaporated.

“It seems you recognize little Patty Cakes.”

Kaden laughed in delight. “Patty Cakes?”

“As I said, her mind wandered and when I asked for her sub name, that’s what popped out of her mouth. She was as surprised by it as I was. but it does prove my point, doesn’t it?”

“That she’s secretly, or unknowingly, yearning for a Daddy Dom.”

“Exactement!”

“Let’s test your theory. Please take her to the whipping chamber and have her chained naked to the Saint Andrew’s cross. Be sure to spin a tale of the sadist’s love for making the subs scream and sob uncontrollably.”

“Naked? Don’t you think that’s a little extreme for a newbie? You do realize the whipping chamber is already milling with members.”

“If your assessment is correct, my guess is she’ll crack before it gets that far.”

“Ahh. You want the little brat to admit she lied, then give her the option to choose an appropriate punishment.”

“Why no, Mistress Winter. The only option she’ll have is to either get naked on the cross for the masochistic scene she asked for or accept the punishment for blatantly lying and worming her way in here under false pretenses.” He took one last look at the beautiful woman down below. “In the meantime, I’m going to try to get hold of Slade and give him a piece of my mind. He better have a damn good explanation for why he invited a vanilla sub to a Pair and Play theme night.”

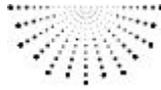
Of course, as was mostly the case, Slade’s phone went to voicemail. Not bothering to leave a message, Kaden dropped his cell phone in his desk drawer.

“Now, let’s find the perfect impact tool to put the fear of God into little Miss Patty Cakes.”

Armed with a bright red leather crop with sharp steel spikes on the clapper, he headed toward the whipping chamber. He would never use the crop to mar a woman’s soft skin, but it was the perfect deterrent tool for brats.

Little Miss Patty Cakes sounded like she needed a serious attitude adjustment—for lying.

CHAPTER THREE



“I trust you studied the leaflet, Patty Cakes?”

“Yes, Mistress Winter, I did.” Sage craned her neck for a peek into the rooms they passed as she followed the Domme down a wide hallway. The sound of deep voices mixed with giggling and screaming were proof that some of the paired couples were already at play.

The dungeon was rather intimidating, with its Neomedieval stone walls and wrought iron lamps. Feeling like she was tumbling down a rabbit hole, Sage struggled to hold on to the fierce warrior inside her. Being brave was second nature to her. It had to be in certain scenarios of her job. So why then was she trembling the deeper they went into the bowels of the dungeon?

Because you are completely out of your depth, Patty Cakes, an inner voice hissed. Arguing with that was pointless. It was the truth. She was about to indulge in a BDSM scene with a stranger. For a complete novice, she hadn't the slightest clue what to expect physically or emotionally. Unbeknownst to her, she was about to experience what it might feel like to be sucked helplessly up the face of a rogue wave.

She fidgeted for the umpteenth time with the red leather collar around her neck, issued to her once she had been paired

up. Red, because she was a masochist. Now, feeling more reluctant than ever, she wished she had answered the questions honestly on the application. At least then she'd be sporting a virgin white collar and would be gently guided into the world of debauchery of which she had only read about. Because she knew Clinton Beats had sexually sadistic tendencies, she had made herself vulnerable. She definitely hadn't thought this through. If he was her paired Dom, what the hell was she going to do?

“Please remind me what the club safeword is for stopping a scene.”

The Domme's voice deepened in warning that she didn't appreciate Sage's mind wandering while in her presence.

“Ehm,” she hedged, frantically searching her mind for the word she had seen but only skimmed over. In most of the books she had read, they all used the universal word, red, but not here. At Club Rogue, they went for something completely unexpected and yet appropriate. *Oh, yes!* She all but fist bumped herself as she remembered. “Cucumber!”

“Good girl.”

Sage frowned as a thrill of pleasure raced down her spine at the praise. Good Lord, all she did was remember the safeword. Why did it matter so much that it pleased the Domme?

“As mentioned in the welcoming speech, all play tonight is based on the tenets that are the foundation of the BDSM lifestyle—safe, sane and consensual, or the more modern reference, RACK, meaning Risk Aware Consensual Kink.”

“It's hardly consensual if I don't want to be paired up but prefer to watch,” Sage muttered.

“You specifically signed up for tonight’s theme night, Miss Lewis. On theme nights, there are no exceptions. I checked your file and confirmed that you virtually signed the consent form for any scene and pairing we decided would best fit your needs. So, you already gave your consent. I offered you the opportunity to walk away earlier. You chose to stay.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or did I misunderstand your very emphatic, *I’m staying?*”

“No, Mistress. I guess I’m just a little nervous that there won’t be a discussion prior to the scene.”

“The discussion was your application essay, telling us exactly what you would like to experience. That, my dear sub, is what your scene is going to offer you. What you asked for.”

For the life of her, Sage couldn’t remember what drivel she had written on the application. All she had wanted was to get it done so that the form was submitted in time to be approved. Even though her uncle was a member at the club from its inception, the rules for his guests were no different. She had to follow the same path as all the others. Besides that, she didn’t want the knowledge that she was his niece to become known.

Yes, she needed to get close to Beats, but would she truly have applied for a scene with a sadist to accomplish that goal? Minute beads of sweat formed on her breastbone then ran down its length and pooled in the concave of her navel. The tickling sensation was becoming a distraction. She had better dig deep into her memory banks so that she was somewhat prepared for what was coming.

“Either way,” Mistress Winter’s voice yanked her attention back to the present. “I want to assure you that we don’t take any submissive using the safeword lightly. The owners of the club installed the latest technology to ensure the utmost safety

for everyone at play. The moment a sub uses the word cucumber, the CCTV system is coded to send out an alert to all the Dungeon Monitors and the Club Master Dom with the exact location of the scene. They all wear electronic monitor devices linked to the system. No matter where the sub is inside the club, the scene will be stopped in a matter of seconds.”

“That’s quite impressive.”

“Of course, you must know that in the BDSM community screaming at the top of your lungs, crying, or begging a Dom to end the scene, is not considered a legitimate reason to cease.” Mistress Winter’s piercing gaze slapped the stupefied look right off Page’s face. “So, with that said, it would be wise to play an associated word game to ensure that you remember the safeword. It will be the only way to end a scene.”

“Don’t worry, Mistress. It’s already glued in place.”

“Good. If, however, you only wish to stop the scene momentarily to take a breather or discuss your discomfort with the Dom, you will have to agree on a different word. That way, he will know to stop and listen, then adjust the scene without it bringing the entire club down around you.”

Sage wasn’t all too sure that saying a single word would have such an effect, particularly not with a sadist wielding a whip, but she was a visitor and would have to take the expert’s word for it.

“Here we are. This is the whipping chamber.”

“The wh-whipping chamber?” Sage suddenly felt a rush of goosebumps form on the top of her arms. Her eyes widened and remained fixed on a couple to her left. The sub was chained spread eagled with her back against the wall. Her naked body, illuminated by an overhead arc lamp glistened

with sweat. Her breasts heaved as she dragged in a deep breath, clearly distraught at the crack of the bullwhip that the mighty Dom in front of her slashed through the air.

A bullwhip! Jesus Christ! That thing will slice her skin to shreds!

“Excited, are you?” Mistress Winter whispered in her ear, her voice darkening as she watched the Dom draw back his arm. “You should be. Your Dom is an expert at wielding a whip, and I daresay he chose his favorite snake-edged one just for you.”

“Wh-whip? Sn-Snake-edged? He’s going to whip me?”

For God’s sake, Sage, pull yourself together! You sound like a wimpy teenager, not a fierce FBI Operative!

Sage squeezed her eyes shut as the Dom’s arm moved forward in a sharp snap, the sound of leather kissing skin like a gunshot to her ears. She waited for the sub’s scream of terror. It never came. Lifting one eyelid, she peeked at her, surprised to see her chin tilting back, with her lips spread wide as she gasped, “Oh!”

A red streak grew across her stomach like a splash against her pale skin. The sub moaned and arched her back as two successive strikes curled around the rounded curves of her breasts. If Sage didn’t know better, she would say the woman was drowning in ecstasy, enjoying every strike the Dom offered.

Then Sage noticed the red collar around her neck and realization struck. She was a masochist, which meant she was enjoying the pain.

Shit! I can’t do this. Desperation fought against panic as her fingers tightened on the collar around her neck. Yes, she

had a black belt in Martial Arts, and fought like a tiger when she had to. She didn't scare easily but she had never taken punishment well as a child. Always wailed like a baby when her father gave her a hiding. Just the thought of that still bent her mind.

In here, she didn't have any control since she handed it over to a sadist for the night. It was time to rethink her strategy. Playing at being a masochist was one thing but to do so with the sole purpose of getting close to Beats was a mistake. Mainly because she would have to go through with the scene if she was paired up with him. Thinking about that, now made her realize how many flaws her plan had. She needed to gather information, not expose herself, and in the process, potentially jeopardize any chance of building a solid case against him. An eagerness to expose corruption was putting her in danger.

Not discussing the anonymous tip with her boss before rushing into the investigation was the first mistake. Going out without backup on an intel-gathering expedition was the second.

The biggest problem she was now facing was the big steel and leather Saint Andrew's Cross that Mistress Winter guided her to. Getting whipped to shreds had never been part of the plan!

"Since you're a guest of one of our founding partners, we have to ensure all your needs are being met."

Sage blinked as the Domme's voice yanked her from the musings. "I... ehm, perhaps I wasn't completely—"

"To achieve that, there is only one Dom who has the ability to reach deep inside any submissive's mind and unwrap her true desires," Mistress Winters said, cutting her short.

“Believe me, before the first slash of the whip wraps itself around your hip, you’ll be begging for the pain to ease you into oblivion.”

“And he is?”

“As Master Z’s partner, it’s our owner Master Dom, of course, Master Alpha.”

“Owner? As in, he’s my sponsor’s business partner?” Sage couldn’t wrap her mind around the fact that she would be scening with her uncle’s friend. Her mind struck a blank. She couldn’t recall his name, but she knew they’d been army buddies long ago. That Slade Lewis was a founding partner of Club Rouge was news to her.

“That he is.” Mistress Winter pointed to the cross. “He’s on his way and wants you chained in place by the time he arrives. Undress, please, then step onto the footrests.”

“Un-Undress?”

“Yes. Master Alpha requires his submissives to be naked during scenes. If memory serves, you had no problem with exhibitionism on your limit list.”

“I…” Sage rushed for an appropriate response, but apart from blurting out that everything she had written about on her application were all lies, she had nothing to offer. Nakedness in the BDSM community was part of the BDSM club scene—a natural expectation for a Dom to have. She had known that but had been naive to believe she’d be able to set down the rules of when she took off her clothes—preferably behind closed doors, in one of the private suites upstairs.

“Maybe I should help the little subbie along, Mistress Winter, since her responses to your instructions are rather lackluster.”

Sage's back snapped straight at the guttural voice, accompanied by the threatening crack of a whip in the air behind her. She didn't have to turn around to know who it belonged to. The recordings of speeches she had listened to as part of her research identified him instantly—Clinton Beats.

“No need, but thanks for the offer, Master Bull.”

“Oh, but I insist.”

Sage turned in stages to give herself time to force her nerves under control. As an undercover FBI agent, her presence in the offices at the J. Edgar Hoover Headquarters was kept to a minimum but she had no idea if he might have noticed her in the hallways of that same building before. If he did, the game was over.

“Ah, such a beautiful little subbie she is, too.” Beats' eyes glimmered with lust. Sage relaxed as he showed no signs of recognition then cringed as the long whip slithered closer to her when he flicked his hand. “I can almost hear you scream,” he whispered against her cheek as he leaned in to inhale her scent. “Hmm, I love the smell of fear on a sub.”

“No need to prepare my sub, Master Bull. I assure you, I'm more than capable of handling her myself.”

The dark voice resonated through the chamber that had suddenly gone quiet. Even the musical thundering of drums became a distant whisper in response to the authority underscoring each syllable. It seemed as though every member in the whipping chamber was watching them, breathlessly anticipating a showdown.

Sage dragged in a deep breath as Beats stepped back and Master Alpha came into view... at which point she promptly lost her breath.

Holy shit! This is my Dom for the night? How could one girl get so lucky? With wide eyes, she stared at the gorgeous hunk of a man who had sparked an exciting tingle inside her earlier.

Yeah, lucky indeed. Did you happen to forget he believes you're a masochist, which makes him a sadist?"

Shit -shit -shit!

“Ah, Master Alpha, I didn't realize the prettiest and bravest masochist in the club would be paired up with you. Or have you suddenly decided to dip your toe into the pleasures of sadistic pursuits?” Beats didn't appear fazed as he continued to study Sage.

“My pleasures are just that, Master Bull. They are mine. Since everyone is already allocated a partner, I assume yours is eagerly awaiting your presence.” Master Alpha's voice didn't change, but Sage could swear she detected a subtle warning in his tone.

“Very well. No more dawdling,” Beats said with a grin as he took a final look at Sage, and murmured for her ears alone, “I will be on the lookout for you in the future, little subbie. Make no mistake about that.”

Before she could settle the frayed edges of her mind at the sudden turn of events, her gaze was caught by a flash of possession in the mighty Dom approaching her as Beats sauntered off.

“Ready for me, Patty Cakes?” Master Alpha's voice turned darker.

Had it been a gunfight or even a hand-to-hand combat, Sage would have stood her ground, but one look at those eyes, which now glowed with devilish intent, robbed her of all

bravado. Without a conscious order flashing through her brain, Sage Lewis turned tail and bolted.

Escape was all she could think about as she ran toward the heavy dungeon door—not an easy feat with the stiletto heels she was wearing but she refused to slow down. Master Alpha might be a sex god—one she would be all too happy to spread her legs for—but one look at those bulging biceps was enough of a deterrent.

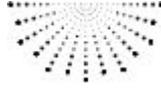
There was no way he was going to whip her, most definitely not with the one thing that had spurred on her escape—a bright red leather crop in his hand... one with steel spikes on the clapper.

Steel fucking spikes! Who even makes a tool like that?

“No! Let me go,” she shrieked as a steel band suddenly wrapped around her waist and lifted her clear off her feet. Her fingers curled around the handle of the dungeon door in desperation.

Escape was close... so close.

CHAPTER FOUR



“She did not just do that, did she?” Kaden’s amusement filtered through his voice as he watched the enchanting little submissive run off. In her wake, the delectable fragrance of fresh gardenias teased his nostrils.

“Yep. First time I’ve seen a sub run away from you. I must say, I’m very much savoring the moment.” Zee smiled broadly. “Want me to retrieve her for you?”

“Not to worry, Mistress Winter. I have this one.”

“I’m sure you do,” Zee laughed as Kaden strode after the fleeing woman. He didn’t bother to speed up when the recalcitrant sub glanced over her shoulder at his sudden approach, shrieked then bolted.

Kaden was an animal lover and stood firmly against trophy hunting but as he quickly stalked his prey, he could understand the thrill one must experience during a hunt. For his entire adult life, he never had to chase a woman. He was always the elusive one. It was a giddy feeling to be the predator and not the prey.

Now with a final lunge, a snort of laughter erupted from his lungs as he scooped an arm around her waist just as she reached out to open the dungeon door.

“Oomph!” she gasped as he tightened his hold and dragged her up against his chest, smiling as he watched her legs dangling in the air.

“I’m not a masochist! I’m not a masochist!” she screeched as she struggled against the hard constriction of his arm. With a smile, he deliberately tightened his hold, threatening to cut her in two, which spurred a frantic kicking to commence. “I’m not a masochist! I don’t want to be whipped. Let me go!”

“The red collar around your neck says differently.” He felt a tremor race along her body at the sound of finality in his voice. It was becoming a challenge to keep her in place and avoid the sharp spikes of the ridiculous stilettos she wore.

“No! It’s a lie. I’m not a masochist!”

“A lie? Are you saying we misunderstood the stipulations on your application, sub?” Kaden couldn’t remember when he last had had so much fun upon first meeting a submissive.

“Let me go!”

“I asked you a question,” he growled in a guttural voice. She might be trembling in fear but that didn’t mean he was going to let her off the hook. She had played with fire and now the consequences were hers to suffer.

“No, you didn’t. I’m the one who lied. There. I admit it. I. Lied. Now let me go. You’re not whipping me with that fucking spiky crop. I’m NOT a masochist!”

“I got the message, Patty Cakes. Now, be quiet and listen well, so *you* get mine.” He tightened his hold around her waist. “Stop kicking or you’re going to make your punishment twice as bad.”

“I c-can’t breathe!”

“Stop struggling, and you’ll breathe just fine.”

Her sharp glare, whipped in his face like a rapier, only succeeded in further spiking his growing libido.

“Ah, I see I have a fiery brat on my hands,” he said, beaming a bright smile at her as she continued to squirm. This little subbie presented the kind of challenge that he had been searching for. The way she acted underscored Zee’s belief that she was a newbie to the BDSM lifestyle.

The Daddy inside him stirred to life. Maybe Zee’s calculation wasn’t far off the mark. He would love nothing more than to cut this rough diamond to shine in the pleasures this lifestyle offered... as her Daddy Dom.

“Now, I want you to behave. We are going to go to my office for a little honest conversation.”

“I can walk,” she protested as he pushed open the dungeon’s heavy wooden door and headed toward the stairs, still carrying her in front of him like a captured trophy.

“Since I don’t trust you not to bolt toward the exit the moment I release you, you’ll have to excuse me for having to hold on to your luscious form.” With that said, another involuntary smile, gleaming with white teeth, blinded her.

“You are *not* excused! Oww!” With eyes wide, she shot a hurt look at him over her shoulder while rubbing a scorched thigh where he had planted two hard slaps in response to her bratty remark.

“You smacked me!”

“Yes, I did. And believe me, unless you start behaving, there will be a lot more where that one came from.”

Ignoring the unintelligible mumbling that followed, he walked into his office, and closed the door behind them before lowering her feet to the floor.

“Please, sit down.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she chirped in a snippy voice. “These heels are killing me.”

“Not there.” His deep voice intercepted her enroute to the visitor’s chair at his desk. Her eyes followed the red crop in his hand pointing toward the round leather ottoman in one corner in front of the window overlooking the club. “Over there, on your knees, and then sit back on your heels with your hands clasped behind your back.”

“You’re not serious.”

“You’re on my turf now, my pet. I suggest you start paying attention and do as you’re told.”

Kaden suppressed a smile as she huffed and scowled at the ottoman as if it was the most offending piece of furniture she’d ever come across.

“Do you require my assistance?”

The speed with which she kneeled on the pedestal would have been insulting if he wasn’t so thick-skinned. Clearly little Miss Patty Cakes wanted to avoid any further contact with him. The incandescent glow of his eyes was a result of homing in on the two red marks on her thigh where he had slapped her. He was reminded of how delicious her skin felt under his slap by the sudden pulse of warm blood that slammed into the taut knob of his cock.

“Why are you here, Patty Cakes?”

“Really? That’s the question you want to lead with?”

That she even had the audacity to respond in such a disrespectful manner was the final proof he needed. Miss Patty Cakes had never been dominated before, or rather, no one had ever unshackled the natural submissive in her yearning to be released. Unconsciously, yes, the signs were all there in her eyes. Whoever she really was, she was aching for someone to take control.

“I warned you that we’re going to have an honest conversation. I suggest you take it seriously. I’m usually a very forgiving man but with you, I’m running out of patience. Believe me, you don’t want that to happen.”

“Why does anyone come to a club like this?” she quickly countered, a little more subdued but still with the same bratty attitude.

“*Anyone* isn’t the topic of discussion. *You* are. Answer the question.” The way his voice darkened was more than a warning—it was a demand. One she was clever enough to identify as her hands finally disappeared behind her back when she got into the position that he originally ordered her to take.

“I wanted... uh, needed to find an outlet for pent-up emotions.”

“Hmm. In which BDSM novel did you read that? *His Sassy Sub? The Devil’s Kiss?*” He snorted a derisive laugh. “Come now. Surely you don’t expect me to believe such silliness?”

“It’s not... I’m not...” It was evident that she was frustrated with her inability to express herself. From the confidence she presented from first meeting her, he would guess that she had a demanding career, was perhaps even a leader in her field.

Kaden picked up the red folder he had earlier placed on the edge of his desk. Paging through it, he picked out a specific page.

“Sheila Lovett. Thirty-four-years old. Single. Occupation: Security Management. Experience as a submissive: eight years.” He looked at her. “Eight years. So, that begs the question: Why would an experienced sub lie on her application for the Pair and Play event and ask to be placed in a severe masochistic scene?”

“I didn’t apply for a *severe* scene... just something more than, you know... the usual.”

“No, I don’t know. Why don’t you explain to me what, *the usual*, means.”

Again, some unintelligible muttering, which he once more allowed, purely because he found her expression adorable when she did it.

“What was that?” he asked with a straight face as he placed the file back on the desk.

“I wanted to find out whether or not I had unrealized masochistic tendencies by indulging in a bit of hard spanking that might reveal the truth.”

“If you haven’t been able to identify that you have masochistic tendencies after eight years of being a submissive then I can’t help but wonder what kind of Doms you’ve been exposed to.”

“Proper ones. Powerful, forceful ones, who offer their subs exactly what they ask for.”

“So, are those the fantasy Doms that appear in the books you’ve read or are they real?”

“Look, I’m done with you making fun of me,” she snapped.

“Believe me, Patty Cakes, a Dom worth his salt won’t give a sub what she asks for. He’ll give her what she needs.”

“Same difference.”

“Anything but, which makes me wonder, do you even know what BDSM is about?”

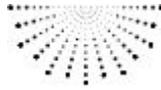
“Of course, I do.”

“Maybe you know the basics, but I think it unlikely that I’d lose a bet if I said that you’ve never been inside a BDSM club, let alone having ever experienced a scene with a true Dom.”

She spread her arms wide. ““Since I’m sitting in your office, overlooking—oh, what is that down below? What do you know? It’s a BDSM club! So, I’d say you already lost the bet.”

“Keep going, Patty Cakes. The number of strikes is racking up pretty fast.”

CHAPTER FIVE



Sage bit back a sharp retort. Becoming more circumspect as the night wore on, she thought that maybe reining in the *petite peste* behavior would yield dividends of some kind. Her situation had deteriorated to the point where she found herself on the short end of the stick. And that same stick was getting shorter with each display of bad behavior.

She had, in part, already achieved something by showing up incognito at Club Rouge—confirmation that Congressman Beats had a dark side. Not that there was anything wrong with being a sexual sadist, provided of course, he was with a consenting masochist. That wasn't at all obvious to her. The way his eyes had glowed at the prospect of using his whip on her, had warned of the very real possibility that this man harbored psychosexual tendencies of which he, himself, when fully aroused, had little self-control over.

Being stuck in an interrogation wouldn't help her find actual proof against the corrupt bastard—no matter how much of a sex god her jailer was. Success would only be achieved if she got back in the dungeon. It was time to wind up this little interim power play.

“I apologize for my disrespectful actions, Master Alpha. I blame my reaction to my surprise at how cruel Master Bull

sounded in his promise to take care of me.” As she had seen in the videos, she lowered her eyes and allowed her lips to droop just a little.

“Ah, I see. So, the true sadist immediately cured you from any desire to be treated like a masochist?”

“Strange, isn’t it?” She dared a quick peek at him through the thick veil of her eyelashes. “Guess I got my answer, though. I’m definitely not a masochist.” She smiled timidly. “Am I forgiven, Master Alpha?”

“Forgiveness has to be earned at Club Rogue, my pet. Your disrespect wasn’t aimed toward Master Bull but instead, directed at me. Therefore, I’m afraid you’re not off the hook... just yet.”

“But I apologized!” Sage couldn’t hide her frustration at the delay. He was the owner of the club, the Master Dom, and no one opposed him. Certainly not a visiting guest. She would just have to bite her tongue and get this over with as soon as possible. Resisting was only going to further stretch out the interrogation.

“So, you did. I’ll give you one more chance to redeem yourself, Patty Cakes. Answer my questions truthfully, and I’ll absolve you of punishment. Lie to me again, and you will pay the penance in full. Forgiveness for blatant lies doesn’t come easily. Not from me.”

“Ask away, Sir.”

“How many years of experience do you have as a submissive?”

Sage felt the wave of embarrassment at being caught in the lie color her cheeks red. Lying about it further was fruitless.

He already knew she was a virgin submissive but somehow, she had to redeem herself... by continuing the lie.

“I’m rather new at this.” She winced as his eyes darkened. “Although I have participated in some activities, I’m afraid most of my knowledge comes from fiction, the Web, and tutorial videos.” Well, spanking herself and clamping her nipples did qualify as participating. She was quick to justify the lie, if only to herself.

“Your sponsor, is he aware of your ignorance of the lifestyle?” This time there was no doubt about the irritation beginning to boil inside him. It made itself known by a bright spark that flashed in the darkness of his eyes.

“No. I assured him I’ve been in the lifestyle for years. He had no reason not to believe me.” Her response doused the heat inside him somewhat.

“The personal information you supplied. How much of that is true?”

“Oh, that’s all accurate, Sir. One hundred percent truthful.”

Kaden’s eyes narrowed as he rose. His stance visibly became more forceful as he straightened to tower over her.

“Why are you here?”

“I’ve become so consumed with the fictionalized versions of the BDSM lifestyle and club stories that I started living them in my mind. I came here because I wanted to fully embrace being sexually dominated, not just play at it with a partner at home.” Sage felt her right eye twitching. It always happened when she blatantly lied. She could only hope that he didn’t notice.

Then he smiled. Staring at him wide-eyed, she realized that he knew she lied. It was there in the way his lips twitched, a

positively demonic grin of enjoyment. She frantically dragged in a breath as she attempted to bring her heart rate back to normal but the dark expression crossing his face, instead, caused her entire body to start shaking.

Good Lord! He's just a man. He has weak points, like any of those you've fought in the past. Get a grip, woman. You can take him!

Her little power talk disintegrated in the face of the man with a ripped six-pack as she found herself becoming numb. Her courage withered, not because of his size but because of the powerful Dominant that suddenly looked larger than life.

"I warned you not to lie to me, Patty Cakes." His voice turned ominous as his mouth twisted in warning.

Unnerved, Sage couldn't formulate a thought to utter a word, so she just stared at him. He returned her look; his entire demeanor poised, waiting... daring her to not fail him again.

"I'm not lying," she finally croaked. A feeling of dread flooded into her as he looked on in utter disappointment knowing instantly that she had censored the truth, yet again, with a bald-faced lie.

The spot where he slapped her started to tingle. It expanded to her buttocks, igniting the remembered spark of pain as her muscles clenched, all the way to her knees.

He leaned closer, offering her no escape. "Exactly what aren't you lying about? That you have *some* BDSM experience, the information you supplied, or what you're doing here at Club Rouge?"

"B-Both, all of it," she stammered, completely rattled by his proximity. She could cope with the powerful dominance he exuded from afar but up close and personal? Now, that was a

completely different ball game. With the lightest touch, he turned her into a flustering, quivering ball of fire.

A long exhale drifted from his lips as he straightened and looked into her face. “Are you sure you don’t wish to change your answer?”

“Quite sure.” Flicking her arms, she straightened onto her knees. “Now, if the interrogation is over, I’ll be taking my leave. I suspect I am to exit the premises immediately?”

“Sit down.” Without raising his voice, the order carried such power that Sage’s bottom promptly plonked back onto her feet. Her jaw went slack as she tried to compute what had just happened. In no way that she could comprehend had she ordered herself to react to his command and yet... she did.

A small squawk escaped her lips as he picked up the red leather crop and slapped it against his leathers—the sound a promise of pain and punishment. Both of which she had no doubt featured prominently in the very near future if she didn’t manage to get out of there, pronto.

“Since you claim you’re being truthful, it would be remiss of me not to offer you at least a taste of what true BDSM lifestyle offers.” His smile grew at the same pace as the shudder that wracked her body.

Mouth suddenly dry, she swallowed, her eyes drawn back to the crop he continued to clap-clap-clap against his pants.

“At Club Rogue there are a variety of Doms. There are soft-hearted, empathetic, dark, sadistic, and more, but one thing we all have in common is that we adhere to SSC. Unless a sub has given consent, nothing will happen.”

“Which kind of Dom are you?” Sage bit her lip, not sure where the wayward question popped up from.

“I am a dark Dominant edging toward that of a sexual sadist. There is a thin line that separates two coexisting worlds that can become easily blurred where they form into the singular, ephemeral realm of the consensual non-consent. In fact, one can live briefly in both, swinging wildly back and forth. I love the feel of a woman pinned against my lap, kicking, and screaming as I turn her backside red. The knowledge that she’s fighting for release while secretly craving every strike, the ensuing pain, and the resultant desire that makes her little pussy slick with juice as I blister her cheeks, is what feeds the sadist in me. There is no lovelier sight than the female form tethered in rope with rosy, taut nipples clamped and weighted down.” His grin expanded at her wide-eyed look. “Do you know what I love the most?”

“Wh-What?”

“Watching the supercilious brat breaking down as she cries and sobs in despair or longing for more. Those little pleas when a sub begs feed my soul, especially when I know she would in despair if I stopped.” Kaden walked toward the closet and opened a drawer. “How accurate is your limit list, Patty Cakes?”

“My limit list?”

“Yes, you know, the list of BDSM activities in which you would or would not participate.”

In her mind, Sage raced through the selections she had made on the list. Truthfully, everything she had chosen were activities she would participate in if she was a submissive.

“The list is accurate.”

“Daddy.”

“Excuse me?” Her head snapped around to stare at him where he was still rummaging through the drawers.

“You will call me Daddy.”

“Now why in the world would I ever want to do that?” She had read about the Daddy and little girl kink, but it wasn’t something to which she was drawn.

“I’m not looking for a nursery school little girl, Patty Cakes, but I am in need of my own Babygirl. So, as your Daddy, for tonight, my aim is to protect, dominate, and devour you sexually. As a semi-sadist, I’ll have as much fun creating some large tears that I’ll kiss away later.”

“Ehm... I actually don’t want to scene anymore. I’d rather just observe,” she quickly protested as she remembered why she was there. Latching onto a Daddy Dom, no matter how sexy and inviting the offer was, could ruin her chances of achieving her goal, which is why she came there in the first place. She had to get back to the dungeon to see what Beats was up to.

“In that case, let’s just get your punishment over with then I will escort you to your car.” He walked closer, watching her intently.

“But I don’t want to leave.”

“I’m afraid it’s not up to you. The theme tonight is Pair and Play. Either you participate, or you leave.”

“But only after you punished me.”

“You know the rules and protocols of this club. That is why we insist on a very detailed orientation process and provide a leaflet to study. When you don’t adhere to either of those, even as a guest, you will suffer the consequences.”

“And because I told a little white lie, I am to be punished.”

“You’re being punished for treating me with disrespect. And furthermore, even though you were given every chance to tell the truth, you continued to fabricate stories. Lying about how experienced you are as a submissive could end up in disaster, Miss Lovett. Don’t you realize that?”

“I... I guess so.”

“Do you believe I’m being unfair?”

“No.”

“Say it right, Babygirl.”

Why she was struggling with the confusion of emotions surging through her at the pet name, she had no idea. Biting her lip, she curbed the desire to rub her buttocks, which once again were again inundated with unchecked spasms. Faint prickles of electricity sparked in the air between them.

“No, Daddy.”

The pleasure at hearing her response presented itself in an explosion of light in the depths of his eyes. Sage could only stare in wonder. How could something that insignificant invite such a volatile reaction from such a large man?

“Please remove your panties and lie face down on the ottoman. Grab the edge on the other side and spread your legs.”

Sage looked down. The ottoman was large and for her to be in such a position would mean she’d be spread out like a starfish.

“Why don’t I just kneel beside it and bend over it?”

“This isn’t a negotiation, Miss Lovett. Either you take the position, or I will plant myself on the stool and pull you over my lap and go all old school on you. Believe me, you’ll be begging for this paddle rather than my hand on your bare bottom within the first five slaps.”

The tremors of dread that she was feeling, ignited into full-blown erotic alarms that sparked through her mind as he held up a wooden paddle. It was a little larger than a brush but in his huge paw, the imminent danger it presented to her soft buttocks was monumental.

There she was. No one was coming to the rescue. The shock that the moment had finally arrived, so stunned her, she became speechless. She got herself into this position. If she was brutally honest with herself, the excitement that had surfed through her when watching the spanking videos, now threatened to drown her. For once, she wanted to feel what it felt like to be sexually dominated; to fully hand over control to a man who knew exactly how to tap into the submissive part of her. That same part needing to just relax, feel, and not have to think about what it was that her partner wanted from her.

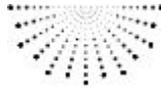
Being the hard-ass FBI Special Agent was a full-time job. Unfortunately, it led to all her sexual partners to date expecting the same from her in bed. They wanted the aggression, the demanding woman she was in her day-to-day career. It was tiring, particularly since the end result was that she was the one doing all the work and never truly found the sexual satisfaction she craved—to have her needs put first, to be cuddled, cared for, and her emotions protected.

Perhaps it was time to acknowledge she needed the one thing she had been shying away from the moment she had started investigating the BDSM lifestyle—that she craved to

be a submissive. Her eyes flickered as she looked at Kaden, surprised that he stood waiting patiently.

If this was how a Daddy treated his Babygirl, with strictness and control, yet with patience and care, perhaps this was exactly what she secretly yearned for.

CHAPTER SIX



“Very well. Let it be known that I’m not one to run away from being accountable for my actions.”

“Such bravery,” Kaden chuckled.

With a cautious eye toward her inquisitor, Sage rose hesitantly from the ottoman. There was a dark undertone to the amused quality in his laugh that suggested she might have misconstrued the severity of the impending punishment.

“No, leave on the spikes... just the panties,” he said as she started removing her shoes.

“Why is it that men have such a fixation with stilettos?” she said as she hooked her fingers under her panties but refrained from pulling them off. For the first time she was glad she had decided to wear a corset dress and not shorts, otherwise she’d be even more hesitant. Maybe she was delaying the inevitable, or possibly, it was just feeling apprehensive about baring her luscious bits to a stranger. Not that she, in any shape or form, feared this particular one, but she had never let her clothes come off without the proper amount of foreplay.

What foreplay? Your ass is about to be blistered. This is punishment, Patty Cakes, not some sexy frolicking where you get to end up squirting for the first time in your life.

Oh, shut up!

“It’s twofold,” Kaden said. “There’s the way a woman’s legs move on those spikes. How her calves flex with every step that, and this is the big one, scream out, fuck me silly.” His smile turned Cheshire-like. “But I imagine you already know that much, otherwise, why else wear them?” He snapped his fingers. “Enough dilly-dallying. Get those panties off and lie down.”

He waited quietly as she shimmied out of her panties and gingerly lowered herself onto the ottoman. At first, she laid flat like an ironing board—body stiff with arms and legs stretched out straight. He was standing behind her and the thought of the view he would have once she spread her legs, brought a blush that first appeared on her neck then bloomed over her body.

“I’m a very patient man, Patty Cakes, but I find you have a knack to stretch mine very thin. I suggest you stop these delaying tactics and get into position.”

“Just wait! Okay! I’m... I need to... shit.” She ran her tongue over her suddenly dry lips. This man was just too much. Surely, he realized he was the cause of her distress. “Please just move over to the side. I can’t open my legs with you watching me like an X-Ray machine eager to flash its first image of my hoo-ha!”

“For every five seconds I have to wait, the initial twelve strikes will escalate by two. We’re on fourteen, Patty Cakes. Want to push for twenty?” There was no mistaking the effort he put into not laughing at her response, but the mirth filtered through the deep voice floating toward her. It irked her... seriously pissed her off!

“That’s not fair. I’m not... it’s not... you’re not—”

“Sixteen.”

“Oh, for shit’s sake,” she muttered and before the bravado triggered by irritation trotted off again, she spread her legs, and grabbed hold of the bottom edge of the ottoman. Eyes aglow, she shot him a debilitating look over her shoulder. “Don’t think I won’t remember this, Master Alpha. I’ll be sure to give you tit for tat.”

“Hmm, eighteen.”

“Like hell it is! There was no five-second delay,” she protested vehemently.

“Twenty.” The smile he offered was one of pure evil pleasure. “I warned you about disrespect, Patty Cakes. For every threat, or insult, I’ll keep adding two strikes.”

“That’s not—”

“Not fair? Of course, it is, especially since you were warned.”

“Well, you could at least have reminded me of *that* warning, since you had so much else to say in between,” she snapped.

“Twenty-two.”

“What the hell for this time? I didn’t...” Sage swallowed the rest of the complaint as she watched the light of pleasure dance about like fireflies in his dark eyes. The damn Dom was enjoying this way too much! She dragged in a calming breath. The quicker he spanked her, the sooner she could get back to work. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound disrespectful again... Daddy.”

This time, Sage could only stare as her dutiful response dulled the sharp-edged demeanor that was consistent with the

orthodoxy of this powerful Dom. A softer side presented itself in the form of a smile that completely stole her breath away.

“Ahh, how sweet that word sounds from your lips, little Patty Cakes, mainly because I didn’t have to ask you to use it. Just for that, I’ll take back the last two counts.”

Well, slap me silly with a wet fish. It’s that easy to please this big, hulk of a Dom? By calling him Daddy?

Just walk softly and don’t overuse it, Patty Cakes. He doesn’t strike me as the kind of man who would fall for being manipulated.

Right. Got it.

The voice of her subconscious briefly settled a frayed mind until he stepped closer and knelt between her legs. Then it went into overdrive.

“Face forward, Patty Cakes.”

“But—”

Crack! Crack!

“Sweet Hells Angels!” she cried out as two slaps landed, one on each cheek. “Okay! Jeez! You don’t have to be so... so strict, Daddy.”

“I’m only strict when the situation demands it and, in your case, I’m afraid it does. You need a little attitude adjustment, not to mention a lesson in honesty.”

“I’m an honest person! It’s just...” Sage bit her lip. Just what? She couldn’t blurt out why she was here, no matter that it was suddenly the only thing she wanted to do—to tell him everything. Be honest and level the playing field. Start over and be his little Babygirl for real.

Damn, Sage. You definitely overdid watching those videos.

No shit, Sherlock.

For once, she was in total agreement with her psyche. She had to pull herself together and remember why she was there in the first place.

“Yes, it’s just *that*.” He brushed his palm over her smarting cheeks, rubbing the pain deeper until she could feel it bouncing off her bones.

“You chose to come into my club, Miss Lovett, and I will make sure you get what you came here for. I can only do that if you are honest, not only in what you say, but in how you respond to me now, or while in a scene with a Dom. Overstating your experience could easily turn into a disaster. Not only for you but also for the Dom you’re with. One thing you need to realize, my pet, is that it’s not only a sub that is invested in a scene, the Dom is twice as much drawn into it. If he fails to give you what you need, it impacts on him emotionally just as much. Unfortunately, lying on your application is what has put you in this very position. Once the lies start, it’s very difficult, if not impossible, to stop them. I’m sure that’s not something I need to tell you. I can’t allow such actions to go unpunished. Not only to adhere to the protocols of the club but to ensure you realize the magnitude of your deceit by coming to a place such as this under false pretenses.”

“I’m beginning to realize that,” she mumbled.

“That’s good. Now, you already know the safeword to stop is cucumber. If you need a breather or wish me to slow down, let’s go with a word I’m sure you won’t forget—lies.”

Sage thought it wise not to respond. She was already in so deep it was starting to become difficult to stay afloat. Opening

her mouth seemed to just suck her down even more.

“For whatever reason you came to the club, you’re solely responsible for ending up here with me. In my view, no one but me is equipped to deal with you in the appropriate fashion. Now, I’m going to spank you for the blatant lies and disrespect toward me.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“Maybe you are now, but not as much as you will be.”

This time she winced from biting down so hard on her lips. If he thought she was going to cry and shout cucumber, he had a surprise coming. Sage wasn’t a wuss. And he was right. She deserved to be punished. If there was one thing everyone in the Bureau knew about FBI Special Agent Lewis, it was that she could take her due like the trooper she was.

“Beautiful.”

Sage hissed in surprise as his hand suddenly covered the heat between her legs, bold, hard, and without any hesitation. Knuckles turning white from tightening her hold on the stool, she stared through the window with wide eyes, barely noticing the milling people dancing and having a pleasant time. Then, the initial shock gave way to warmth flooding her mind as she relaxed into his touch and just... felt.

Heat cascaded from him to her as his fingers began a meandering caress, spreading her labia to gently toggle her clit before dipping a finger just inside her wet folds.

“Ah, such heat and eagerness.” There was no surprise in his tone. Of course, he had known before touching her that she was aroused. How and what made her so wet and ready to feel all of him buried deep inside her, she had no idea, but there it

was. She was primed, slick and ready. “Keep still, Patty Cakes. You don’t move unless I tell you too. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Sage had difficulty breathing as once again his fingers found her clit, drawing enticing circles around and over it until it swelled taut and became so sensitive that it felt as if her entire being evolved around its throbbing center.

Shudders wracked her body as his hand lifted away. Before she could comprehend what he intended, the sound of his palm rapidly swatting her wet pussy echoed through the room.

“Oww!” Sage’s shocked cry was cut short by another swat, followed by his hand brushing over the stinging pain in its wake.

“Come now, Patty Cakes, that was hardly worth complaining about.”

Unable to think straight, Sage could only claw at the furniture as his fingers once again circumnavigated her throbbing clit, dipping inside her slick channel to coat the swollen nub in her own essence.

“Remember what I said. Do not move. If you lift your legs, I add two strikes. If you attempt to cover your ass with your hands, I add two strikes. This can be over quickly or continue for as long as you choose.”

Sage’s body was still zinging from the caresses and the sting on her labia when the first strike of the paddle landed on her buttocks. Her gasp was muted as the next swat cracked against her skin, and the next. He was spanking her without restraint. Even though her body struggled to fathom the stinging sensation, she was overcome with confusion at how her clit felt like it sizzled, setting her pussy to throb, humming in the wake of each swat.

At first, she could breathe in between each strike. It didn't hurt that much. But when he brushed a palm over her burning cheeks, flicked a finger over her clit then gently slid two fingers inside her slick folds, she realized that it was the sting from her bottom that accelerated the lust sparking to life inside her.

Once again, the paddle cracked against her cheeks with its bite increasing with each consecutive strike as he now spanked her uninterruptedly. Mind-numbing swats in rapid succession pillaged her crimson cheeks. Left. Right. Left. Right. Center. Again, and again. The heat that radiated from every strike consumed every inch of her behind. The sting was gone. Now, all she felt was pain. Her fingers all but strangled the stool where she gripped it.

“Gaawd! That hurts,” she wailed.

Crack!!

The swat from his palm against her pussy came as such a surprise, her entire body lifted from the ottoman. This time, it hadn't been a seductive slap. It hurt, like a drop of acid had fallen on her skin. Then he turned her body to mush, confusing the sensations by gently rubbing her clit. He teased the slickness before separating her folds and settling just the tip of his finger inside her clenching core that fed her desire. Desperately, she writhed against his devilish caress.

“Do you want me inside your pussy, Patty Cakes?”

“Yes! Hell yes,” she gasped as his finger slipped in deeper.

“Such eagerness must be rewarded.” His deep voice resonated through the room. Sage lifted her hips and pushed back against his hand, crying out as he responded by thrusting two fingers to the hilt deep inside her. “Keep still, little one.”

Sage tried but the way his fingers curled into her, stroking, teasing, sparking a fire so hot inside, she couldn't help but twist and jerk for more.

She clawed at the stool, desperately anchoring herself for the ultimate penetration but all he did was continue to thrust his fingers into her. Every penetration drew new sensations from her. All new to her as he continued to thrust, slapping, and grinding into her pussy. He stole her breath, touching her in ways she hadn't known was possible.

“Daddy, please.” Breathless, the words exploded in a croaked whisper. Calling him Daddy now came naturally, as if the word had been engraved in her mind.

“Please what, Patty Cakes?”

“I... need more. I need you.” She sobbed as his large hand squeezed her buttocks, brutally reminding her of the spanking.

“Oww! Freaking hell!”

“Hmm, unfortunately, complete pleasure would defy the purpose of your punishment, so...”

With one final deep thrust and swirl of his fingers against the bundle of nerves deep inside her, he pulled out and was gone, leaving her limp, and spent, crying. Crying, for heaven's sake! She needed one tiny push to send her flying into a blissful orgasm, a push he denied her.

“Now, Patty Cakes, I'll accept your apology.”

“I'm sorry, Daddy,” she sobbed, not even thinking of defying him. “I'm sorry.”

“Ah, little one, come here.”

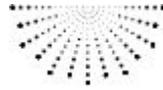
Just like that, in that moment when he picked her up, wrapped her in his arms and cuddled her on his lap, she

forgave him. It didn't matter that he denied her a climax, nor that he hadn't given her the pleasure of his possession she so desperately wanted. All that mattered was that his strong arms made her feel protected, cared for, and offered an unspoken promise of more to come.

That was what Sage blindly clung to. No matter what tomorrow brought, he was here now, and he made her feel loved.

He, as her Daddy, and she, as his Babygirl.

CHAPTER SEVEN



A week later at the Triple K farm, Bunkie, Louisiana...

“Keith just turned off the main road, Kaden. They should be here in fifteen minutes.”

“I still don’t know why I agreed to do this. I don’t have time to play babysitter to some little chit who was stupid enough to play grownup games and got her fingers burned.”

“Perhaps because Slade saved your life when you were on that last tour in Afghanistan?”

Kaden slanted an intransigent look at his younger brother, Kevin. “I paid that debt back more times than I can count,” he muttered but with less ire.

“You make it sound as if Slade is taking advantage of you.”

“Slade is too much of a gentleman to do that and no, he would never take advantage of a debt I actually don’t owe him in the first place. He did what any other soldier would have done at the time.”

“Exactly, and you agreeing to protect his niece is what friends do for each other.” Kevin smirked. “Besides, I hear the

little chit is quite a looker. Keith literally gushed when he spoke to me on the phone as she got off the train.”

“Our little brother is twenty-five getting high on his own testosterone. You can’t take what he says too seriously.”

Kaden was annoyed. As the owner of a black ops recovery and protection company, he was a busy man. He didn’t have time for this nonsense. It was bad enough he was saddled with a young girl. Now he had to make sure the men kept their dicks inside their pants. The prospect of what lay ahead just went from bad to worse.

“Besides, since she’s Slade’s niece, she must definitely be too young for any man on this farm to gush over. Make sure all the ranch hands know that. No one winks at her, or they’ll have me to deal with.”

“Got it.” The offices of Triple K Secure were in the basement of the barn tucked away safe and sound to ensure optimal confidentiality to the customers they served. Kevin opened the door and led the way up the stairs. “We should get up there. They’re probably already here.”

“I better take this,” Kaden said as his cell phone chirped. “Slade, your timing is impeccable,” he said as he answered the call.

“Is she there?” Slade’s concerned voice triggered alarm bells.

“Keith went to pick her up. They should be here anytime. Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on? I can hardly protect your niece properly if I don’t have all the information.”

“A year ago, Sage led an intel-gathering operation into a hedge fund empire involving banking conglomerates. She

uncovered proof of Wall Street fraud and the largest Ponzi scheme in history.”

“That’s hardly something that should put her life in danger.”

“They weren’t ordinary people but wealthy investors, bankers, and fund managers. They were fooled and suffered losses based on impressive, but fictitious returns that were supposedly being invested in blue-chip shares. The fund empire also engaged in portfolio hedging by buying options on the S&P 500.”

“Similar to what happened in 2008, I assume.”

“Exactly, except Sage wasn’t convinced they had the main player from back then even. The FBI held back on arrests because the findings were ruled inconclusive. The case went cold. Sage received an anonymous tip a couple of months ago and started digging into the case again. She recently found a connection between the current scandal and the hedge fund managers in 2008. There are two implementers in the current scheme that were also involved in 2008. One is a Chief of Police, and the other one is a congressman intending to run for president in the next election.”

“Let me guess. The operation and intel she uncovered were leaked, subsequently exposing them. She then became a threat.”

“Exactly. She’s my responsibility, Kaden. I promised my brother when he died that I would take care of her. Three days ago, there was an attempt on her life. I can’t let this go. I need to get her out of danger until the entire scandal is blown open.”

“How far is that from happening?”

“According to Sage, she finally has the names of the two players I mentioned earlier. She started looking into them. I assume the assassination attempt means she stumbled upon something that could bring it all together. Once she uncovers what it is they’re trying to hide, all information will be handed over to the FBI director. She wants to be absolutely sure this time that they have enough evidence to indict, prosecute and convict to finally put all the guilty parties behind bars. The exact time frame is unclear, but it shouldn’t be much longer.”

“Very well. At least now I know what we’re dealing with.”

“I’ll be back from Seattle this weekend. I’ll come for a quick visit.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you...” Kaden’s voice drifted off as Keith parked the GMC truck. With surprising speed, he jumped out to open the door for his passenger. “Well, I’ll be fucked.”

“What was that?” Slade’s voice sounded far off.

“Nothing. We’ll see you the weekend.” The desire to ask his friend about the guest he had sponsored at Club Rogue the previous week evaporated. He had tried to find Sheila Lovett, but all the information she had supplied on her application had proved to be false. The week had become very busy and apart from the quick conversation with Slade two days ago about protecting his niece, the search for the errant submissive was pushed to the background. Now, there was no need to probe him for information.

His voice lowered as she looked up, her face growing pale as she recognized him. “So, what do I call you today? Sheila Lovett, Sage Lewis... or Patty Cakes?” His voice was deliberately dark and warned the shocked woman to tread carefully.

Kevin's head snapped around. "Patty Cakes? This is the Patty Cakes Zee told us about? The same Patty Cakes you disappeared with into your office, never to be seen again?"

"As you can see, and can set Zee's mind at rest, she's still alive. That she disappeared without saying goodbye, well, that's a matter between her and me. One, that will be addressed with much haste."

"What the devil are you doing here?" Sage finally found her voice.

"Oh, this is my brother, Kaden," Keith was eager to interject. "He's the golden oldie and the leader of the pack. He's also the owner of Triple K Ranch and Triple K Secure. The giant next to him is my second brother, Kevin. We are The Triple K."

"Fuck me," Sage muttered under her breath. "It seems fate has its knife in for me."

"You'll have to excuse her. She has a habit of mumbling. Not a very attractive characteristic but in a way, I find it endearing." Kaden's face lit up as he smiled. "Mainly because it offers so many opportunities for corrective measures."

"Stop that," she sneered, glancing at his brothers, her cheeks glowing red. "This is hardly the time or the place."

"Babygirl, I can't think of a better place," he said, grinning ear to ear. Without warning, he hitched her over his shoulder, and headed toward the farmhouse. "Or time."

"No! Put me down! I'm warning you, Kaden Frazer! If you don't put me down right this instant, I'm going to kick your nuts so far up your ass, you'll choke on them!"

"Need help, bro!?" Kevin shouted after him, his voice drowned out by the hearty laughter of the farmhands and

Triple K Secure operatives.

“Hell no. I can handle little Patty Cakes— Fuck! God dammit, woman, watch the family jewels,” Kaden groaned painfully as she managed to skim one kick over his crotch before he clamped his arm around her legs and pushed her further back over his shoulder.

“Stop!” she screamed, desperately flailing to hang onto his belt in an effort to keep her head from bumping against his legs, or worse, the ground.

“Could’ve fooled me, big brother!” Kevin shouted after him.

Kaden ignored them as he shouldered his way into the house, his squirming cargo firmly held in place. Lowering her in the kitchen, he made no attempt to stop her when she jumped away from him.

“God, you’re beautiful without all that black club makeup.”

Sage’s mouth snapped shut on whatever insult she had intended to spew. He clearly took the sails out from under her with the revered look on his face.

“You don’t play fair, Kaden Frazer.”

“Neither do you.” He leaned back against the kitchen counter—his countenance one of lazy confidence. “I believe proper introductions are in order. Hi, I’m Kaden Frazer. Your uncle and I served together in the military and have been best friends ever since. As my brother said, I’m also the owner of Triple K Ranch and Triple K Secure, the primary owner of Club Rouge, and if memory serves... Daddy to Patty Cakes.”

“You’re not my Daddy.” Kaden could barely hear the words she mumbled, but he chose to ignore her denial... for

now.

“So, the appropriate response would be to introduce yourself, Miss...”

Kaden got the feeling she was on the verge of rolling her eyes, but she refrained. The heavy sigh she expelled was enough to indicate a growing annoyance.

“I’m Sage Lewis. My uncle is my father’s younger brother, and my self-appointed guardian since my Dad passed away. I’m a Special Agent at the FBI Criminal Investigation Division, CID, which I’m sure you already know about since it’s why I’m here.” She shrugged. “Unnecessary, in my opinion, but a result of an overprotective uncle.”

“From what he told me, his reasoning is sound.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.” She tilted her head. “Is there anything that he doesn’t share with you? I mean, my business is private for a number of very good reasons and yet he felt comfortable enough to blabber about it to you.”

“I needed information to understand the life-threatening nature of your situation, Miss Lewis. I can’t protect you if I’m not armed properly with accurate intel.”

“That’s just it. I don’t need your protection. I’m thirty-four-years old and have been a covert FBI operative for the past eight years.” She ticked the points off on her fingers. “Not to mention I have a black belt in Taekwondo, and I’m an excellent shot.”

“None of which would serve you well if you’re caught unaware or alone. You have exposed some very powerful men, Sage. Do you honestly think you can protect yourself against the dark assets they have access to?”

“I’m part of a very cohesive team. We protect each other.”

“From my understanding, this specific case you’ve been working on is not a team effort. It was closed down a year ago. You’re acting on your own without the Agency’s approval. Do you honestly think they’re going to be found accountable if this thing turns south?”

“The Deputy Director would never do that.”

“Believe me, he will. You might think the FBI, CIA, DOJ, and whoever else that stands for law and order in this country, will come to your defense, but in the end, each individual at the top will cover their own ass. There’s great value in that for them. You, on the other hand, are expendable and will become the sacrificial lamb, the scapegoat. I can say without a doubt that you will be thrown under a bus so fast, it’ll make your head spin.”

“So, I assume you don’t have much trust in my uncle either. I mean seeing as he’s the Deputy Director of the CIA.”

“Slade is the only one I trust to always do what’s right, but even his hands are tied in certain instances. You’ve been in the FBI for eight years. You should know how it operates by now.” He crossed his arms as her lips curved into a stubborn pout. “Why do you think you’re here and not at an FBI safehouse until the heat dissipates around your investigation?”

Sage blinked at the question. For a moment she seemed defeated. Kaden’s respect for her grew as she squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the face.

“I don’t know, Mr. Genius. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Did D.D. Palmer even discuss the matter with you when it was brought to his attention that you were still digging into a cold case?”

“No, he didn’t, but there’s nothing irregular about that.” She frowned, clearly not appreciating being under interrogation. “I have a team leader to whom I report my findings.”

“At what point did you discuss your findings with your leader?”

“I...” Sage turned pale. “I haven’t. Purely because I had a new lead I was looking into. Someone... oh, my God!”

“And so, the penny drops.”

“I should’ve made the connection. How could I have missed that!”

“When you’re that close to a situation and have no one to bounce your discoveries and ideas off of, it’s easy to overlook what’s right in front of you.”

“How could you know?”

“I’ve been in the business far longer than you. I know how criminal minds work. So, the lead you were checking, am I correct in assuming it’s someone at the Bureau?”

“Yes, but I don’t know who... not yet.”

“And the moment you started digging, what you were doing came to light, and suddenly, there’s an attempt on your life. Slade said it happened on Wednesday. Where?”

“I was working late at the office. It happened as I was walking toward my car in the underground parking garage.”

“That only FBI employees have access to.”

Sage nodded. The revelation of her oversight painted itself across her face. It was humiliating. For someone as loyal and

committed to the Bureau as she was, it came as a huge shock to realize that someone on the inside tried to assassinate her.

“This entire scheme is much bigger than even I realized. That’s why it went cold so quickly last year, even though I had found loopholes that we never closed at the time.”

“Sometimes, it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

“If you’re trying to convince me to stop digging, you have a lot yet to learn about me. Corruption affects every citizen in this country and something of this magnitude? I’m not going to stop until I cut out the rotten core.”

“Which is commendable but under the current situation, it’ll have to be put on the back burner. At least until they believe you’ve given up. Then, and only then, will we continue the investigation.”

“We?”

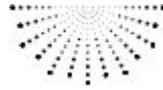
“Of course. There is no way in hell I’ll let my Babygirl face such danger on her own.”

“I already told you. I’m not your Babygirl, and you are not my Daddy.”

Kaden shrugged. “Your room is upstairs on the left. Go unpack and get some rest. Do not leave this house without telling me. Not even to take a walk in the garden.” With a salute and a wide grin, his words floated toward her as he walked out of the kitchen. “Lunch is at one. And insofar as me being your Daddy is concerned, I do believe the lady doth protest a little too much.”

“I’m not protesting!” she shouted after him. “I’m stating a fact!”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Two hours later...

“I’ll take the truck and scour the road back to the station,” Kaden said, grabbing the keys from the kitchen table. “Keith, take a team and check the south perimeter, Kevin, you do the north. Whoever finds her first, give me a call immediately.”

“Her luggage is still in the room, Kaden. Are you sure she didn’t just go for a walk?”

“Did anyone see her leave the house, Keith?” he countered angrily.

“No. Sue was fetching eggs from the chicken shed, so there was no one in the house for a while,” Kevin said, his eyes scanning the area near the barn.

“I explicitly told her not to leave the house. She’s not here, anywhere in the yard, or in the barn. I told you about the life-threatening mess she’s in. We have to find her. Let’s go.”

“Oomph!” Sage’s gasp married with his grunt when he stomped out of the door and walked right into her as she came jogging around the corner. “Oww!” she moaned as she landed hard on her buttocks. Before Kaden could react, she was back

on her feet, furiously brushing the grass off her jeans. Eyes flashing, she stormed past him into the house. “Next time, watch where the hell you’re going. I thought you’re supposed to protect me, not break my damn coccyx!”

Her furious stride toward the stairs was cut short by a raging bull when all of a sudden Kaden barred the way. Anger seethed from him.

“Where have you been?”

“I went for a run. I had to get rid of some pent-up energy.”

“You went—” He exhaled slowly in an attempt to calm his anger,— “For a run?”

“Yes, you know, the age old lifting your knees and moving forward, faster and faster until you’re actually... *running*,” she whispered the last word as she looked around dramatically. “Oh, shoot. Is that a banned word around here?”

“Oh, she is really asking for it,” Keith snickered from behind.

“No, little brother, she’s actually begging for it,” Kevin interjected. The two of them were leaning against the door watching their brother face off against the redheaded spitfire.

“I remember very clearly instructing you not to leave the house, not even to walk in the garden without telling me. Do you at all remember me saying something to that effect?” Kaden ignored the goading of his brothers and returned to glare at the source of his anger. He had always shown a mastery of emotional control but the fear that had swamped his mind when he went looking and then not immediately finding her, burned white hot inside him. In that brief moment of panic, what struck home was that she might in fact be the woman who could and surely would become what Anna once

was. Not only as his Babygirl but in his heart. He didn't know her, not yet, but in a very short period of time, she had triggered the Daddy inside him. For the first time in eight years, he found a woman he wished to cherish, to be her unyielding, unmovable anchor in any storm she faced in life.

It was an unexpected revelation but one he embraced. He was forty-five, and the yearning to love and be loved had intensified over the past few years. A wife and kids—that was what he needed in his life. It hadn't been meant to be with Anna, and because she had been the one for him, he had kept his heart locked off from any other possibilities.

That this little brat managed to undermine the walls around his heart, shook him to the core. Unfortunately, for her, it also unleashed the fierce protector in him.

“I remember but come on, Kaden.” Sage looked around at faces staring back at her. “We're in the back of beyond out here—all of us warriors with years of combat experience.” She turned back to face Kaden. “So, what's the big deal?”

“The big deal, Miss Lewis,—” he said, with a firm voice, —“is that out there in the bush, you're an easy target. You walk around with a bright red one on your back, or did you perhaps conveniently forget about that too?”

“No, but no one knows I'm here.”

“How can you be so certain of that? You don't even know who in the Bureau is in bed with the Congressman and whoever the hell else is involved. Anyone out there could be your enemy at this point, Sage. Do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear!” She took a step back. “Now you listen to me. I'm not a child and refuse to be treated like one. If you're so bent on keeping me safe, assign me a damn

bodyguard. Other than that, one thing I will not do is hide in fear inside this house 24/7. Do *you* understand *me*?”

“Done. From now on, you will be guarded around the clock. But hear me well, Sage. If you deliberately evade your guards, you will regret your impulsive behavior.” A low grunt preempted a lengthy protest ready to explode from her lips. “For now, because you deliberately ignored my instructions, you will take some time to examine your childish performance.”

“Sure. No problem. Hey,” she protested as he guided her past the kitchen table that set her mouth watering at the savory aromas filling the room. “I thought it was lunch time,”

“It is for us. But because you decided to play the petulant Babygirl, it’ll be corner time.”

“Corner time?” Sage snickered at the vision coming to her mind. His darkening eyes warned her to tread carefully. The smile froze on her lips. “You can’t be serious.”

“I never joke about punishment, Sage. The sooner you realize that the better.”

“I am not going to stand in the corner like some delinquent teenager!” Sage retreated cautiously from the angry bull in front of her. Daddy or not, standing in the corner was just ridiculous.

“You ignored an instruction; one very specific to ensuring your safety. I can’t protect you and care for you if you decide to say, fuck it, and go run off to God-knows-where. So, because you did do exactly that, you will suffer the consequences.”

“My uncle asked you to protect me. You don’t need to care for me. I’m not a little girl.”

“You’re wrong, Babygirl. It’s a package deal and your uncle has nothing to do with it. You’re now my responsibility to protect, care for, and keep safe.”

“I told you; I can take care of myself!”

“I have no doubt you can but that doesn’t negate my responsibility to protect you. You will not ignore any instruction I give you, Sage, especially not when it comes to your safety. Is that understood?”

“Yeah! Understood! I get it,” she snarled as she jammed her hands against her waist.

The increasing ferocity of her constant challenge to his authority was becoming more and more difficult to ignore. That she flaunted this caustic behavior in front of his brothers had become theater for them and a stage for her—to act out, which hadn’t slipped Kaden’s attention. But it was too soon to spank her in front of them. He needed to go slow with her. Ease her into the transition from a strong, independent woman who was in control of all aspects of her life, to one who offered a little of that control to someone she could trust. Allow her to relax, and give over to his care, if only sexually at first.

“If not for the fact that I don’t particularly wish to give my two brothers some afternoon entertainment, you would be over my lap already, with my hand coloring your backside.” He leaned in and warned in a dark voice, “I still might if you continue to sass me, but then I’d be shooting myself in the foot since I wouldn’t be able to fuck you later tonight. Believe me, if I spanked you now, you won’t be able to sit on your cute little butt for a week.”

“I... you’re going to... ehm.” Sage’s cheeks exploded in blooms of red when the two younger Frazers burst out

laughing.

“Corner. Now.”

This time, Sage didn't protest and turned toward the spot to which he was pointing.

“In case you missed the dynamics of the human body, I'm not built to fit into a triangle,” she mumbled as she shuffled closer to the corner.

“You'll manage. Feet all the way against the wall. Clasp your hands behind your back, push your tits into the corner, then lean forward. I want your nose flush against the wall. Keep it there until I tell you to move, or that cute little bottom of yours is going to be blistered.” His bark of laughter followed the snort that fell unchecked from her nose. “Oh, I'll still fuck you, make no mistake about that, except you will be the one suffering the discomfort. Remember, Sage. There will always be a reaction to every undisciplined action from my little Babygirl.”

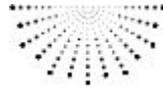
“Oh yes, and standing in the corner is so appropriate,” she said acerbically.

“You'll soon benefit from the position you're in, Babygirl. You will use this time to consider the behavior that got you here, the consequences of that behavior and most of all, the importance of what it means to be my Babygirl.”

“I told you! I am not your Goddamn Babygirl!”

“As often as you repeat that mantra, I'm beginning to wonder who you're trying to convince. “Me? Or yourself?”

CHAPTER NINE



“Good Lord, you haven’t moved from that spot for the past three hours!” Kevin said as he walked into the kitchen.

“Since my nose is still glued to the wall, I’d say you’re stating the obvious,” Sage snapped. At first, it had been fun standing like that. She had used the time while Kaden and his brothers were having lunch to torment him by wiggling her hips, sighing excessively, and generally just acting like a brat. Her aim was to distract and draw his attention. It did neither. He hadn’t said a word until they were done and heading outside. It was only then that he drawled, “I trust you’ll behave better once I’m gone, Babygirl. I’ll be checking in on you later.”

“I don’t know who your brother thinks he is to order me around like this,” she mumbled, suddenly feeling ridiculous. Realizing the implications of not having moved, jarred her. Did she honestly just spend the last three hours with her nose pushed against a wall because her supposed “Daddy” told her to do so?

“I’d say you already know the answer to that, Sage.” Kevin leaned against the wall, watching her with a smile. “There’s no one here to keep an eye on you. The guards are stationed around the house, so you’re inside all by your

lonesome. You could've stepped away from the corner at any time. Care to tell why you didn't?"

"I... how was I supposed to know there's no one watching me? I've got my nose stuck against the wall, Mr. Genius!"

"C'mon, Sage. You know the answer as well as I do. It's obvious in the way you react to my brother."

"Yes, he irritates the nettles out of me."

"Does he? Or is it that he offers you a safe haven? The kind you might have subconsciously been yearning for your entire adult life. Be honest. Your nose is stuck to that wall for only one reason."

"Which is?"

"You're doing it because you want to please him. Make him proud that you listened to him." He tapped her cheek. "Kaden is your Daddy. I know it. He knows it. Perhaps it's time you acknowledge that *you* know it, too."

"Oh really? You think? How presumptuous, you insolent pri... I mean, man tool!" She glared furiously at him, more so because she couldn't deny there was some truth to what he was saying.

"I see you're sticking your nose where it doesn't belong, again. Get out of here, Kevin. You've got work to do." Sage's body turned to stone at Kaden's deep voice sounding from the doorway.

"Damn, you're so selfish," Kevin protested. "Don't you know how much fun it is watching both of you do the Daddy tango?"

"Kevin..." Kaden's tone darkened.

“At your service, brother.” Kevin leaned closer to place a little peck on Sage’s cheek. “Hang in there, squirt. He’s not as big and bad as you think,” he whispered. “Admit what he is to you, and you’ll have him eating out of your hand.”

“Do you need help exiting the house, Kevin?” Kaden’s voice turned gravelly.

“You do know how to make a man feel wanted, big brother.” With a wave, Kevin left, whistling as he sauntered off toward the barn.

“Hey! What are you doing,” Sage shrieked as she was suddenly picked up and carried to a kitchen chair. “What makes you believe you have any right to order me around?”

“Multiple reasons, so, take your pick. Because I want to, because I can, but mainly, because you crave my domination, and I, Babygirl, accept your offer gladly and immediately.”

“I made no such—”

An unexpected kiss pressed softly against her mouth, creating a pause that left her wanting yet receiving nothing more than only the tease that it was meant to be.

“You must be cramping from standing so long. Sit down, Babygirl. Here, drink some water and let me take care of you.”

“If you want to care for me then feed me. I’m starving.” She took a long slug from the bottle of water.

“Sorry. Naughty little girls who missed a meal will have to wait for dinner.”

“I missed lunch because you put me in the damn corner!” Her eyes flashed dangerously. A hoarse gasp filtered through the air as Kaden took off her sneakers and started rubbing her feet. “Ohh, that feels so good.”

“Relax, Babygirl. Just allow yourself to feel.”

“I am relaxed.”

Kaden grunted but chose not to debate the issue as he moved his hands up over her calves, slowly working to loosen her agitation. “Tense muscles are a reflection of anxiety. Working out knots is the best way to interrupt that negative cycle and move into a positive state instead. Stop fighting the feeling, Sage. You’re tense, not because of standing still for so long, but because of the stress you’ve been experiencing. Let me ease you back from the edge. Massaging has a way of cleansing the mind of negative thoughts, restoring resolve, and showing the body that the environment, in which it dwells, is safe and nurturing.” He smiled gently. “Don’t ever forget that, Babygirl. With me, you will always be safe and have my care.”

With a sigh, Sage relaxed into the mesmerizing effect of his hands sliding over her legs, gently kneading her tense muscles. Right there, in the kitchen, calmed by the sound of melodic birdsong from outside, she felt wrapped in a warm cocoon. His hands scripted a tactile message that words could never supplant, sending a message of caring and keeping her safe in a way words couldn’t achieve. The percipience of his tender touch became essential, soothing her deep self while enabling her higher self to remain the thoughtful and calm navigator of her own soul.

For how long she’d be in charge, she didn’t know. What she did know was that while luxuriating in his exquisite touch, her mindset switched. The protector became her anchor. The one man she believed could be trusted to care for her, maybe even come to love her one day. But above all else, still allow her to be the strong woman she was.

For the first time, she truly acknowledged her feelings. Kaden Frazer was the man who could make her soar, guide her, and show her the way to truly becoming the woman she had been denying herself to be—a submissive. A Babygirl. No, not any Babygirl, but *his* Babygirl.

No matter how much she wanted to keep it a secret, because truthfully, she hardly knew the man, there was no denying it. She yearned to be his... even if only as her Clandestine Daddy.

“Ah, finally, my brave little girl garnered enough courage to seek me out.”

The deep voice resonated through Sage where she stood pressed against the door of Kaden’s room. What little resistance remained in acknowledging her submission to him, disintegrated as the velvety tones reached deep inside her to toggle loose her true desires.

After a pleasant dinner with all three brothers, Sage excused herself to secretly slip into a long, warm bath. Upon emerging, she waited then after ten minutes, tiptoed down the hallway to his room. If Mohammed didn’t come to the mountain...

Patience had never been her strong suit, especially when she wanted something, and she wanted him, more than what was good for her.

“Cat caught your tongue, Babygirl?”

Sage squinted in the direction of where his voice came. The only light guiding her was a sliver of moonlight splashed

against a wall.

“No, but unfortunately, I’m not a bat, so it’s a little hard to see and stubbing my toes in the dark isn’t why I came here. Do you have an aversion to lights?”

“Not particularly, but I want to see you in the moonlight. I’ve been imagining the incandescent glow of the moon illuminating your lustrous skin. Take off your robe, Babygirl, and kneel in front of the window, right there where the silver streak breaks the darkness.”

Without a thought, Sage found herself kneeling naked in the moonlight that had now reached to the edge of the bed. Not sure what to do with her hands, she grasped them behind her back.

“Such beauty.” Kaden’s voice sounded reverent, in awe of the sight he beheld. Silence descended. Moments stretched into minutes.

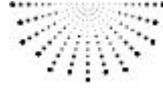
At first, Sage was tense, but it didn’t last long. His presence and the way she could feel him watching her, caused a warm tingle to travel over her body. At that moment, she relaxed. Her shoulders became rounded. A smile of acceptance softened her face as she waited. There was no impatience in this scene. No rush. For her, this was a moment of feeling admired, appreciated, and more than anything, cherished.

Whatever the future might hold, tonight she needed what he offered. The kind of domination she craved.

“Good. Now, Babygirl, I’m going to fuck you until you beg me to stop, but I won’t. Not until I’ve had enough.”

Who would’ve thought that mere words could cause her loins to clench, set her entire body atremble. She lost all train of thought.

CHAPTER TEN



“No.” Kaden stopped her as she rose and started walking toward the bed. “I want you in the balcony doorway, facing out.”

The rush of power her immediate response triggered, revitalized him as he watched her take a position in the center of the open door. Sage might not be experienced as a sexual submissive, but instinct guided every move she made. Her stance was perfect for a sub waiting for her Dom—feet braced shoulder-width apart and shoulders pulled back. His testosterone spiked when she lifted her arms and held on to the doorframe, tossed the silky length of her hair back, and slowly canted her hips in a tight, inviting circle.

“What are you doing?” she protested as he strapped wrist bands in place and hooked them to the O-rings attached to the frame.

“Making sure your hands stay out of the way.”

“All you needed to do was ask. I would’ve willingly complied.”

“I’m sure you would’ve tried but I don’t want to have to slap your hands when they lower in uncontrolled ecstasy to hold on to me. This is going to be all for your pleasure, Patty Cakes. That’s why you’re tied up. I don’t want you to think of

having to give me any pleasure in return. It's all just about you."

"Sounds hardly fair," she murmured as his hands cupped her breasts and squeezed.

"This isn't a competition, little one. One thing you need to realize is that your pleasure feeds mine." One hand swept the gentle swell of her stomach while the other feathered over her nipples. "For tonight, there are no rules. You can move around all you like. You can come as often as you need to. You can even cry and beg but realize this—I will set the pace."

"Do you always talk this much when you're having sex?"

"Impatient little sprite, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am... for you, Daddy."

Kaden had to dig deep to hold on to his control. It seemed his vanilla submissive was more cunning than he gave her credit for. She knew just which buttons to push and when. Hearing her calling him Daddy in relation to how much she wanted him, floored him. It had been so long since he'd indulged in sexual banter, he had forgotten how arousing it was.

He might have told her tonight was all about her pleasure, but his little Patty Cakes had to learn that when he said he would be the one setting the pace, no amount of manipulation, however sensual, would sway him off course.

She looked ethereal. Walking under her raised arm, he stood in front of her. The streaks of moonlight played a game of hide and seek over the landscape of her frame. Seductive valleys and curves became the canvas of a silver nascent beam before it moved on.

Moonlit enchantress now had a name... Sage Lewis. His Patty Cakes.

“Daddy,” she acknowledged in a husky whisper. Kaden melted in the heat of her eyes as he was greeted with the full force of her smoky, dark green eyes.

He remained paralyzed with a feeling of being winded, struggling to breathe. Through parted lips he exhaled slowly, with his gaze riveted on the beauty of her nakedness. Moonbeams danced over the rose-colored tips of her breasts. She was a Venus of perfection, her skin glistening with sensual excitement.

“You truly are a vision of loveliness, Sage.”

Her eyes shone like pools of iridescent green. Kaden breathed in as her gaze slowly traveled over his chest, coming to rest on his loins.

“As you can see, just looking at you gives me pleasure.”

She released a heated breath as her eyes became glued on the drops moistening the purplish glands when he squeezed the tip of his cock. Dark red tresses shimmered as she tilted her head, cascading in lustrous waves over rounded, ivory shoulders.

“Then why don’t we pursue the finding of that pleasure together, Daddy. Quickly, please.”

“Indeed, my little minx,” he whispered as he stepped closer and kissed her. Their lips fit perfectly, as though they were shaped to melt together. She moved gently against him, the caress reminding him of the seductive contrast of her softness to his hardness. Closing his fist around a tuft of her hair, Kaden growled and deepened the kiss.

One kiss and it was over. Kaden had been drawn to her from the first moment he had laid eyes on her at Club Rogue. Electricity sparked on his skin as testosterone shut down his brain and the rise of his animal self. From this point, it was all passion—intense and intoxicating. She would be his release, his escape, his drug. All these thoughts raced through his mind as the thrill of the primal need to possess her shuddered through his body.

But not yet. He reigned in his lust with difficulty. Little Miss Patty Cakes deserved a sensual flight of euphoria on the way to finding herself. Her true self—the submissive inside her.

“We will, Patty Cakes. All in good time,” he murmured in a gravelly voice as he brushed his palms over her arms and the gentle curve of her shoulders while tenderly nibbling along her jaw.

“You have an effect on me I never expected to experience again. Every time you open your mouth to speak, I feel the desire to pull you into me. The feel of your skin under my hands is like divine fire for my soul. I’m intoxicated by it. For the first time in a very long time, I embrace what it means,” he said in a deepening tone of voice.

“Kaden, you’re confusing me. I can’t afford to let whatever it is that your words make me feel become more than lust. Not now.” She smiled sadly. “Maybe never. I’m not made for permanency. I don’t want to be saddled down and become a housewife.”

“You’re under a misconception of what I’m talking about, little one. I will never expect you to change who you are.”

With a gentle finger he traced her face, forcefully holding her gaze, drinking the passion from her eyes in a way that only

magnified the spark between them. There was no smile on his lips, only the hot intensity of his gaze which shimmered from the inferno raging inside him, begging for release.

“Soon, you will learn what it means to have me as your Daddy in every sense of the word,” he rasped against the soft skin of her stomach as he knelt and planted hot, wet kisses downward.

“Oh God,” Sage cried, her hips jerking when he flicked his tongue over her clitoris, drawing tantalizing circles around it before sucking it between his lips.

Kaden was losing himself too quickly. The vibrancy of her nature teased, promised, and tormented him. He reveled in how she thrashed against him as he spanned his hands around her buttocks, holding her in place.

“I can’t... Lord that feels good,” she wailed and orbited her hips against his mouth.

“Easy, Patty Cakes,” he murmured against her labia. Tickling the slit with the tip of his tongue, he spread her legs wider when she moved restlessly, her chest rising and falling with rapid breaths.

“You’re a witch. You crumble my resolve with your unreserved wantonness and desire. It’s not even worth trying to resist you,” he growled against her pussy, inebriated by her aroma that consumed his mind. “You’re likely to become a fever in my blood in the future, becoming the elixir to ease my need.”

Flicking his tongue over her labia once, twice, he pushed his tongue deep inside, lapping at the silken folds that clenched around him. With a growl of satisfaction, he sucked and licked the generous offering he found in his quest.

“Gaawd. Yes!” she cried when he suckled her satiny folds, tormenting her flesh with his tongue and teeth. Her movements became frantic as he pulled her bottom up to lap at her slickness to find her core then raking his teeth over the delicate spot.

Sage gasped, then became still, frozen to the spot as he ravaged her.

“Come for me, Patty Cakes.”

“Daddy!” Her cry was one of surprise as her hips jerked frantically. With her back arching, he watched transfixed as one climax after another rippled through her.

“Hmm, beautiful.” Closing his eyes, he intensified his efforts to sustain her ride on a rollercoaster of orgasmic bliss.

Kaden’s body was rigid in an effort to stay in control, to give him more time to savor her, to offer her as much pleasure as she deserved.

“Daddy, please!” Her hoarse plea drew his eyes to hers. She looked breathtaking in this lustful moment. Her body was flushed and swollen from multiple orgasms, her eyes wild and filled with heat. He knew what she was after. He could no longer deny her, or himself. Without realizing he had moved, he stood behind her, his hands on her hips as he nibbled her shoulder.

“Ready?”

“I’ve been ready since I walked through the door—ahh, holy shit that feels good,” she ended in a raw cry as with one hard thrust, he hilted inside her.

Kaden grunted as he pushed into her, exulting in the tremors that shook her body the deeper he went. His face was drawn in a mask of torment as he rocked into her with smooth,

easy strokes until her movements became frantic, begging for more. He groaned as he felt himself grow harder and thicker.

“You are so hot, little one. In more ways than one,” he whispered against her ear as he tugged on her nipples and teasingly patted her swollen clit. Her body twitched wildly in response as his movements grew stronger and faster when he thrust deeply.

“Again, Patty Cakes. Come for Daddy.”

Sage screamed his name then he felt her climax as the rippling waves of her body enveloped him, holding him intimately, squeezing and clenching around him.

With his hands clasped around her hips, he held her firmly in place. His movements turned feverish as his own pleasure increased. Bucking wildly into her hot sheath, he pounded her, losing himself in the undeniable bliss he knew was imminent. A deep, husky growl of masculine triumph escaped from his lips at the searing heat starting at the back of his cock.

His body solidified for a moment then he pulsed deeply inside her, filling her with his heat on a roar of pleasure. In those final moments, he came into her like he'd wanted to—roughly staking a claim, hungry for her soul and on the verge of brutally branding her as his.

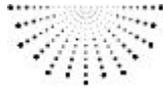
Breathing harshly, he untied her and carried her to the bed. Their stuttering breaths were the only sound humming through the stillness of the night as he cuddled her close. With revered gentleness, he traced the lines of Sage's back. The night drifted around them in soft, collateral sounds.

Leaning over her, he stared into her face. He knew then he would never let her go. She was his now.

Sage sealed her fate with the tender smile beautifying her face as she traced his lips.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



A week later. J. Edgar Hoover FBI Building, Washington D.C....

“Who is this?” FBI Director, Ben Whitmore, asked with his brow drawn into a dark frown. “This is an FBI matter, Agent Lewis.”

“This is Kaden Frazer, sir. My bodyguard.”

“After the attempt on Agent Lewis’ life, her uncle was adamant that she be protected around the clock,” Deputy Director David Palmer interjected.

“And her uncle is?”

“I thought you knew,” Palmer said, looking confused. “Deputy Director of the CIA, Slade Lewis.”

“Ah, yes. It slipped my mind momentarily.” Whitmore stared at Kaden. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist you wait outside, Mr. Lewis.”

A knock on the door interrupted the response that sat on Kaden’s tongue.

“You’re late,” Whitmore snapped as Congressman Clinton Beats and the Attorney General, Jessica Hewitt, arrived.

Kaden didn't miss the gasp Sage bit back at the sudden arrival of the two guests. He recalled Slade mentioning that one of the people Sage had uncovered in the case was a congressman. Her reaction to Beats was telling. He had never liked the man but had allowed him membership in Club Rogue. As a military strategist, Kaden believed in keeping his enemies close. Something about Beats had warned him it would be beneficial in the long run not to make an enemy of the man. Now, the time had come to realize the wisdom of his decision.

"Kaden, I didn't expect to see you here," Beats said, looking uncomfortable for the first time as he glanced at Sage and with a gasp, recognized her from the night at Club Rouge.

"Mr. Lewis was just about to leave. This is a confidential matter involving national security," Whitmore said with a warning look at Kaden.

"I'm afraid I can't comply, Director Whitmore," Kaden responded in a crisp voice. "I have a responsibility to Miss Lewis that I take very seriously."

"I prefer Mr. Frazer to stay," Slade interjected from the doorway as he walked inside.

"What are you doing here, D.D. Lewis?" Whitmore looked shaken, clearly not liking the development.

"My niece is my ward, and therefore my legal responsibility. Mr. Frazer is her personal bodyguard and knows the entire story of why she requires protection. Did you honestly think I would allow you to steamroll her with no support from her family or legal aid?" Slade opened the door. "Please, come in. Gentlemen, this is Zee DuBois, Sage's attorney."

“This is merely a discussion in regard to the unauthorized case she is investigating. A case that threatens the welfare of many politicians and banking tycoons. This is also a case that was closed a year ago. It’s a complete waste of Agency time and resources,” Whitmore said with barely controlled anger.

“Then let’s discuss the matter, Deputy Whitmore,” Zee said as she sat down and switched on the recorder on her phone. “You won’t mind if I record this, do you?”

“Tell me, Deputy, has my niece divulged any of the information she has uncovered during her investigation?” Slade sat down beside Kaden.

“No, but the mere fact that she is digging into a cold case has become known.”

“Is it uncommon for agents in the Criminal Investigation Division to investigate cold cases and pursue leads they receive without being formally appointed to a specific case?” Zee asked.

“No, it’s part of their job to do just that but as soon as they verify the authenticity of information received, they are bound by Agency protocol to disclose the case to their superior. Which, Agent Lewis hasn’t done.”

“I didn’t say anything because I am still investigating certain claims. Until I have crossed all the t’s and dotted all the i’s, disclosing it would be a waste of everyone’s time,” Sage replied in her defense.

“Except, you’ve woken up sleeping dogs, Agent Lewis. Or was the attempt on your life my imagination?” Whitmore’s voice cracked coldly.

“Since you claim this specific investigation is a waste of the Bureau’s resources, why are you so sure the attempt on my

niece's life is linked to this case? I mean, you clearly stated there is nothing to investigate further, except for the fact that it's making certain politicians uncomfortable." Slade was clearly not intimidated by the combined power of the men and the woman sitting at the table.

"It's the only case she's working on," Whitmore was quick to defend.

"But not the only one where she played an integral role in putting corrupt politicians and law enforcement officers behind bars. It could be any one of them out for revenge." Kaden watched Whitmore and Beats intently. The way they kept glancing at each other was damning. Whether the Deputy Director and the Attorney General were also involved in the corruption was yet to be seen, but Beats' presence proved that Sage was onto something. Perhaps he had a hold over the other two and needed them to intervene to protect him from discovery. Who knew, but the way he glared at Sage filled Kaden's heart with fear. It was a look of such violence, there was no doubt if no one else was present, Sage's life would be in imminent danger.

Now, more than ever, he would keep her under his protection.

"Be that as it may, you are hereby ordered to cease all further investigation into the financial banking forum corruption and hedge fund case. That case was closed a year ago. The country has moved on. We have recovered from the recession caused by the 2008 crash. Five years ago, a minor attempt by a group of bankers and businessmen was cut off before any damage was done. Last year was nothing more than a resurgence of minor players. Do you really want to catapult the country into a state of angst by pure speculation and the

desire to make a name for yourself?” Whitmore’s fist landed on the desk. He took a deep breath in a visual attempt to calm down. “You are to take two weeks’ mental leave, Agent Lewis, during which time I suggest you think about your career choices. If you insist on pursuing this matter, I’m afraid you will not be welcomed back at the Bureau.”

“These two weeks of mental leave will of course be paid?” Zee interjected.

“Definitely,” Whitmore snapped. “Should Agent Lewis decide not to return to the Bureau, she will receive a three-month severance package as a show of good faith.”

The underlying message was clear. Whitmore didn’t want Sage to return to her job as Special Agent in the Criminal Investigation Division. Unfortunately for him, his actions also confirmed to Kaden that there was more to the entire situation than met the eye.

Kaden looked at Slade, who gave him an inconspicuous nod. Whatever Congressman Beats was hiding and whether Whitmore and Jessica Hewitt were involved or just trying to protect him for some reason, he would find out. Once he did, Slade would make sure that heads would roll.

The country had had enough of corruption. It was time to send the message to other corrupt players. Little by little, step by step, they would win the day, no matter how long it took.

“This is absolute bullshit!” Sage exploded after a long silence. They had taken off from DCA airport an hour ago in Kaden’s private jet on the way back to Triple K. Up to now, she had been silently fuming.

“I worked my ass off for the last eight years and this is how they treat me? What happened to the process of discussing the matter? No! He just fucking suspends me.” She slammed a fist against the arm rest. “They never even spoke about the case with me before today.”

“Then how did they know that it leaked out that you were investigating that specific cold case?” Kaden asked.

“D.D. Palmer asked me what I was investigating that could have triggered the attempt on my life. I told him about an anonymous tip I received and that I was looking into certain allegations. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Nothing I have at the moment is substantial enough to open a full-blown investigation. Except...”

“Except what?”

“Except that Beats was at the meeting, which confirms my suspicion of his involvement, so... maybe the attempted hit wasn't because of someone else having it in for me.” She stared, wondering. “But Director Whitmore and Attorney General Hewitt? Do you think they're involved, as well?”

“Possibly. Either that or Beats has dirt on them, making both of them dance to his tune. One thing's for sure, Sage. You've stirred up a hornet's nest big time. No more taking any chances. From this point forward, you don't go anywhere without one of us stuck to you like white on rice.”

“That's gonna drive me crazy, Kaden. I'm used to being out there, in the field, or scouring the internet for information. I can't just sit around the house all day every day. I'll go mad.”

“I get that. So, here's the deal. Slade and I have decided to continue your investigation. If we have all the information that you already gathered, it'll save us a lot of time. And yes, this

includes you. The heartbeat of our operations is situated in a bunker, thirty feet under the barn. To keep you safe and out of harm's way, you will work with Keith. He's our resident IT and dark web expert."

"Thank you for including me. I would've been splenetic otherwise."

"Have you given any thought to what Whitmore said?"

"He said a lot of things. I haven't thought about anything else since we left the FBI," she said angrily. "Perhaps you should be more specific."

"I'm speaking about your future, Sage. Is it truly worth putting your life on the line for a Bureau that has turned on you?"

"Corruption is everywhere, Kaden. I just... I find it a bitter pill to swallow that people as loved and powerful as Deputy Whitmore and Attorney General Hewitt are the core of this rotten apple." She smiled wanly. "At least at the FBI, I can make a small contribution to limiting the damage bad actors cause to my country."

"We'll soon find out whether or not they're involved. Personally, the way Whitmore acted? He's got guilty written all over his face."

"Maybe." She studied her nails. "And what about Beats? I assume you are friends?"

"There are many members at Club Rogue, Sage. I have a very tightly knit group of friends, all of whom I've selected very carefully over the years. Beats isn't one of them."

"So then, why not kick him out of the club?"

“Some of the members were chosen based on an ancient Chinese military philosophy originated by the genius, Sun Tzu. He said, “Keep your friends close. Keep your enemies closer.”

“But he could irreparably damage your reputation if he blurts out that you are the owner of a BDSM club.”

“My ownership of the club isn’t a secret, Sage. Clubs like ours haven’t been illegal for many years. As long as we adhere to the rules and regulations laid out, we’re safe. We run a clean operation. No harsh or hard BDSM is allowed. No blood, cutting, burning, or over the top sadism either. People go there to experience their personal erotic pleasures. No scene happens without mutual consent.”

“That’s not the point, Kaden. What is legal is not synonymous with what’s moral. Lawyers operate on that idea. But not Joe Blow and his family. They would throw you off the edge of a cliff in a heartbeat if they knew about your personal life. You wouldn’t have a pot to piss in if convicted in the court of public opinion. I can’t believe you don’t understand that.”

“Oh, I understood that from the get-go, which is why being in the intelligence-gathering industry is a great balance to my personal life. It provides me with an anonymity clad in impenetrable armor. Let’s just say that everyone has skeletons in their closet.”

Sage looked dumbfounded. “Well, aren’t you a clever little boy?”

“One needs to be to operate successfully in this fucked-up world.” He squeezed her hand. “For now, I want you to relax. Beats might know you’re under my protection, but no one knows where I live. The ownership of Triple K is a closed

corporation, so no one can access information about any property associated with my legal name. I am very protective of my personal life. You have no need to worry about anyone finding us. We're safe on the ranch."

"That's a relief. Thank you, Kaden."

"For what?"

"For trusting me and allowing me to be part of your investigation."

"You mistook what I meant, Sage. It's your investigation. We're the ones helping you."

The smile Sage bestowed on him, took his breath away.

"I better be careful. If you continue to be this nice to me, I might just start liking you."

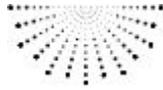
"Ah, come now, Babygirl, be honest. You're already halfway in love with me."

The blooms of red that adorned her cheeks caused his heart to skip a beat.

"Now that's what my mom used to say is putting the horse ahead of the cart," she protested with a husky lilt. "You, in true Daddy fashion of course, placed the mule at least a mile ahead."

"Nope, I'm just listening to our hearts, and yours Babygirl, is already beating alongside mine."

CHAPTER TWELVE



The next morning...

“Yesterday, you made a point of telling me that this was still my investigation. Now, I’m being told to stay in the goddamn house!” Sage stomped her foot in frustration as she glared at the three brothers. She was chomping at the bit to follow up on the trail of leads she’d been working on when she had been forced to stop.

“It was just a few hours since you handed over all the information you gathered, Sage. If we are going to move forward together we need time to look at it so we’re all up to speed with you. It would defeat our collective effort if we’re at loggerheads with each other,” Kaden said patiently.

“I can bring you up to date much quicker by verbally summarizing everything.”

“I’m not interested in a summary. Even the minutest detail we’re not aware of could have a negative impact on the outcome. We need to know everything you do. Once we’ve gone through the information, we’ll get together and you’ll have ample opportunity to answer any questions we may have on the case. Deal?”

“Very well.” She plonked down on one of the kitchen chairs and crossed her arms over her chest. “What am I supposed to do with myself in the meantime?”

“It’s the housekeeper’s day off. Why not surprise us with your cooking skills and make us dinner?”

The searing glare she shot back, burned hotter than a branding iron. “I’m not your housekeeper’s substitute, Frazer. Cook your own damn dinner.”

“Suit yourself.” A negligent grin fixed the corners of his mouth. “It was just a thought. You could always stand in the corner instead. Or kneel on a splatter of rice kernels. I’m sure there are a couple of disrespectful actions I overlooked if I cared enough to remember them.”

Her petulant remark was snuffed in its infancy at Kaden’s mocked threat.

Kneeling sounded easier than standing with her nose pushed against a wall... until his words registered. *Rice kernels? That’ll feel like steel spikes in no time. No fucking way!* The decision to give in was made in a blink of an eye.

“I suppose I could rustle up something simple for dinner,” she said meekly but with no less irritation glowing in her eyes.

“Good girl. Just don’t make it too spicy. I like to taste the different flavors of my food, not pray for salvation from having my mouth excoriated.” Kaden leaned in and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“I don’t mean to imply that you don’t know how to cook but if you’re at a loss as to what to prepare, there are some of my mom’s recipe books in the pantry,” Keith interjected from across the breakfast table. “I’m particularly partial to her Mexican Discada.”

Sage laughed when he literally drooled just thinking of it.

“I can do a Discada. It was one of my Dad’s favorites,” she said with a tender smile of remembrance.

“Perfect. There are some freshly picked jalapeño peppers in the pantry. They’re on the lower range of heat, so big brother’s palette will be safe,” Keith said with a wink and then followed Kevin toward the barn.

“Have fun, Sage,” Kaden smiled. “Apparently, this kitchen is every woman’s dream.”

“Pfft, that’s a rather sexist statement. I know quite a few men who would give their left nut to cook here.”

“Also true. I am one of them.”

Sage looked at him in surprise. “You cook?”

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me. Maybe, if you stick around long enough, you’ll find out more about them.”

He caressed her chin between his fingers then leaned in to deliver a quick, hard, open-mouthed kiss; unleashing a wave of arousal to wash over her.

“Tonight, Babygirl, I’m going to teach you position sixty-two of the Kama Sutra.”

“Sixty-two? Kama Sutra?” she mumbled unintelligibly, still struggling with the lust brought to a slow boil inside her loins.

“Hmm, you’re right. We should really start with position one and work our way through them all. Very well, then. You’ve convinced me. Tonight, we’ll work on positions one through ten.”

“One through... ten? I... uh, I think you misunderstood what I meant.”

Kaden chuckled as he leaned in for another quick, hard kiss.

“Have fun cooking, Babygirl. See you at dinner.”

Sage could do no more than stare after him. “Good Lord, now what’ve I gotten myself into?”

Dinner time at Triple K Ranch...

“Holy fuck!” Kaden exploded. “Good Lord, my throat is on fire.”

“But how is that possible? I assure you I took your preference for non-spicy food to heart when I prepared the Discada.” Sage stared wide-eyed at the red blush spreading over Kaden’s face.

“Of course, you did,” he choked out, swallowing down an entire glass of water.

“Oh my, you look rather flustered. Are you okay, Daddy?”

“Don’t Daddy me, Sage. You did this deliberately. I suppose this is how you take revenge?”

“Revenge for what?” With palms supplicated, she looked over at his brothers. “I made the dinner exactly as Keith asked, using only the peppers in the pantry. And this is what I get? Being accused of seeking vengeance? I am truly hurt!”

Taking a bite from her plate, she chewed delicately. “Maybe your fragile palette has more in common with a baby’s bottom. I find this rather mild.”

“Yeah, me too. Perfectly spiced. Just the way we like it,” Kevin gushed. He smiled broadly. “Hot as the devil’s breath.”

Sage pointed a finger at Keith. “You told me the jalapeño peppers in the pantry were not that hot. Now, look at your poor brother. He can hardly breathe!”

Sage wisely avoided looking at Kaden lest she burst out laughing. Pranks were a daily occurrence when she was growing up. This was a little more than that. Mr. High & Mighty Daddy had to be brought down a notch or two. Ms. Patty Cakes wasn’t a little Babygirl to be ordered about and threatened with punishment.

Eating away at her own generous portion of Discada was easy since she had dished it up before adding the peppers. Like Kaden, she, too, didn’t like overly spiced food. She knew exactly how much he was suffering but refused to give in to feeling sorry for him. Big, bad Daddy had it coming!

“I don’t know about you, Kaden, but I’m having seconds,” Keith said as he filled his plate again.

Sage was impressed that despite the searing heat, Kaden soldiered on, continuing to eat, suffering in silence. She did notice however that the ratio between the meat and bread leaned heavily toward the latter.

“I did try to balance the flavor of the jalapeño by mixing the big ones with the smaller ones, although I must say, I didn’t realize that they were harvested when they were that small. But who am I to question experienced farmers like you?”

Keith and Kevin looked at each other then burst out laughing when Kaden growled with a sharp glare at Sage.

Squaring up her shoulders, she innocently asked, “What?”

“Those aren’t jalapeños, Sage,” Keith said with a grin. “They’re ghost peppers. They’ve been ripening in the pantry, so at this point, they are almost at the peak of their heat. It’s also the hottest chili on the market.”

“Oh, my.” With her hands covering her mouth in pretend horror, she jumped up to keep from bursting out in laughter and rushed to the fridge.

“Here,” she said as she filled Kaden’s glass. “I believe milk helps to ease the heat.”

Kaden gulped down the dairy drink in one go. “You better start buttering up your ass, Babygirl.”

“But it was an honest mistake! How was I supposed to know the difference? They look exactly the same and— Hey! Where are you going?” she shouted after Kaden when he jumped up and stormed toward the pantry, only to return within moments.

“Do they look the same, Sage? Well?” he prodded when she didn’t immediately respond when he all but shoved the two peppers in front of her face. She leaned back and frowned as she pretended to study them intently.

“Wow, that’s strange. In the pantry I definitely didn’t notice the difference.”

“Am I correct in understanding that you chopped them up in the pantry which is why you didn’t notice the difference? Is that right?” he ground out between clenched teeth. His face still glowed from the effect of the hot dish.

“Well, no, but to be honest, I wasn’t paying that much attention. I was so focused on getting your mother’s recipe right that—”

“Keep digging, Babygirl. The hole is getting deeper by the minute.”

Sage snapped her mouth shut. Further denial was only going to get her into deeper trouble. She had been caught out and he knew that she knew it. Shuffling her feet apart, she grasped her hands behind her back, pushed out her breasts, and looked down, the perfect form for a bratty sub who knew her Daddy was on the warpath.

“Well, damn,” Kevin said. “One thing I’ll give you, Sage, you’re a fast learner. Perfect form, I have to say.”

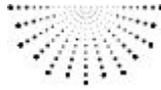
“Yeah, just a pity it’s gonna invite the opposite reaction from her Daddy.”

Sage refused to be intimidated into looking up to check Kaden’s reaction. One thing she had learned since living with him as his Babygirl, was that he loved it when she acted submissively without being told. Unfortunately, she had totally forgotten that he abhorred being topped from the bottom. She realized her attempt at manipulating the outcome had backfired as his dark command floated to her ears.

“Our room, Sage. Now.”

Not wishing to test his patience further, Sage immediately took the stairs to their bedroom. “And that backside of yours had better be naked by the time I get there!” His voice chasing after her was enough to put an extra step in her stride.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



It was a difficult thing for a woman, who, a couple of weeks ago didn't know a thing about sexual domination, to acknowledge that the knot in her stomach was one of anticipation rather than dread. Deep down inside, she knew how he would react to being manipulated.

But damn, every time he blistered her bottom, he pushed her to a level of euphoria that she had never before experienced. Now, she craved it and found herself looking for ways to incite punishment, just to feel his hand stinging the bejesus out of her round cheeks.

One day, he would catch on that she was enjoying spanking too much for it to be a punishment. But until then, she would secretly revel in the wickedness of her own game.

“Damn, he's truly turned me into his Babygirl!”

Her voice sounded husky and the words resonated deep inside as she quickly stepped out of her jeans and panties. At first, the prospect of being sexually dominated had been daunting but Kaden had set her mind at ease almost immediately. It was the most satisfying feeling to just relax and let someone else take charge of at least one part of her very demanding life.

It was a balance that she giddily anticipated once she returned to work.

“So, you’re a prankster, I see.”

“Oh!” Sage jumped around at Kaden’s deep voice spooking her from behind.

“I made dinner, that’s—Hey!” she protested as he sat down and upended her over his lap in one smooth moment. “Wait! Ouch!” she screamed as two loud swats landed on her buttocks. “Let’s just discuss this first, Daddy, please.”

Sage suddenly realized that Kaden’s demeanor was different from before—more focused and a little darker. The strength behind the two swats also warned her that this wasn’t going to be the usual spanking that rocketed her lust into the stratosphere.

Still, much as before, her buttocks clenched as a tingling sensation spread over her buttocks. A confluence of dread and wondrous anticipation swept over her.

“Oh!” Sage gasped as his large hand covered her throbbing heated core.

“Hmm,” he murmured as his long, thick fingers separated the petals of her labia to stroke their delicate, satiny flesh.

She whimpered, knowing he’d find her already hot and wet. Grabbing hold of his shins, she struggled to breathe, especially when he stroked her clit and then dipped back into the liquid heat, spreading it all over the throbbing nub.

“It seems you enjoy being spanked too much, and since this is punishment, that just won’t do, now will it, Babygirl?”

“I hate punishment, Daddy,” she whimpered as she became lost in the sensations as he drew circles around her clit. Now,

the throbbing nub, having been thoroughly teased, swelled taut, causing her body to shudder uncontrollably.

“Then I suggest you remember this the next time you attempt to top me from the bottom.” He pushed her off his lap and went to fetch something from his chest of drawers. “I’ve been wanting to test this new switch. Now is the perfect occasion.” He pointed to the bed. “Bend over at your waist, legs spread apart, feet pointed inward. One warning, Sage. Hold on to the bedding. Do not reach back to cover your ass cheeks, because once I start, I’m not stopping. If your hands are in the way, they will be struck.”

“Yes, Daddy.” Sage didn’t like the sudden shift in tactics. She liked the looks of that thin switch even less. It looked too much like a cane which she feared more than a criminal with a loaded gun.

“I’m waiting.”

Her legs finally followed the order from her brain and walked her over to the bed. A whimper escaped her lips as Kaden tugged her hips lower so that her buttocks pushed up at the perfect angle he wanted. The feel of the switch tracing the curve where her cheeks and thighs met caused her to jerk.

“Remind me, Babygirl, what happens to naughty little girls who torment their Daddies?”

“To be fair, Daddy, in this instance, I didn’t torment you.”

Her cry echoed through the room as he rewarded her impudence with a strike across both cheeks.

“Jee-sus Christ, that hurts!”

“What’s the matter? Aren’t punishment spankings supposed to hurt?”

“With that thing, it’s not anywhere near a spanking,” she wailed, desperately clawing at the bedding in an attempt not to reach back and rub the smarting rash embedded into her soft flesh.

“OWWW!” she cried, as Kaden used a fingernail to trace the crimson outline, stoking the fire he had created.

“I ask again. Do you agree that naughty little girls who torment their Daddies deserve to be punished?”

Not wishing to draw out the interrogation and earn more strikes than necessary, Sage gave in, reluctantly, which she didn’t bother to hide from her voice.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“This time, you’ll learn what true punishment means. It’s time you differentiate between what’s acceptable and what’s not.”

“I already know! I’m sorry for attempting to manipulate you into punishing me.”

“Did you deliberately spice up my plate of food, Sage?”

Suddenly, her prank wasn’t all that funny, not now that her ass was about to pay the price for an act of petty vengeance.

“Yes, Sir, I did. I was a bad girl, and I’m sorry.”

“Good, then let’s get this over with. Remember my warning. Keep your hands out of the way. You can twist and move around but do not lift your legs. Every time you do, I add two strikes. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Two quick swats landed on her soft cheeks, leaving her gasping, and completely amazed by the stinging sensation.

Now that the initial shock of the previous strikes evaporated, she couldn't stop her hips from dancing and twitching as welts appeared in the wake of the strikes peppering her behind.

Amazingly, it felt like a butterfly kiss against her skin—at first. Each strike branded her with its own mark that stung, beautifully, and with just the right amount of pain to spark the lust inside her. Then, slowly the swats intensified, turning into white hot slashes that tore through her entire being.

Her cries turned to screams, then to tears and finally into sobs as each line seemed to remind her of every piece of ghost pepper she had added to Kaden's dish.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she screamed. "I won't be a bad girl again."

The switch bounced back off her thighs a final time, his voice soothing and rich, assuring her it was over.

"That's debatable, Babygirl, but I'm proud of you. You handled your punishment very well."

No longer bound by his warning, she reached back, whimpering as she rubbed the sting that rapidly turned to fire with every swipe of her hand.

"God, it hurts," she wailed, filled with surprise at how she could feel the welts swelling and forming under her hands. "It feels like you've cut me into shreds!"

"No, Babygirl, I will never cut your skin, not even during a whipping." He brushed her hands away and gently cupped her cheeks, waited a second until her breathing settled then squeezed.

"Fucking hell!" She screamed as the pain threatened to blind her. But then, the moment he let go, it all flowed out of her as if he had absorbed it into his own hands.

“It will leave some gorgeous purple lines for me to caress over the next couple of days.”

“Torture you mean,” she sniffled as he picked her up and sat down in the wingback chair in front of the window.

“Ah, but so much pleasure is derived from a little sensual torture, is it not, my pet?”

“Gmphf,” she muttered, settling against his chest as the last of her tears trickled over her cheeks.

Kaden held her like that for a long time, gently brushing a hand through her hair, rubbing a cooling gel on her scorching cheeks, and whispering sweet little nothings in her ear.

Sage was completely relaxed. The pain was a constant throbbing reminder that her Daddy would always take action when she deserved to be corrected. Strangely, it wasn't the punishment that kept her floating on a cloud of euphoria, it was this moment. The aftercare, the way he cuddled her, made her feel like she was the most important part of his life.

What scared her more than anything was that he was fast becoming the most important part of her life.

“I love these moments with you. This is what I treasure more than the sexual satisfaction after lovemaking, an intense scene where I get lost in a Dom high. This, right here, holding you in my arms is precious, Sage.” He tilted her chin back to stare into her eyes. “I don't want to lose this... not ever. I don't want to lose you, my Babygirl.”

“I'm here, Kaden. I'm not going anywhere.”

“I'm talking long term, Sage. I want you in my life, not only while we investigate the corruption case. Will you consider it? Becoming my submissive with the hope of something permanent in the future?”

“Permanent?”

“Marriage.”

Sage gulped. Her thoughts had been running along the same lines, but the reality was a hard task master.

“It’s a very tempting prospect, Kaden, but you know it could never work.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t know each other, for starters.”

“I’m not talking about marriage within the next month, Sage. I want us to build a relationship, not only as a Daddy-sub couple but with the intention of a future together. I’m in no hurry. I’ll give you all the time you need.”

“My job is in Washington D.C. Do you expect me to give it up?”

“No, I never want you to change who and what you are. Nor will I take away what is important in your life. Those are obstacles we can overcome. Your job doesn’t require you to go into the office on a daily basis. You could make your base to work from here, at Triple K Secure. When you need to go to D.C. my plane will be ready.”

Sage stared at him for long moments. For once he didn’t hide his emotions. It was all there, the expectation, the promise of a future, and finally, growing love that made those dark orbs shimmer with hope.

He offered her a future of happiness, with no demands, only solutions.

“Will you give me time?”

“As much as you need, Babygirl.”

“And you’ll be patient with me as I discover the path of a submissive?”

“With you, patience will be my middle name.”

“Then I accept. I will stay and be your Babygirl.”

“And?”

“And maybe one day soon, I’ll fall in love with you, and decide to make it permanent.”

“Only one day? Hmm, guess I’ll have to double my efforts then.”

“Kaden?” Her eyes lit up as she stared at him in wonder.

“Shh.” He silenced her with a finger on her pouty lips. “No pressure, remember. I’m happy with one day soon. As long as you know, I’m going to make damn sure the day I formally ask for your hand in marriage, you’ll say yes. Understood?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The End

Want to continue the journey and find out if Kaden and his Babygirl managed to overcome all the obstacles life throws at them?

Then preorder Book 1, Black Ops Daddy here:
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Linzi's Bio

“Isn't it a universal truth that it's our singular experiences and passion, for whatever thing or things, which molds us all into the individuals we become? Whether it's hidden in the depths of our soul or exposed for all to see?”

Linzi Basset is a South African born animal rights supporter with a poet's heart, and she is also a bestselling fiction writer of suspense filled romance books; who as the latter, refuses to be bound to any one sub-genre. She prefers instead to stretch herself as a storyteller which has resulted in writing in multiple genres. Her initial offering: Club Alpha Cove, a BDSM club suspense series released back in 2015, reached Amazon's Bestseller list, and she has been on those lists ever since. Labeling her as prolific is a gross understatement as just a few short years later she has now been published over a hundred times; a total which includes the published works of her nom de plume: Isabel James who co-authors, and penname, Kimila Taylor.

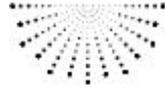
“I write from the inside out. My stories are both inside me and a part of me so it can be either pleasurable to release them or painful to carve them out. I live every moment of every story I write. So, if you're looking for spicy and suspenseful, I'm your girl... woman... writer... you know what I mean!”

Linzi believes that by telling stories in her own voice, she can better share with her readers the essence of her being: her passionate nature; her motivations; and her wildest fantasies. She feels every touch as she writes, every kiss, every harsh

word uttered, and this to her is the key to a never-ending love of writing.

Ultimately, all books by Linzi Basset are about passion. To her, passion is the driving force of all emotion; whether it be lust, desire, hate, trust, or love. This is the underlying message contained in her books. Her advice: “Believe in the passions driving your desires; live them; enjoy them; and allow them to bring you happiness.”

LIFE'S UNEXPECTED GIFTS
BY LIVIA GRANT

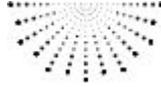


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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

CHAPTER ONE



Troy Jackson looks at the time on his cell phone just before pulling out of the roadside gas station just off the Denver Boulder Turnpike. He's not happy to see it's already after six p.m. The Friday night traffic paired with the heavy December snowfall has slowed him down. He regrets not calling his sister to let her know he was on the way.

That's what I get for trying to surprise her for her birthday. I guess the surprise will be on me if she's not even home when I finally get there.

It's been over six months since he's seen his sister, Traci, and he's been increasingly worried about her with each weekly Skype conversation they've had these last six months. As the only two remaining living relatives in their small family, Troy's decided it's about time they spend more time together. Tonight is meant to be a double celebration. Not only does he want to help his sister celebrate turning the big 3-0, but he can't wait to see the look on her face when she finds out his transfer back to Denver is complete.

Just the weekend before, Troy had finished moving his relatively meager collection of possessions into his off-base apartment. At thirty-four years old, it had depressed him to realize he had so very little in the way of possessions to show

for a lifetime of hard work. Sure, his bank account and investment portfolio were well padded with the money saved by being a single workaholic. His computer expertise along with his ability to lead research teams had spurred his military career along very quickly, making him a rather young Captain in the Air Force. He's proud of his contribution to his team and service to his country, yet the older he gets, the bigger that hollow hole in his gut gets when he sees his friends with their families.

The irony is, there was a time when he felt sorry for those friends trying to keep it all together while moving from country to country, families chasing their husbands and fathers when they could. Now he knows those same men pity him as they talk about their plans for the upcoming Christmas holidays. Sure, he always gets invitations to join in his friend's family celebrations when away from home, yet those requests really amounted to an invitation to be a fifth wheel. At least this year, he'll spend Christmas with his sister for the first time in four years.

As he maneuvers a curve, Troy's SUV slips on the slick mountain road, weaving the way to Eagle's Pass, Colorado, the small town where Traci lives. As he gets the vehicle under control, he allows his thoughts to shift back to his sister.

He's still in disbelief that Traci had chosen to live in Eagle's Pass, a community populated by people who have one major thing in common, their love of spanking. Troy smiles to himself as he remembers his sister's loud carrying on during one of the last spankings she'd received from their strict father. Only a few weeks from her high school graduation, she'd been more than three hours late for her curfew. Their parents had been nearly frantic with her uncharacteristic behavior. It was only bad luck that had Troy home from college that weekend

to witness his father's normally calm demeanor shattered by worry for his daughter. After they had found Traci safe and sound, his father's anger bubbled up, replacing worry.

As a twenty-two-year-old college senior at the time, Troy had still been selfishly resenting his father's rather strict discipline. But there, waiting along-side his parents to hear news on the safety of his sister, he'd seen another whole side of a loving domestic discipline way of life. He had watched with envy the closeness of his parents as they supported each other through their hours of worry. That was the first night Troy had finally understood the value of his parent's consistent boundaries in his life, which had kept him and his sister remarkably grounded while allowing them the security of spreading their wings with the knowledge of their parent's unconditional love. Unconditional love even when they did something stupid, like staying out half the night with her new boyfriend. Troy is sure his sister had not felt the same way after receiving the tanning of her lifetime courtesy of Dad's well-worn belt to her bare bottom.

Yes, Troy had grown up a bit that night, uncovering important revelations about the kind of relationship he wanted in his future. Little did he know just how hard it would be to find a woman in the twenty-first century who actually wanted to be guided by their dominant husband. Between deployments, he's had little time to play the field, but even those few relationships he's had over the years have been a shallow imitation of what his parents had. So far he hasn't been willing to compromise. Unfortunately, as he comes up on his thirty-fifth birthday, he finds himself worried he may need to settle for 'good enough' soon.

If I don't start a family soon, I'll end up being a senior citizen by the time the kids graduate.

When Traci had told him of her plans to buy into the co-op community to both live in Eagle's Pass and serve as the resident therapist, he had actually laughed at her, thinking she was playing a joke on him. He wasn't sure such a place could actually exist and if it did, why in the world would his sister choose to live there as a single woman? The fact that she would voluntarily live in a place heralding the benefits of something she'd howled so loud over as an eighteen year old always amuses him. The only thing he's come up with is that maybe his sister had realized how great their parent's marriage had been after all.

They've never openly talked about what they'd both learned that fateful night, but he wants to change that. He's sensed a growing sadness each time he's talked to Traci over the last few months. He's been worried about her and is relieved he's close enough now to drop in to visit more often. She'd been so happy when she first moved to Eagle's Pass, but he can't shake the feeling she might be regretting her decision now, almost two years later.

Troy is relieved to see the large sign welcoming him to Eagle's Pass. The country roads have been getting worse by the minute, making him happy to see the plowed streets of the town nestled into the mountains outside Boulder. He chuckles as he turns onto his sister's street, Spanking Loop. The last time he'd been here it had been a hot summer day and the park across the street from her house had been full of happy children. Tonight, the park is empty as he passes by before slowly pulling into the first driveway he gets to. His sister was lucky to get this prime location in town, so close to the park and only a few blocks walk to the community center, pool and theater, all locations they'd enjoyed together the last time he was in town.

Only once he puts the SUV in park does he take the time to realize his sister's house is completely dark, confirming his fear that he should have given her a heads up he would be coming tonight. He'd wanted to surprise her, but the surprise is on him. Troy gets out of the vehicle, his leather boots sinking into the several inches of wet snow on his way to her large front porch. He rings the doorbell, with only a small hope of her opening the door. After several attempts to rouse her, he takes out his cell phone to text her.

Text from Troy to Traci:

Hey, sis. Happy birthday! What are you up to for your big day?

No response. Okay, she must be out having fun.

Troy chooses 'Sis' from his contacts, pressing SEND on a call. He's not happy when the call goes straight to voice mail.

The least she could do is answer her damn phone.

He goes back to sit in his idling car for what seems like an eternity but is most likely only ten minutes. After trying her phone several more times, he's in a quandary of what to do. It's way too far to drive home, not to mention he'd hate to drive the roads back down to the turnpike with the snow continuing to come down at this clip. He knows there's no hotel in town and he's never bothered to get a key to Traci's considering he visits so rarely. Hopefully, they can correct that now that he's moved back to Colorado, but little good that'll do him tonight.

Impatient, he checks the locks on both the front and back door, actually happy when he finds both secure. He'd not be happy if his sister had been careless enough to keep her doors unlocked, especially living alone, safe community or not.

As he stands near the front door, his eyes travel down to the ceramic guard goose dressed in a Christmas Santa suit. His heart lurches as the childhood memories of his mother lovingly changing the clothes on their family guard goose as each new holiday season would approach. He'd completely forgotten about the silly tradition, yet he's happy to see his sister carrying it forward. He knows his mom would be pleased. A pang of homesickness he hasn't allowed himself to feel in a very long time invades.

If only that were the only memory he had of that stupid goose.

It was their family's guard goose that had made him aware that their father not only disciplined Troy and his sister, but their mother, too, when she'd broken a family rule. Even in the frigid cold, a warmth passes through Troy at his vivid memory as a thirteen-year-old boy coming home from school to hear the unmistakable sounds of his mother being paddled by his father through their clearly-not-thick-enough bedroom door.

Troy had felt the hard, wooden paddle on his own bottom enough to know conclusively what was happening on the other side of that door. His father's stern lecture pointing out the foolishness of putting their family's safety at risk by hiding the key to their house in such an obvious place, only two feet from the front door, could barely be heard over his mother's sobbing promises to never let it happen again.

The spanking had gone on for what seemed like an eternity as he stood there, completely panicking over how this turn of events would change their family dynamic. He remembers selfishly standing there listening to the sounds of the harsh punishment, wondering how it was going to feel having parents who were divorced, because surely his mom was never

going to put up with being thrashed by her husband like a naughty child.

After the paddling ended, he had run to his room to hide, ear to his door listening for sounds of an argument or worse, his mom leaving. When his mom had called him down for his after-school snacks like she did every other day, he'd been shocked. He had crept down to the kitchen, cautiously, hoping not to see his father. Afraid he might deck his dad for driving Mom away.

Troy had almost fainted when he arrived at the kitchen to find his mom sitting on Dad's lap at the table, snuggled up close as he hugged her to him as if she was precious. The peaceful smile on her face as she looked up as he entered overshadowed the slightly red rims of her eyes, the only indication he had really heard what he had heard. He remembers the rush of relief followed by his own confusion over what had transpired between his parents. He took every opportunity to watch them closely in the following years, witnessing firsthand how much happier they seemed than any of his friend's parents. Only years later would he start to truly understand the power of such an intimate relationship.

One of his biggest regrets of losing his parents so unexpectedly is that Troy never got a chance to talk about domestic discipline with his father. Only as an adult, years later, did Troy figure out the official name for their family dynamic. While he's researched DD extensively online enough to know he longs to find a woman searching for the same intimacy in a marriage, he regrets that he can't talk to his father about this important topic.

Uncharacteristically emotional tonight, Troy reaches down to stroke the silly piece of rock that had brought back so many

memories. When the goose wobbles at his touch, Troy bends down to investigate, finding a single key smashed under the concrete statue.

A strange mix of relief and anger courses through Troy. Sure, he finally has a way into his sister's house to await her return, but he's not happy at all that anybody wandering by could have found the same key and be waiting in her dark house to accost his sister upon her return. He tries to shrug it off, knowing how safe the close-knit community of Eagle's Pass is, but he plans on cautioning his sister to find a better hiding place for her backup key.

With a chuckle, he wonders what his adult sister would do if he upended her for a spanking like he's sure their father would deliver under the circumstances were he still alive.

Suspecting Traci will need to park in her garage upon her return, Troy takes a minute to move his car across the street before grabbing his overnight bag and letting himself into her house. He feels a bit guilty for barging into her private space, unannounced, yet it is his sister, after all. He really doesn't think she'll mind considering he's stayed here in her guest room on three separate occasions while on leave.

After taking his wet boots and coat off in the entry, he throws his duffle bag on the guest bed before heading to the kitchen to see what Traci has in the fridge in the way of adult beverages. He appreciates that she stocks his favorite beer when she knows he's coming, but since she was in the dark on his plan, he only finds several large bottles of wine chilling along with a rather sad array of food. Yogurt... and more yogurt, a few half-used condiments, two cases of diet soda and Traci's strange favorite snack food, jars of dill pickles. Right on schedule, his stomach growls.

Serves you right, asshole. You should have called her earlier today to wish her a happy birthday and find out her plans.

Troy had talked to her earlier in the week and she hadn't mentioned any special plans for her birthday, giving him the idea of surprising her. His luck, some of her friends must have whisked her away on a weekend ski trip. That would explain the lack of food in the fridge and also why she's not answering her phone. She must be on the slopes.

Knowing it's too late to drive back to the city, Troy throws the one and only frozen pizza from the freezer into the oven and settles in on the couch with a glass of too-fruity chardonnay to await his gourmet dinner. He sees her normal stack of books on the coffee table. She's never more than an arm's length away from reading material. Rifling through, looking for something non-psychology related to read, he's surprised to find several risqué romance novels mixed in with the heap. He starts reading a novel touting itself as 'The hottest read of the year.' Not exactly how he'd planned the night.

The sound of Traci's car in the driveway jars Troy awake. He's momentarily disoriented by his surroundings. He had fallen asleep on the couch after forcing down a few slices of frozen pizza while watching TV in the dark. The last thing he remembered was the start of the late show after the evening news. The additional loud rumble of a large truck out front confuses him. His sister drives a small hybrid, a car Troy had cautioned her against driving in Colorado winters.

He flicks the TV off with the remote, grabbing his cell phone to check the time. He glances to see it's just after midnight. He pushes his six-foot frame to his feet to make his way to peer out the long, decorative side window flanking Traci's front door. It's pretty dark out, but what little light there is from the nearest streetlamp reflects off the bright white snow to cast enough light for Troy to spot his sister struggling to get out of her car, stepping into the deep snow of the driveway. What looks like a hulking football lineman is already climbing out of the cab of his jacked-up truck, parked directly behind his sister.

Shit. Isn't she going to be surprised to see me?

Troy suddenly feels like a complete idiot for assuming his sister would be happy to have him surprise her. Clearly, she'd made other plans for her thirtieth birthday... plans he suspects she would prefer her brother not know about. She's never mentioned seeing anyone seriously, but clearly she must have a boyfriend if she's inviting the guy in this late.

Unsure how he should spring his surprise on his sister, he moves across the room to the bank of light switches in the kitchen not far from the front door. The houses in Eagle's Pass all have an open floor plan and he'll be able to turn on the lights from the kitchen and call out his 'surprise'. Troy waits anxiously while he hears shuffling of feet on the outside front porch. He can hear his sister's voice through the door. "Thanks for making sure I made it home, Ronnie. G'night." If Troy didn't know better, he could swear his sister sounds tipsy. Her words are slurred through the door.

"Oh come on, little lady. The night is young. It's way too early for me to go home and anyway, you haven't let me give you your birthday spanking yet. I know all you chicks from

Eagle's Pass love to have your butt lit up by a big strong guy like me. Let me in and I'll be sure to show you and that hot ass of yours a good time."

Troy stands frozen to his spot, in shock at his sister's choice of a date for her thirtieth birthday, his blood pressure rising with anger directed at her escort. He prays this was a blind date or better yet, just a misunderstanding. He's waiting for her response when he hears a thud against the front door from the outside followed by a sharp slap.

"Knock it off, Ronnie. It's late and I 'ave appointments in the morning. You need t' go home." Listening to his sister slur her words infuriates Troy.

She fucking drove home impaired. I guess her only other option had been to ride with the troll.

"Like hell I'm leaving. I spent a Goddamn fortune buying you drinks tonight. The least you can do is invite me in for one nightcap. I promise, baby, I'll go home right after one drink."

'Say no... tell him to bugger off... get lost...'

What comes out of her mouth is "Well, okay, but only one dink. And no funny business."

The jingle of keys in the lock is followed by the rush of cold air from the ongoing snowstorm outside. The front door isn't closed one second before the hulk named Ronnie has grabbed Traci, swinging her around to press her back against her own front door, trapping her between the hard wood and the hard muscles of her unwelcome guest. The jerk is so large, Troy can no longer see any of his sister, but he does hear her struggling to free herself from the aggressor's grip.

Troy is enraged. Flipping every light switch on at once, the entire space is immediately flooded in bright lights. Troy has

to squint in the sudden blaze of white, but he has an advantage. At least he knew the flash was coming, unlike the brute manhandling his sister. Troy is sprinting by the time he gets to the front door. Not bothering to stop, he hurls his full-body weight into the side of the massive intruder, knocking the troll to the floor. He's about Troy's height, but based on how hard he goes down, easily seventy-five pounds heavier. The advantage of surprise coupled with the sheer velocity of his tackle have Troy successfully wrestling the asshole to the floor where Troy presses his forearm to Ronnie's neck, cutting off his oxygen flow long enough to subdue him.

Only once Troy is relatively sure Ronnie is going to stay down without striking back does he let the high-pitch scream of his sister register.

“Traci, knock it off. It's just me.”

The screaming stops, replaced with a shaky voice. “Troy?”

“Yes. Were you expecting someone else? Maybe a home intruder or even a mass murderer?”

“What are you talkin' 'bout?”

“You. Letting this asshole into your house. What the hell were you thinking, Traci?” Troy doesn't try to hide his anger. He's pumped up on a dangerous cocktail of fury and adrenaline.

Troy can't see his sister, but he hears her shuffling across the room to plop down onto the couch. He sees the hulk is preparing to fight back. Troy tries to defuse the situation. “Listen, I don't want any trouble. I'm gonna let you up and you're gonna leave. I don't want you to come near my sister again, you understand?”

Hulker-dude seems offended. “I don’t know why you’re so pissed at me? She’s the one who was coming on hot and heavy to every guy at the bar. I did her a favor by following her home. There were a lot worse guys than me eyeing her up, believe me.”

It’s a sad state of affairs when the intruder who just manhandled his sister is actually speaking more coherently than said *victim*. Still, Troy can’t help but think about what the hell would be happening to Traci right now if he hadn’t been here to surprise her. She could have been beaten or worse, raped.

Troy’s anger is slowly spreading from the man trapped on the floor to include his wayward sister. “I’m gonna let you up now.”

“About time. I was beginning to think you bat for the other team, you know? You seem to like it on top.” He flashes a lopsided smile, revealing a mouth full of uneven teeth. Seems Ronnie has a sense of humor.

Troy is in no mood to take shit from the jerk. “Nope. Just protecting my baby sister.”

The men push off to stand and with one last look over his shoulder at Traci now nursing what appears to be her throbbing head on her sofa, Ronnie stalks out the door to his truck. The loud engine can be heard as he tears out of the driveway, only to gun it, fishtailing in the snowy streets of Eagle’s Pass.

Troy watches until he sees the truck’s taillights disappear in the darkness before turning around to get his first good look at his sister. He’s never seen her like this. Her outfit is too skimpy. Her too-much makeup is smeared. Her beautiful long

brunette hair is messed as if she'd just gotten out of bed. In a word, she looks a mess.

It is so uncharacteristic of his sister, that it alarms him. Traci had personified professional even as a teenager. While most teenage girls were into boys and makeup, Traci had already been pushing herself academically, knowing at an early age she planned on going into the medical field like their dad. She'd been voted 'Most Likely to Succeed' by her classmates her senior year and even after losing their parents in the accident the summer before starting college, she was able to maintain a straight A average all through college and grad school. Troy has never understood why some guy hasn't come along and swept her off her feet yet. Traci is the epitome of brainy, bold and beautiful. Well at least under normal circumstances. Troy knows something big must be going on in his sister's life for her to act so foolishly tonight.

She finally lifts her head from her hands. The siblings spend a long minute eyeing each other up. With each passing moment, Traci appears to transform from carefree drunk to guilty young woman. Troy speaks first. He has no chance at keeping the anger he feels out of his tone.

"So why don't you tell me what the hell has gotten into you today?"

She's going on offense. "Why don't you tell me what the hell you're doing here first? I thought you were still in DC?" Maybe she isn't feeling very guilty after all, which only angers her brother more.

"I wanted to surprise you for your birthday. You know. Take you out on the town to celebrate. Help you ring in the big 3-0."

Traci scoffs. “I don’t need any help celebrating. I’d forget the whole damn thing if I could.”

Troy sees the pain flashing through her eyes, and it helps tamp down his anger. “What’s gotten into you, Trace? This is so not like you.” He uses his nickname for her, trying to get her to open up.

“How would you know, Troy? You’re barely here. I’ve had to learn to take care of myself, you know?”

A pang of guilt hits Troy hard. “Well, that’s part of the surprise, sis. I’ve moved back to Denver. I’m stationed out of Buckley now. I’m gonna be close enough that we can see each other all the time now.”

Troy had expected a smart-ass remark from the tipsy occupant of the sofa. Instead, he sees tears forming in Traci’s brown eyes. “You aren’t just kidding me, are you? You really are moving back to Colorado?” Her sarcasm is gone, replaced with a vulnerability Troy has never seen on his fearless sister’s face before.

Moving towards her, Troy reassures her. “I promise. I wouldn’t joke about something like that.” Troy has stopped to stand in front of the couch, looking down at Traci in a way that forces her to crane her neck back to look at him. “Now, why don’t you answer my question. What the hell has gotten into you that you thought it was a good idea to pick up some guy in a bar and bring him home with you, driving drunk to top it off?”

Large, sloppy tears stream down her cheeks as she remains silent.

“Traci Lynn Jackson, answer the question. What the fuck were you thinking?” Troy has tried to stay calm, but the reality

of how bad things could have gone tonight keep piling in on him. Reaching down to pull Traci to her feet, Troy sees his sister's regret followed closely by a flash of anger as he holds her upper arms in a vice grip.

He watches so many emotions flitting across her tear-stained face. She settles on a shouting rant. "What d'you wanna hear, Troy? You wanna hear how lonely I am? How I moved here in hopes of finding a man who wanted the same kind of relationship I did... the same kind of close marriage Mom and Dad had. Instead, I get here and find there are hardly any single guys, unless you count Father Beauchamp, but since he's old enough to be my father, he doesn't really count. This is a wonderful community for families... couples... Not so great for those of us who come here alone. Add to that the fact that while everyone in town is very nice to me, don't think I don't know they all hold back being too friendly. God forbid they get too close to *the shrink*. I feel like everyone's afraid I'm gonna try to psychoanalyze them to figure out why they're so into spanking. Little do they know I'd never judge them since..." Her angry rant trails off as she closes her eyes, fresh tears dropping from her wet lashes. Troy doesn't need her to finish her sentence. He knows what she was going to say.

"That's why you moved here, isn't it? It wasn't just to start up your practice. You sought out Eagle's Pass because you understand where they're coming from, didn't you?"

Her emotions are all over the board. When she opens her eyes, he sees an anger he's never seen there before, and it scares him. "So what if I did? Are you gonna call me a freak too, like so many other guys I've dated? Are you gonna ridicule me like all the other psychologists did at the annual convention I went to last summer? Maybe call me the 'spanko quack' like..." The pain on her face as her voice cracks breaks

Troy's heart. How could his sister be so unhappy and him not know about it? He'd sensed something was wrong, but he had no idea she's been in such pain.

"Calm down, Trace. I'm not the enemy here." Troy tries to pull her into a hug, but she pushes away.

"You could have fooled me. Some birthday this has been. Even throwing myself at a room full of guys and I still can't manage to get laid."

Troy's fury returns. "Oh for Christ's sake. So that was the goal? Go out and pick up a one-night stand? Real smart. Are you just trying to get yourself hurt?" He's shouting loud enough he fears the neighbors are going to hear.

He's unprepared for her to collapse into his arms. "At least I'd know I'm still alive. I feel like I've been going through the motions for months, I was starting to wonder." Her crying is coming harder now, and Troy suspects she needs to cry it out. He holds her tight until her sobs have turned to quiet hiccups.

Pulling back to look down into her eyes, Troy sees the sadness in his sister's face. He reaches to swish away some tears with the pad of his thumb. "I'm sorry you're having such a shitty birthday. I'm gonna stay for the weekend and you and I are going to start sorting this all out so we can get you back on track again. First things first. March back to your bedroom and take a hot shower. We have more to talk about tonight, and I'd rather not do it sitting next to someone who smells like stale cigarettes and beer." At least that got the smallest of smiles.

"I'd rather just go to bed and sleep it off. Maybe tomorrow I can pretend this whole night never happened."

Troy knows sleep is not what his sister really needs most to feel better. The kind of funk she seems to have fallen into needs a bit more of a hands-on approach to resolve. A strange calm hits Troy as the clarity of how his father would handle this situation becomes clear. He can almost hear Dad's voice coaching him on how to best show his sister his unconditional love while helping to relieve her of the guilt she's sure to feel when she sobers up and realizes just how careless she has been tonight.

Troy drops a quick kiss on Traci's forehead before cupping her chin, making sure he has her full attention. "Trace, I wish Dad were here to take care of things like when you were a little girl. He may not be here, but I am and we both know what needs to happen tonight." Her reactions are sluggish, but he knows when the first inkling of what her brother is hinting at dawns on her. Her brown eyes grow wider as Troy continues on. "You drove drunk through deep snow on dangerous roads. You could have killed yourself or someone else. You invited a strange man into your home knowing he intended to spend the night. He could have been a rapist or a murderer, and even if he turned out to be an okay guy, I know you, Trace. You don't do one-night stands. It's just doesn't seem like your style."

His words have a sobering effect on her. "Oh God. I'm such an idiot. I'm so sorry, Troy. I was just feeling sorry for myself is all. It'll never happen again."

Troy hugs her close, her head resting just under his chin as he stands a head taller than his sister. He's glad they can no longer see each other's eyes. "I know it won't, kiddo. And I know you really are sorry, but I just don't think that's enough tonight." Troy takes a deep breath before continuing. "You need a head of your household (HoH) tonight, Trace. You're off track. Dad's not here. I know it's kinda weird for both of

us, but you're important to me and I'd like to try to help you if I can. It's your call, though."

Her breathing is short as if she is panicking. He can appreciate the position he's put her in, but really, she put herself in this position with her poor choices. He waits patiently for her to process her choices and is somewhat surprised when she agrees with his offer. "You're right, Troy. I hate it, but you're right."

He's not sure how to feel. A part of him had hoped she'd tell him to fuck off. Pulling out of their hug, he looks down into her troubled eyes and knows he would do anything to help his sister. "I want you to take a hot shower and then put on your pajamas and come back out here to talk some more." Troy takes a deep breath before barging ahead. "And I want you to bring your wooden hairbrush with you when you come back."

Her tears are back as she dampens the front of his button-down shirt. "Oh, no. Not the brush." He can't help but smile at her petulant whine. Troy notices she's not saying no altogether. He suspects it's because she knows as well as he does that her behavior tonight was completely unacceptable.

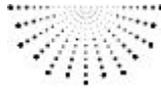
She looks up at him, a strange emotion in her eyes. "I know I've never given you a spanking before, Trace, but you and I both know your behavior has been over the top. You wouldn't sit for a week if Dad were here."

That pried a small smile from her before her eyes cloud over with tears again. "I know I deserve it, but please, Troy... not the brush."

"Yes, Trace. The brush. Go freshen up and be back here within fifteen minutes. Don't keep me waiting." Troy's confidence in his decision is solidifying her fate.

He suspects she wants to change her mind, but to her credit, she answers with a quiet, “Yes, sir.”

CHAPTER TWO



Hallie Boudreaux has only driven in snow a handful of times in her entire life, and never, not once, has she driven in the kind of blizzard she has the misfortune of finding herself in the middle of on this dark December night. Her hands are shaking as she works to keep the car on the road, although she's not sure if it's because the heater in the clunker she's driving doesn't work well, or because she's scared shitless with the dangerous situation she's managed to find herself smack-dab in the middle of.

Way to go, Hallie. Eddie is gonna get the last laugh if you manage to kill yourself driving off a cliff in a blizzard.

Hallie hates that she keeps letting her thoughts stray back to the man she's running away from, not that he is going to chase her. She's worried about a million things, but Eddie tracking her down is not one of them. He might miss her managerial skills now that she's gone, but she's under no delusions. She only left three days ago and he's probably already replaced her with a new big-wig band manager assigned by his shiny new recording studio. The same studio that Hallie had contacted over a year ago and convinced to recognize the extraordinary talent of the cutting-edge band with a growing fan base. The same fucking people who had promised they wanted the whole band, support staff and all.

Yeah, that lasted about thirty seconds.

The car fishtails as she rounds the inclined curve in the mountains of Colorado, jarring her to attention. For the tenth time in the last hour, she berates herself for not parking at the rest stop she passed on the turnpike before exiting to take this smaller back road. She was just so tired after traveling all the way from Oregon, stopping to nap in the car along the way. She doesn't have enough cash to get a real motel with an actual bed. She's had to use almost all her money to keep feeding the damn gas-guzzler junker she had the misfortune of *borrowing*. What little cash she had left had gone to feed her own caffeine addiction.

Hallie lets her mind start running through the laundry list of problems she is facing. It's not that the worrying makes her feel better, but the panic level produced does have a way of helping her stay awake. Other than being cold, hungry and broke, she hates that she has to add homeless to the top of her 'reasons it sucks to be Hallie' list. Not that she's had a stable home to call her own in a really long time, but the last few years hadn't been all that bad, at least not until the last few months when Eddie seemed to go off the deep end.

Sure, being on the road and living out of cheap motels and the touring bus wasn't exactly The Ritz, but when they weren't touring, the tiny apartment she shared with Eddie had been nice enough. Only a few blocks from Santa Monica Beach in sunny California, she had enjoyed being so close to the ocean and had even learned how to surf passably well. She knows she won't be doing much surfing in Eagle's Pass.

That's the next worry on her list. Will her Aunt Gina and Uncle Adam even recognize her? And even if they do, Hallie is not stupid enough to think they're going to be happy to see

her. Not after basically dropping off the map for the last three years. Sure, they'd exchanged Christmas cards and the occasional email, but they had been pretty clear about their disappointment in her when she had decided to run away on tour with a no-name musician, choosing to live in sin. She never got around to explaining to them that running away with Eddie had actually been the least sinful option available to her at the time.

She hasn't seen her aunt and uncle since they'd come to Louisiana for her high school graduation. It may have only been just over five years ago, but the memories are so distant, it feels like a whole different person's life. Hallie likes to compare her relatively short life to the way a heart doctor might read an EKG of a heart patient. Lots of very high highs followed by very low lows. Up and down, life seemed to go. Sad, but she's learned to expect it. She knew the record deal a few months ago was one of her peaks and it would only be a matter of time before the next valley arrived. Tonight, driving through a blizzard in this crap car, unsure if she's gonna make it to her aunt's safely... well, this is one of the valleys. If it's one thing she's learned, she'll survive, whatever happens. In fact, she'd just escaped one of the lowest valleys of her life. A pang of panic mixed with sadness at the memories of her last day with Eddie has her vision blurring.

Don't go there, Hallie. He doesn't deserve your tears.

The tired car's dim headlights connect with a roadside sign indicating Eagle's Pass is just three miles ahead. Relief courses through her. The gas gage is near empty and the roads are becoming almost impassible for anything less than snowplows. She's lost track of the time but knows it must be close to midnight by now. She'd been pushing forward, trying to arrive before it got too late. After all, it's bad enough

showing up on Aunt Gina's doorstep unannounced. Doing it after midnight is just plain rude. Just before her cell phone battery had died yesterday, she'd tried to phone the last number she had for her aunt but knowing they had moved from New England to Eagle's Pass since then, understood why the number had been disconnected. She may have to settle for finding their house tonight and just sleep in the car until morning.

As she rounds another corner, Hallie catches a quick glimpse of a cluster of lights off in the distance. The town lights of Eagle's Pass are swallowed by the thick trees lining the road. As she rounds the next curve of the winding road, the car fishtails yet again. If it wasn't so scary driving alone on this dark road, it really would be a beautiful sight. The snow-covered trees stretching out as far as her headlights illuminate are actually quite breathtaking. Hallie's mom, Gina's sister, had never understood why her baby sister had agreed to move from the deep south of Louisiana first to New England and later to this 'God-forsaken tundra' as her mother had liked to call Colorado.

It only took Hallie living with her aunt and uncle one summer in New England as a preteen for her to understand her aunt's motives. Ironically, the mountain scenery was only a small part of what made her summers with Aunt Gina and Uncle Adam some of the 'peak' moments in life. She always looks back to those summers as the happiest of her life. The closer she gets to Eagle's Pass, the more worried Hallie gets that her memory may be playing tricks on her. Surely, her aunt and uncle couldn't possibly be as loving and supportive as her childhood memories recall. People that wonderful only exist in the movies. Still, she knows if even half of what she

remembers about her last living relatives is true, she will be happy here.

She's within the last mile of her trip when a large deer darts out into the snow-covered road. Hallie slams on the breaks, succeeding in throwing the car into a fast-spinning doughnut in the center of the road before sliding off the far side, crashing through the thick brush lining of the road and careening hood first into the six-foot deep ditch. Time moves to slow motion for Hallie as the sound of crunching metal combines with snapping wood until the car comes to a final resting spot nose down at a forty-five-degree angle, propped against the trunk of a large tree. The sudden silence allows Hallie to hear her own gasping breaths as she tries to calm her racing heart.

Hallie's forehead had connected with the steering wheel as she was thrust forward when the car decided to lose its battle with the tree. It all happened in the space of just a few seconds, yet even in her disoriented state, Hallie is relieved she'd been wearing her seatbelt. The car was so old, it had no airbags, so the belt was the only thing keeping her from lurching forward into the steering column of the crunched car.

A quiet hush descends all around her, yet inside, she wants to scream. The sound of her own semi-hysterical laughter breaks the silence, releasing some of her muscle's tight tension from the accident.

She takes a few minutes to catch her breath, taking stock of her newest aches and pains, feeling relatively sure she'd done no major damage to herself. The car is another story. The rest of Hallie's journey will be on foot as she is certain the car has reached the end of its lifespan.

The question is, how to get herself out of the car and back up to the road? She's not looking forward to making her way to her aunt's on foot considering she only has what most people would consider a light coat and fashion boots on her feet. Living in California had not required snow gear and her hasty departure had not allowed her to plan for the trip. She briefly considers sleeping in the car tonight and climbing out after daylight when someone might find her driving by, but the car's engine is dead and she doesn't relish the idea of freezing to death in the car. There is no other option. She's going to have to walk the rest of the way tonight. It can't be more than a mile.

She tests the driver's door first to ensure she can get it open. The tree beside the car only allows for a foot-wide opening, but being 'a runt' as her stepfather, Gene, used to call her, does have its advantages. She takes a minute to stretch to grab up her purse from the passenger side floor along with the flimsy gloves she bought at a rest stop a few hundred miles back. She'll have to have Uncle Adam bring her back for the other meager belongings in her small suitcase in the trunk tomorrow.

When she feels ready to support herself, she unbuckles the seatbelt, allowing herself to fall onto the steering wheel. She maneuvers her legs through the opening of the door as the wind whips snow into her face, briefly giving her pause on her course of action.

Hallie drops the few feet down from the car to the ditch below. The thick snow cushions her fall, yet her ankle twists uncomfortably under her as gravity drops her faster than she'd like. Within seconds, she feels the bite of the snow seeping through her jeans, covering her body with cold wetness. She knows she needs to move fast, not just to keep her body heat

up, but she can't remain exposed to the elements for long. A pang of pain shoots through her forehead, pounding behind her eyes. She suspects the newest pain is courtesy of the bump forming on her head from connecting with the steering wheel.

She takes her frustration out on the surrounding forest by screaming at the top of her lungs. "God-damn it, what the hell is next?" She regrets it immediately when fresh pain shoots through her forehead.

Climbing up the ditch embankment comes next. Her boots slip on the incline, forcing her to make several attempts at clawing through the brush until she finds enough handholds in nearby bushes to pull herself up. Her breathing is heavy from exertion by the time she finally arrives back up at the dark road. Without the benefit of moonlight or even crappy car headlights, it is eerily black, yet oddly serene. The sound of the naughty deer who'd caused this whole turn of events draws her attention as the buck prances off into the forest as if nothing had happened. She's relieved she at least doesn't need to add the guilt of killing the deer to her already depressing evening.

Hallie takes a moment to brush off as much snow as possible, before heading off in the direction of Eagle's Pass. The going is slow through the deep snow and she wishes another car would come along so she could try to hitch a ride, but she's not hopeful this late at night. As the adrenaline rush of her crash wears off, she becomes more aware of the ache in her ankle.

It has to be twenty minutes before she gets to an opening in the trees large enough to see the lights of town again. She can no longer feel her toes by the time she reaches the sign welcoming her to Eagle's Pass. As luck would have it, the first

thing she comes to is a huge park. She knows the kids of the town must have a blast on all the playground equipment when the weather was more cooperative than at the present moment. Exhaustion threatens and Halle has to dig deep to keep her cold feet moving forward.

As late as it is, she's relieved that at least a few houses still have lights on, giving her hope her aunt may still be up when she arrives. There is just enough dim light from a park light for her to check her aunt's return address from last year's Christmas card. When she arrives at the first street sign, it seems her eyes are playing tricks on her as she reads Spanking Loop. Who names a street Spanking Loop?

There is only one direction to turn, and that leads her directly into the wind. The lump on her head is pounding. She is shaking from head to toe, forcing herself to move forward. She can see streetlights lining up in a row ahead of her, making it clear there are many blocks to walk ahead, not even sure if any of them will be her aunt's street. Tears threaten as she realizes how precarious her position is. What is she supposed to do? Walk up and down the streets of the town, aimlessly walking through the snow until she finds her aunt's street? If only her cell phone hadn't died, she could Google the address.

As much as she hates it, she may just need to stop at one of the houses with lights on to ask for directions.

Traci appears in the open great room at the fifteen-minute mark on the dot. Troy had been watching the time, hoping he wasn't going to have to go to her room to collect her. Now that he's had a few minutes to calm down, he's having second

thoughts about if he's doing the right thing in disciplining his sister. She is a grown woman, after all, and by anyone's standard a very successful, independent woman at that.

In the end, he's decided to proceed with her spanking for two fundamental reasons. First and foremost, she absolutely made major errors in judgment tonight, putting herself and others at risk. If endangering her personal safety doesn't warrant a punishment, nothing else ever could.

Second, and more importantly, Troy is coming to the conclusion that Traci chose to live and practice in Eagle's Pass for a very good reason. It's clear she subscribes to the premise of the community. Troy suspects her uncharacteristic funk is, at least in part, due to her failure to find her own someone special to share the kind of intimate relationship with that she had witnessed in their parent's marriage. Considering Troy has recently come to the same realization of what is missing in his own life, he thinks he has a pretty good idea of how the rest of the night needs to play out. While it may seem unsettling to find himself in the position of Traci's disciplinarian, he knows she needs him to play the role of her (HoH). Dad would do it if he were here. Tonight, the responsibility falls to Troy.

Their eyes meet as Traci approaches tentatively. Her shoulder-length hair is still damp, fresh out of the shower. He stifles a smile when he realizes she's wearing a floor-length, heavy flannel gown. He suspects she's trying to put as much padding as possible between her tush and the dreaded hairbrush.

Troy is sitting at the eat-in kitchen island. As she nears, he can see so many emotions as they parade across his sister's face. Guilt and embarrassment are there, but the emotion Troy hates to see the most is her fear. He needs to wipe the fear

away and pronto. Troy stands and crosses to meet her, wrapping her in a big bear hug. A stifled sob escapes his sister as she clings to him for support.

“I really am so sorry, Troy. I don’t know what came over me. Now that the alcohol is wearing off, I can hardly believe I was so stupid.”

Hugging her tight, Troy reassures her. “It sure as hell isn’t like you at all, at least not the Traci I know. That’s why I know something is really wrong.” Pulling back so he can see her eyes, Troy presses his sister for answers. “What’s this really about, Trace? I’ve noticed the last few months you seem to be in a bit of a funk.”

The answer flashed in her eyes so fast, and then was gone. She’s good at hiding her emotions. Troy knows even if she won’t open up tonight, he needs to get her to talk about what’s wrong at some point this weekend.

The continued silence is deafening. They need to stop stalling. Taking his sister by the hand and reaching for the backless barstool with his other hand, Troy moves to the center of the open space, putting the high chair front and center. Understanding his plan, Traci tugs at his hand in a failed attempt to move away. “It’s time, Traci. Let’s get this over with. I want you to lean over the stool and hold onto the lowest rung.” Troy pulls her forward and helps her move into the embarrassing position he’s sure she hadn’t planned on at the start of her evening.

The stool is the perfect height to rest her flat stomach against as she reaches for the wooden rung near the floor. Her toes are just able to touch the floor as her legs jut out away from the tall chair. He sees her grab onto the wood, hanging on for dear life. He hears her slight squeal when she feels her

brother lifting the heavy flannel gown up and over her back, displaying her granny-style panties. He's thankful she can't see his smile at her veiled attempt at modesty.

Pushing aside the awkwardness of seeing his sister in such a precarious position, Troy moves to stand next to the stool. Taking a deep breath, he begins Traci's warm-up spanking, delivering a steady stream of swats across her bottom.

Unpleasant memories of a similar night just over a year before surface, and Troy works to tamp them down. Tonight is about his sister, not Kathy. Spending time remembering what wasn't meant to be is no use. He'd wasted enough time trying to make her and their relationship into something it wasn't. More importantly, what it never could be. Kathy had made that abundantly clear the night of her first... and last... punishment at his hand. She probably still thinks he broke up with her because he liked spanking more than he loved her. An assumption which had proved to Troy she really had no clue what domestic discipline was really all about in the first place.

The warm-up is light, allowing brother and sister to each slip into this new familial dynamic. With each passing smack of his flat hand to her pantie-covered bottom, Troy's resolve strengthens. Traci needs this. To absolve her of her guilt. To guide her to better choices next time. To keep her safe. The swats are coming faster... harder.

Without changing his delivery pace, he knows it's time for the lecture. "All right, Traci. Why are you being punished tonight?"

Traci answers after the briefest of pauses. Her voice strained. "Because I was irresponsible. I put myself and others at risk by drinking and driving."

“Very good. And what else?” He follows up his question with a flurry of harder swats to her sit spot.

“Ouch, Troy! That hurts!”

“Yep. That’s the point. Why else, Trace?”

It takes her longer to answer this one. Her voice so soft, he almost misses her surprising reply. “Because I acted like a slut. I was lonely and hadn’t been out on a date in so long that I didn’t care who I met anymore.”

Troy is surprised at her candor, rewarding it with ten fast and furious heavy smacks. “You need to respect yourself and your body, young lady. You are important to me and to a lot of other people. It is completely unacceptable to put yourself in so much danger with a stranger who could have done anything to you had I not been here.” He keeps up the heavy pace as her breathing gets heavy as if she’s working hard not to burst out crying.

“Please. Troy. It won’t happen again. I promise. I was just lonely.”

Troy hears the sadness in her voice, and it hurts him to know his sister has been in pain and he hadn’t been there for her. For a brief moment he questions if it’s fair to punish her for being sad, but the feeling is gone as quick as it came. She earned this punishment and more importantly, she *needs* this punishment. She needs the peace that will come after. The freedom of releasing her guilt. Without the punishment, she will just revert to punishing herself with self-doubt and loathing tomorrow in the light of day. No, better to put this to rest tonight before they go to bed so tomorrow they can try to have a fresh start.

The warmup is done. Leaving his sister draped over the stool, Troy walks to the kitchen island to retrieve their mother's wooden hairbrush. As he picks it up, memories of his parents return. Knowing his father had used this exact implement to discipline his family many times over the years, each time to keep them safe and guide them, makes his job a bit easier.

'If it was good enough for Dad, it's good enough for me.'

Returning to the chastised spankee in the middle of the room, Troy can feel the tension pouring off her body as she awaits the next phase of her punishment. He takes a minute to touch the cool skin of her lower back, hoping to help her relax a bit. He had briefly considered continuing on her bare bottom, but he just can't. It would be too weird.

The brush feels heavy in his right hand as he steps close enough to wrap his left hand across her back, helping to hold her tightly to him, preventing her from flailing.

His first strike of the flat side of the large brush is too tentative. He's out of practice. Her squeak confirms his next strike is better... or worse depending on your point of view. He delivers the first dozen slaps with the brush slowly, spreading them evenly across her bottom, giving her time to adjust to the growing power behind each swing. Troy hesitates after the first dozen, long enough to take a cleansing breath for himself and allowing Traci's soft cries to be heard in the otherwise quiet room.

Steeling himself, Troy begins in earnest. The punishment has truly begun as the strong smacks of wood come fast, yet methodical. Three hard swats to one spot. Three hard swats a few inches away. Again and again, Troy pelts her ass until

every inch of her lower cheeks have been walloped a good one.

Her sit spots are next. Moving the brush lower, he keeps his fast pace, alternating back and forth until he hears his sister start sobbing. As he'd suspected might happen, she's let go of the stool's lower wrung and is trying to push up and away. Troy uses his left arm to hold her in place.

"Traci, that's enough. Stop your moving and put your hands back down. We aren't done yet."

"Oh, God. It's too much. Pleassee."

Troy stops long enough to use both hands to guide her back into position. He knows the punishment must continue if he's to ensure there is never a repeat of her performance tonight.

Once he settles her, he resumes the next helping of spanking with a side of lecture.

"Tell me again, why are you being punished, Traci?"

When she doesn't answer, he delivers a fast volley of a half dozen swats before stopping, waiting for her response. He patiently waits for her crying to diminish to demand her reply again. He's surprised at the defiance that's returned to her voice. "Because you're being a big jerk, that's why. I can't believe you're spanking me, Troy! I mean really spanking me. It hurts!"

Troy swoops in quick to squelch the attitude with both words and the unforgiving brush. "Damn straight it hurts. It's supposed to. More importantly, you *need* it to hurt because the next time you get the bright idea to drink and drive or pick up strangers in a bar, I want you to remember this night and think twice, do you hear me?" He hasn't let up one bit through his

entire rant. If anything, he has bumped up the force he is using, and her sobs have returned. He wants her to learn her lesson. “Tell me, Trace. Do I have your attention now? Are you listening?”

“Yes! I’m listening. Please stop! I’ll be good, I promise.”

“Honey, you’re already good. You just made a couple bad choices is all. You are still the beautiful, intelligent sister that I love more than anyone else on this planet.”

“Troy, if you love me, you’ll stop. It’s too much!” She continues to struggle to free herself from his restraint.

Troy delivers a final dozen with the brush, before stopping. He throws the brush the few feet over to the love seat. To her credit, she stays in position as she lays there, vulnerably recovering. There’s one final important safety rule she’d broken tonight, and he decides to add it to his lecture, hoping he can end the spanking.

“Okay, next topic. I tried to text you and phone you at least a half dozen times tonight. Why didn’t you answer me? If you had, you’d have known I was here waiting for you. If you had answered, you could have asked me to come get you so you didn’t have to drive. So many problems could have been solved. Where was your phone?” Crickets.

“Trace?”

She doesn’t answer the question, but instead tries to wiggle away from him. “Can you move your arm so I can stand up now?”

“Watch your tone and no, you may not stand. I like you in this position so if I don’t like your answers, it will be easy to start round two.”

“Oh come on. You have to be kidding me.” When he continues to subdue her against the stool, she finally stops pressing up and answers with an attitude. “How was I supposed to know you would be calling me?”

“Well, for starters, have I ever *not* called you on your birthday?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Tell me. Where was your phone?”

“I left it in my car, okay? The battery was about dead anyway. I don’t have a car charger and I wanted to save what little battery I had for the drive home, but...”

“But, what?”

She is trying to stand up again, but he doesn’t allow it. Her precarious position obviously has not convinced her to check her sassy attitude. “It was dead when I got back out to my car. It didn’t matter anyway since Ronnie was following me home.”

“Let me get this straight. You were not only driving after drinking alcohol on snowy and icy roads, but you were doing it without a cell phone? For Christ’s sake, it’s like you’ve lost your ever-loving mind.”

“It was fine. I didn’t hurt anyone!”

“This time. Traci, you could have killed yourself. Scratch that, how would you feel if you had hurt someone else? I know you. You could never live with your guilt. It would ruin your life.”

“My life is already ruined. I’m a thirty-year-old spinster!”

He would smile more at her melodramatic over-reaction if he didn’t know how upset she was. He’d hoped the spanking

would relieve her of her guilt, but he'd stopped too soon. "I'm sorry Traci, but we aren't done yet. From now on, you need to have your cell phone with you when you're out driving. No exceptions. Keep it charged and ready for emergencies."

"Fine. I promise I'll keep my phone with me, but seriously, Troy. I'm done."

"That's not how this works, and you know it. I can hear it in your voice. You haven't learned anything, except that you remembered just how much you didn't like Mom's brush. Well, I'm about to reintroduce you to how much you hate the belt."

Her anguished sob confirms he is on the right track. "Oh please, not that. I promise it'll never happen again."

"I'm sure it won't after this lesson. Now stay in position."

Troy releases her long enough to step back. He unbuttons the cuffs of his dress shirt, rolling up the sleeves several layers before reaching for the buckle of his two-inch wide leather belt. The sound of the leather sliding through the hoops of his trousers sends a visible shudder through Traci. Her crying is getting stronger at just the promise of the belt on her bottom. Doubling over the leather to fashion it into a sturdy strap, Troy measures the length and adjusts his stance to line up.

Troy takes a deep breath before proceeding. The crack of the leather whipping his sister's backside startles him. There's a loud clap followed by a split second of silence before Traci's anguished cry confirms he's getting through to her. Before he can lose his nerve, he delivers two more solid belt strappings, one above and one below the first stripe.

He recognizes she's finally surrendering to her punishment. Her cries have changed, from angry disbelief to

truly repentant wails of regret. For several long minutes, he continues with the final stage of her punishment at a slow and steady pace. Each slap of leather helping his sister to finally purge the guilt and anger she'd been carrying since her arrival home tonight.

His arm is pulled back, ready to deliver his final stroke when a loud bang crashes into the space followed by a gust of freezing cold air, carrying in snow. Before he can turn around to see the source of the commotion, Troy is tackled from behind. His first thought is Ronnie has returned, but he quickly dismisses that idea when he not only remains on his feet but is able to carry the weight of the intruder easily on his back. Cold, wet, snow-covered jeans circle his waist from behind, legs hooking together in front, while one damp arm wraps around his neck as if to strangle him and a second arm begins punching him on his right shoulder.

A hoarse shout directly into his eardrum comes next. "Stop beating her, you asshole!" It's the strained voice of a young woman.

Troy is momentarily confused by the strange intrusion into his sister's living room. Traci has righted herself, letting her long flannel gown cover her, while turning to check out the brouhaha firsthand. The look on his sister's tear-stained face tells Troy she's as confused at what's happening as he is.

The attack from the waif of a woman on his back seems to be running out of steam. Dropping the belt, he easily pries her wrapped legs free and grabs her flailing, snowy arms. He turns to face his attacker, surprised when he has to look down nearly a foot to take in the ragamuffin standing in front of him. It looks like the only warm thing on her is the fire he sees burning from her deep, green eyes. They are strangely

mesmerizing, yet he pulls his attention away to assess the rest of her, trying to piece together who she is.

Nothing he sees is adding up. Every inch of the woman is covered in heavy, wet snow. The coat she's wearing is suited more for a cool fall evening than a Colorado winter's night. The high-heeled boots, he suspects the only thing responsible for her topping the five foot mark, look more like they should be on a dance floor than hiking through snow. The gloves on her hands are the thin, one-size-fits-all variety you pick up for a dollar in the checkout lane at Wal-mart.

Troy sees her body is paying the price for her ridiculous choice of clothing. He has no idea how long she's been out in the elements, but every exposed inch of her skin is an angry, wind-blown red. Her long sandy blonde hair, matting to her head like a helmet, is dripping wet as the snow melts onto Traci's floor. When his perusal returns to her face, he can see the angry bruised knot jutting from her forehead where it looks as if she's recently banged her head. Troy thinks he sees a hint of an older, yellowing bruise peeking out on her otherwise wind-whipped cheekbone.

By the time his inspection returns to her eyes, he can see the fire that had been there just a minute before has extinguished, leaving pain and fear in its wake. The three of them had stood frozen in place, taking stock of the strange moment. Troy is quick to notice their trespasser has started to visibly shake, from cold or fear, he's not sure. He takes a step closer, reaching out to stabilize her.

“Stay away from me!” She takes a tentative step backwards, wobbling on her heels.

Troy speaks softly, trying to keep things calm. “Traci, why don't you close the door? I think we've let enough snow in for

the night.”

From his peripheral view, he can see his sister tentatively moving around them to go and secure the door before returning to the middle of the room, stepping up behind the woman dripping onto the carpet, placing her between the two siblings.

“You look cold. Why don’t you let us help you get dried off and warmed up?” Traci’s voice is calm. Troy recognizes her therapist tone of voice and is proud of his sister that she can shift gears from punished sister to assertive psychologist in the space of a few seconds.

Their uninvited guest refuses to take her eyes off Troy but answers his sister. “I can’t believe you aren’t calling the police. I’ll keep an eye on him while you call.”

Traci and Troy’s eyes meet over her head before Traci calmly asks, “Why would you think we should call the police? Are you just breaking in so you can get arrested?”

The girl’s anger flares again. “No! Don’t call them for me. You need to call and report *him*. He was attacking you. He needs to pay.”

Recognition flashes in Traci’s eyes. “You have it all wrong. He wasn’t hurting me; he was helping me.”

The confusion in the intruder’s eyes is easy to see as she answers Traci. “He just has you brainwashed. I know a little bit about this. You don’t need to put up with his abuse. You can leave, you know?” Her voice is losing much of its earlier passion. Troy suspects her adrenalin rush has been spent. Just as he has the thought, he sees her eyes glazing over. She’s beginning to sway and he fears she’s about to topple over.

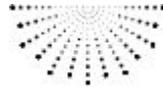
Troy has no clue what brings this young woman to Traci's at this hour of the night, but his heart goes out to her. Anyone can see she's in need of help. "Please, miss. Let us help you get warmed up and then we can talk about everything."

Troy has barely finished his sentence when her eyes close just before she begins to crumble to the floor. He swoops in to scoop her up into his arms just in time to prevent her face planting onto the carpet. Even with the wet, heavy snow covering every inch of her, she is still light in his arms. He cradles her close in an attempt to share his body heat. Her eyes flutter open briefly as he looks down at her. He barely catches her whisper. "Please... don't hurt me, too."

His heart breaks for her because in that moment he knows why she had burst in tonight. Some bastard has hurt her before. Her eyes are closed again and he has no idea if she can still hear him. Regardless, he makes her a promise. "Don't worry, little one. No one is going to hurt you ever again."

Troy's not exactly sure how he's going to deliver on that promise, but in that moment, he somehow knows it's true.

CHAPTER THREE



“I’m on the fence here. She is definitely feeling the effects of hypothermia. I’m confident we can deal with that here. It’s the bump to her head I’m concerned with. I’d like to get a CAT scan to make sure she isn’t suffering a more serious head trauma.”

Hallie is slowly becoming aware of her surroundings. She doesn’t recognize the deep voice speaking at all and is disoriented. She thinks about opening her eyes, but just the light coming in through her closed lids hurts.

“Can we just assume she has a concussion and treat her accordingly? I checked her pupils before you got here, and I don’t think her concussion is too serious.” Hallie recognizes that voice. It takes her a second to remember, but she’s pretty sure that’s the abused woman she had tried to save talking. Memories of her accident and walk through the elements return with a vengeance.

“I agree, but it would be nice if we could talk to her and get information on what happened. Do we know who she is yet or how she got here?” The deep voice of the stranger sounds concerned, but calm.

Letting their conversation fade away, Hallie takes stock of how she feels. Her head is still throbbing, but she feels

warmer. The soft bed she is bundled up in feels like a slice of heaven after sleeping in her borrowed car for the last few days. Most importantly, she feels dry, a sensation she wasn't sure she'd ever feel again as she was walking through the deep snow.

I wonder how long I've been here?

The voice of the abusive asshole jars her back to the present. "I looked through the pockets of her coat and jeans. I didn't find any hints to her identity. She didn't have anything else on her when she burst into the room."

Hallie panics at the thought of that man searching her. Confirming her fears, her fingers touch the dry, flannel top she seems to be wearing, meaning someone had stripped her out of her wet clothes. Equal parts of relief to be rid of her wet clothes and anger at being stripped without her permission invade. Temporarily at least, relief at being warm wins out.

The concerned voice of the only other woman in the room asks a disturbing question "Marcus, any idea of how old the bruises we found on her arms and neck are? It might give us a hint of how she ended up here and who's responsible for hurting her." Hallie's heart rate spikes at the thought of these people not only inspecting her naked body while she had been unconscious, but worse, them finding proof of her own failed relationship with Eddie.

"What the hell are you talking about? Traci, you didn't tell me you found bruises on her? I thought you said Eagle's Pass was a safe DD community. I want to know who the hell hurt her here. They need to be booted out." Abuser-guy seems so angry, which only frightens Hallie more. The irony is thick that he seems angry about Eddie beating her considering he was caught red-handed hurting his own wife.

“Troy, calm down. Marcus and I have never seen her before so I highly doubt she is from Eagle’s Pass. My guess is she was just passing through or something. Anyway, the bruises appear to be a few days old, so she probably got them before she got to town.”

Troy, Traci and Marcus. She is one up on them since she now knows their names, but they still haven’t figured out hers. Hallie is a bit perplexed. She’s sure she had her purse with her when she left the car and walked into town. She tries to remember what happened to her purse, but her memory seems sluggish.

The nice lady is talking again. “I have her wrapped in an electric blanket. The heat’s on low, but it should start to level out her core temp soon.”

“That’s good, but I’m still not sure we shouldn’t call for the helicopter and take her into Denver to have her admitted. I’m pretty sure she’s dehydrated. We need to push some fluids. I’d also like to do that CAT scan.”

“I really don’t want to move her. The storm is still raging. I’d feel better keeping her safe here where I... we... can keep an eye on her.” It surprised Hallie that the man of the house she’d attacked isn’t trying to get rid of her. What could his motive be for wanting to keep her here? Alarm bells are going off and it’s getting harder to lay quietly while they talk around her.

The woman, Traci, makes the final decision, something that surprises Hallie. In her experience, when Eddie is in his caveman mentality, she’s learned to keep her opinions to herself. “Marcus, I know you want to take her in, but I’m with Troy on this one. Let’s keep her here at my place. Can you just go pick up the supplies to start an IV to push her some fluids

and something for her pain? Troy and I can keep an eye on her and honestly, when she wakes up, I'm the best person to talk with her. I think I'll be able to help her."

Hallie can hear the uncertainty in Marcus' voice. "I guess I can go along with that since it is one a.m. Let's get through the night and we can reassess in the morning. Are you going to stay up with her, Traci?"

"No. Traci needs to get some sleep. I'll stay with her tonight. I'll sleep in the armchair in the corner. I'll sound the alarm if anything changes."

There is no way in hell Hallie is going to be left alone with the jerk named Troy. She needs to get to Aunt Gina. Just as she decides to open her eyes, she feels the prick of a needle in her arm. Within a minute she is feeling so drowsy, all thoughts of seeing her aunt tonight fade to black.

"Come on in. You must be Brent Carmichael. Sorry to drag you out in the weather at this hour, but Traci convinced me this is the kind of thing you'd want to know about right away." Troy is not used to having to look up at many people, but as the President of the Eagle's Pass Housing Board arrives just after one-thirty a.m., Troy has to look up to meet the grey eyes of the blond man.

Brent doesn't look angry, but concerned, as he takes off his snow-covered coat and boots before turning to Troy to shake hands. "Hey. Sorry to see you again under these conditions, Troy." When Troy stands there confused, Brent smiles. "It's okay. You met at least a hundred people last summer at the town picnic. I only had to remember one new person. You had

a lot of people to meet. I know Traci must be happy to have you here again for another visit.”

Troy displays a doubtful smile. “Well, I’m not entirely sure about that, but I know I’m glad I’m here.” Brent looks confused at his comment. Troy deflects. “It’s nothing important. Come on in. We’ll get you up to speed.”

Just as they get to the kitchen island, Traci makes an appearance in jeans and a sweatshirt. She had decided if they were going to be having guests, she’d rather be dressed. To anyone else, she looks exactly like the Traci they all know, but Troy can sense the tension between the two of them from having gone through a rather strange evening together.

Brent greets his host. “Hey, Traci. Char wanted to come over with me. She’s worried about you having an intruder in your house. There was just no way we could take Kayla out on a night like this. I told her you’d understand. She wasn’t so sure.”

Traci smiles. “I would have been so upset if she’d come out in this weather. I debated even calling you, but knowing you as I do, I knew you’d be upset if I didn’t. Still, I’d have been unhappy if she’d brought the baby out in this weather.”

“Damn straight. What the hell happened?”

Traci looks nervously at Troy, suddenly tongue tied at how to explain exactly what had happened here tonight. She looks away from both men and Troy can see guilt is playing on her face. Troy steps in to answer Brent’s questions. “Tonight, or should I say last night now, was Traci’s thirtieth birthday. I came over from Denver to surprise her, but she had already gone out for the night...” He glances at his sister before continuing. “...with friends. I had a key so I was waiting to surprise her when she got home. It was late. We were both up,

here in the living room, when the young woman barged into the room.”

Brent has been watching them both carefully. He is a smart man. He has to have picked up on the fact Troy is leaving details out of the story. To his credit, he seems to be choosing his questions carefully. “I see. Did the intruder knock first or just come in?”

Traci answers quietly. “She didn’t knock, no.”

“Can I ask why the door wasn’t locked? It was after midnight, right?”

“Traci and I were... talking. She hadn’t been home long at that point and I would have secured all the doors before we went to bed.” Troy’s answer seems to placate the tall man for a minute.

“Why didn’t you just call 911 to report the break-in?”

Troy is surprised. Calling the police had honestly never even crossed his mind. “If you’d seen her, you wouldn’t have called the police either. She’s a little waif of a thing. She didn’t have any weapons. She was shaking from head to toe. Frozen like a popsicle. It’s clear she needs help.”

“What is her condition now?” Brent has turned to Traci, wanting her to answer as the professional in the room.

“She’s asleep. Marcus gave her some pain meds. He’s gone to his office to bring back some additional supplies. We have her changed out of her wet clothes and are warming her with warming blankets. My guess is she wasn’t dressed to be outside but must have had car troubles that forced her to walk for help. My house is the first one people come to when they come in on Spanking Loop and since we had our lights on, well I think she just was coming to get some help.”

The Eagle's Pass founding father seems satisfied with that answer. Troy is relieved. He doesn't really want anyone else to know about his sister's foolish decisions last night and the punishment he had delivered. He still knows he had done the right thing, but that doesn't mean anyone beside him and his sister need to be privy to it. Between her shower, punishment and the commotion, the effects of her alcoholic bender have dissipated.

"I'm gonna have to give my friends with the sheriff's department a call and let them know this happened." Troy is not happy and Brent holds up his hand. "I can see you don't like that idea, Troy, but we need to get some help to find out who this young woman is. Her family might be looking for her. Wouldn't you want to know they had found your loved one safe if you were expecting them and they were delayed like this?"

Troy hates to admit it, but Brent's logic is spot on. Unfortunately, the thought of some abusive family member looking for her so they can have her home to hurt her more pisses Troy off. "You're right. We do need to find out who she is, but we're not going to just ship her off home. Did Traci tell you they found signs she had been abused before coming to Eagle's Pass?"

Brent scowls. "No. That's new info." The front door opens and the doctor rushes in then slams the door closed quickly to stop more snow from blowing in. Brent then finishes his thought. "I guess it's more important than ever that we get the police involved so we can find out who she is."

"She's Hallie Boudreaux. She is twenty-three years old and lives in Santa Monica, California." All three people in the kitchen turn to stare at the doctor in shock before he explains.

“I found her purse buried out in the snow. She must have dropped it before she came inside.” He holds up a wallet as if to support his claim.

Troy is sure they are all four thinking the same thing. How the hell does a twenty-three-year-old woman from California show up on foot in Eagle’s Pass in the middle of the night? The one thing Troy is sure of is that Hallie Boudreaux is running from something... or someone. Troy had seen fear in her eyes and for some reason, it haunts him. Someone has hurt her and while he may not understand how or why, he does know that he’s going to have to find them and make them pay.

Standing to leave, Brent sighs. “All right. It sounds like the three of you have things under control here. Keep her comfortable and safe for the night, and I’m gonna go home and call my buddies with the sheriff’s department and get them working on finding out what they can about Miss Hallie Boudreaux. I’ll be back in the morning and we can hopefully talk with her by then and try to get to the bottom of what’s going on. Sound like a plan?”

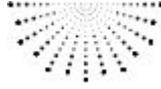
Troy sees why the tall man is in charge. He would have done well in the military. The doctor is the one who responds. “It’s a plan, Brent. I’m going to get her IV going and then I’ll sleep here to keep an eye on her.”

Before he stops to check his tone, Troy butts in. “Thanks for starting the IV, but I’ll be sleeping in the armchair in her room tonight. I’ll keep an eye on her and if I need help, I’ll wake up Traci and we’ll give you a call.” As the three other people in the room look at him strangely, he tries to downplay things. “Listen, I saw the fear in her eyes just before she collapsed. I don’t know why, but I feel like she came here for a reason and I’m supposed to protect her until she can be up and

on her own two feet. Really. I was gonna sleep in the guest room anyway so let me do that and you two go home to get a few hours of sleep with your families.”

Marcus and Brent share a knowing look before agreeing. “Fine. We’ll be back in the morning then.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Pain is the first thing to pry Hallie awake, followed closely by an urgent need to pee. She opens her eyes for a split second before the light pouring through the nearby curtains feels like it's burning her eyeballs and she snaps her eyes closed with a moan.

Her head is throbbing. She suspects the pain might be caused by more than just her normal morning caffeine addiction. Everything seems fuzzy and she takes a few minutes to try to piece together where she is. Memories of the car accident and being freezing cold come back to her followed by memories of a tall stranger with chocolate brown eyes. Unfortunately, she also remembers his brown belt that he'd wielded with practiced skill.

All men are assholes.

As much as she dreads trying to navigate out of bed with her head feeling like a ticking time bomb, the urge to pee wins. Opening her eyes slowly, allowing time to adjust to the daylight, Hallie gasps when she realizes she's not alone in the room. Propped up rather uncomfortably in the cushioned armchair at the foot of her bed is none other than the man of the house. What was his name again? Oh yes. *Troy*.

I wish it were Fred or something gross. I've always liked the name Troy, but now he's ruined it.

The sad thing is, he looks like a Troy. At least the kind of guy she would match with the name. She's glad he's asleep, not only because she wants no part of being in a room with him alone, but also so she has a few minutes to check him out without fear.

She remembers him being tall, but then again, at five foot one, everyone seems tall to her. She can see his long legs are stretched out as he lays his head on the back cushion of the chair. He doesn't look so scary now. In fact, he looks peaceful in sleep. His strong jaw is covered with a sexy, scruffy beard and his dark hair is cropped short. He's still dressed in the mint-green dress shirt and dark slacks he had on the night before.

Definitely not a scruffy musician.

That realization actually works in his favor with Hallie. She's had her fill of musicians to last her lifetime. Then it hits her. She'd hoped getting away from Eddie and the band would help her feel safe, yet the very first people she meets in what was to be her new hometown turn out to be in just as an abusive relationship as she had been in California. It's just another sad realization that since she lost her grandmother, violence seems to follow her wherever she goes.

The need to pee jars her out of her trip down memory lane. As Hallie makes her first attempt to get out of bed, she realizes she's tethered to an IV bag, courtesy of the needle lodged in the top of her left hand. She's glad they had knocked her out when the doctor put that in. She hates needles.

Even though it will mean taking the long way around the bed to get out the door in search of a bathroom, Hallie knows

she needs to stick with her IV stand. Pulling it out is the only thing worse than having it in. Pushing the warm covers off, she gets a look at the long flannel nightgown someone had dressed her in the night before. She's praying it was the woman named Traci and not her husband, *Troy*.

Moving slowly, Hallie swings her legs over the side of the bed and struggles to push up into a sitting position. She has to rest a minute to let her body adjust to being upright. The pressure on her bladder in her new position has her rushing to find the restroom. The bed is so tall; her feet don't reach the floor. She tentatively maneuvers her body into position to try to ease her feet to the carpet, but her foot gets tangled in the long IV cord, and she has to grasp the pole holding the bag in an attempt to stop her from falling forward. Unfortunately, the pole is on wheels, and too late, she knows what's going to happen next.

Damn. This is gonna hurt.

Moving like a ninja, Troy springs out of the chair at the foot of the bed and reaches out to catch Hallie, just before she would have face-planted onto the floor. She falls ungracefully into his outstretched arms face first, their chests slamming together, letting her know her first assessment of his athletic body had been spot on.

"Whoa there. You really shouldn't try to get out of bed yet. We're pretty sure you have a concussion." He doesn't sound like the devil incarnate, but then again, Eddie hides his temper well, too, when he wants to.

Trying to push away from him, Hallie awkwardly informs him. "I really need to pee." By now he has her stabilized on her feet, and she's wondering why he isn't backing off. With their height difference, she finds herself staring into the

buttons of his shirt. She tries again to push him back, but she might as well be pushing on a one-ton boulder for all the good it does. He has his arms wrapped around her, keeping her upright.

They stand there awkwardly until Troy uses a finger to lift her chin so she has no choice but to look him in the eyes. She sees him inspecting her forehead and remembers hitting the steering wheel. “How does your head feel today? You have quite the goose-egg, although it does look like the swelling has gone down some overnight.”

Why does he pretend to even care? And more importantly, why is he in here instead of the doctor or his wife? Allowing her anger to return, Hallie confronts him. “Listen, I need to go to the bathroom, and I’d like to do it without you pawing me, if you don’t mind.”

She sees a brief flash of something that looks like anger, reminding her how stupid it is for her to pick a fight with a guy twice her size. Under the best of conditions he could hurt her in a heartbeat. In her current condition, he could snap her like a twig. She’s relieved when his voice doesn’t betray any anger. “Okay, so you need to get to the bathroom. That’s fine, but you are gonna need my help. For starters, you have no idea where it is, but more importantly, you’re going to need help navigating there with this IV pole dragging behind.” He pauses to give his words time to sink in before continuing. “Come on, Hallie. Let me help you.”

She gasps. “How do you know my name?”

“Dr. Devon found your purse out in the driveway in the snow. You must have dropped it last night on your way here.”

Hallie doesn’t remember dropping her purse, but then again, she doesn’t remember much from that last leg of her

journey on foot. Freezing, exhausted and wet, she had had to dig deep to just keep putting one foot in front of the other to try to get to safety.

She's happy when Troy doesn't dally anymore. He reaches out to grab the pole with one hand while allowing her to lean on his other arm heavily. They only make it a couple of steps, though, when they both realize this isn't working. Obviously, his wife is much taller than Hallie because the long flannel nightgown is dragging on the floor, tripping her up with each step she takes. She has to choose between holding the gown up or holding onto Troy's arm for support.

Taking the decision out of her hands, Troy scoops her up into his arms as if she were a rag doll. "Oh. Wait. Put me down!"

"Don't be silly. You're gonna trip and fall. Grab onto the pole."

And that's how Hallie travels out the bedroom, across and down the hall covered in photo frames of every shape and size and into a large bathroom, pulling her IV pole behind them. She wants to scream for him to get his hands off her. She doesn't want or need help from a guy who takes joy in beating his wife until she cries, yet honestly, at this very moment, she wonders if her memory is playing tricks on her. Surely this handsome guy who is doing nothing but being kind to her couldn't be the same man from the night before.

Troy setting her onto her feet next to the toilet jars her out of her thoughts. She looks up to catch him looking at her. "Okay, I'm gonna leave you in here, but I'll be right outside the door so shout out if you need help. Okay?"

"I'm fine. You can just leave." Her tone is sharp.

Hallie watches him closely, suspecting he'll get angry, but surprised when Troy instead places his index finger under her chin, lifting her face up to make sure she is listening. Hallie flinches away from his touch and Troy doesn't push her.

The look in his eyes is so intense. His words even more so. "Listen, Hallie. I have absolutely no idea what's happened in your life that had you out walking in a blizzard in the middle of the night, but it's clear you need help. I'm going to give you that help, whether you like it or not. So... use the restroom. Wash your hands. I'll leave out a washcloth so you can wash your face and then you can call me back in. I'll be outside the door and then I'd like to escort you back to bed safely." If she didn't know better, she could swear he is daring her to talk back. She has every intention to. Who does he think he is?

And then he does it. He breaks into a smile that could light up Times Square. The sexy dimple on his chin peaks through the scruffy beard and she suddenly understands what his wife sees in him. Abusive asshole or not, the man can melt hearts.

"Hallie? Will you call me if you need help?"

Tell him to fuck off... tell him to fuck off...'

"Yes, I will," is what comes out of her mouth instead.

What the hell is wrong with me? Tell him to fuck off!

The words are on her tongue when she hears his "Good girl." Two deadlier words have never been spoken. They are her Achilles' heel. That's all she's ever tried to be - a good girl.

Leaving her in stunned silence, Troy moves quietly to the door, closing it behind him. She barely holds it together, letting loose her pent up sobs the second the door clicks closed. She hopes Troy hadn't heard her from the other side of

the wood. She doesn't want to give him any more power over her than he apparently already has.

Troy flips the bacon before loading the toaster with two slices of wheat bread. His thoughts are all over the place this morning, remembering the events of the last twelve hours. Is it really possible so much has happened in such a short period of time?

After getting Hallie safely back into bed, he'd retreated to the kitchen to make breakfast, but more importantly, work on getting his emotions in check. First Traci and now Hallie. Both women bringing out the protective side of his nature Kathy had been sure to point out was so 1950's.

For a while there, Kathy had managed to convince him something was wrong with him for being so behind the times. So old-fashioned as she called him. It's taken him almost a year since their break-up to acknowledge their relationship's demise had been the best thing for both of them. He's spent the last year figuring out what was really going to make him happy in life and his move back to Colorado to be closer to his sister... and Eagle's Pass... was a big part of his journey. He'd met so many couples during his weeklong visit last summer. He'd learned firsthand that he wasn't the only one that believed in the power of domestic discipline (DD), as old-fashioned as some make it out to be. Old-fashioned or not, he's seen it make for strong relationships. On the flip side, he sees examples every day in his co-workers and friends how messed up many relationships are without the kind of structure and intimacy DD provides.

It's easy to get lost in thought as he puts on a fresh pot of coffee. He's come to the conclusion that he's a modern man in all things... except relationships. He works with cutting edge technology every day. The kind of stuff only those with a top security clearance like himself are privy to. He drives a new SUV with all the bells and whistles. Loves to snap up the newest gadgets the second they hit the market. Listens to cutting edge, new music of every genre.

There's just one pocket of his life where Troy refuses to trade in his archaic views. Plain and simple, a man wears the pants in a family. Troy is more than happy to share leadership with women in all other aspects of his life, spare one. His home. His bed. As he has found, technically that's two distinctly different things, at least according to every woman he has dated in the last ten years.

He hasn't found it too hard to find women who like to give up control in the bedroom. Women happy to be dominated into doing all kinds of erotic acts they feel too guilty to admit they love. More than happy to let Troy 'force' them to be a naughty girl. Yes, those women he had no trouble finding at all.

It's the woman who subscribes to his dominating tendencies once they leave the bedroom that he's found to be a bit more elusive. Not that he blames them really. He knows and works with many brilliant, strong women whom he respects deeply. He really does understand the strength it must take a woman like his sister or so many of other women he had the privilege to meet last summer at the Eagle's Pass picnic, to follow the lead of their HoH. Strength to walk that tight rope of dominance and submission every day as they go about their daily lives.

Troy thinks back to something his sister had said the night before that surprised... and disappointed, him. It hadn't really been a conscious part of his plan, but only after finding out that Eagle's Pass had not been a good singles place for his sister to meet other like-minded singles, did Troy realize he had moved back to Colorado to spend time with his sister here in this community, in hopes of finding a like-minded woman. Finding out his sister has lived here over two years and hasn't met anyone special puts a damper on his enthusiasm.

Thoughts of his sister are still in front and center as he looks up to see her walking towards him, freshly showered and changed to a pair of jeans and comfortable top. Troy had taken the time to shower and change himself before deciding to start breakfast.

“Good morning, Trace. You ready for your first cup of coffee?”

“I was ready for that about an hour ago, but I was too tired to get out of bed to get up and make it. Thanks so much for starting breakfast. I'm starving.”

“Me too. How'd you sleep?”

“Honestly, not too great. It was hard to turn my brain off, ya know?” Troy sees her glance his way sheepishly.

“Yeah. I had a bit of that myself last night.”

“I just checked in on Hallie. She's asleep. Did you get any sleep sitting up in the chair?” Traci has crossed to the refrigerator to pour herself a glass of orange juice when she turns back to her brother. “Wait a minute. Where did all of this food come from? I haven't been to the market.”

Troy grins. “Really? I couldn't tell.” He lets her off the hook. “I'm glad the storm broke so I could drive over to the

quick mart and pick up some of the basics. You know you really need to stock up during the winter. You never know when you will get socked in for a few days.”

“I know, but I was planning on going to Denver today to run all of my errands. I guess that’s out now.”

“Especially with the roads covered. You really need to take more care with your safety, Trace.” When his sister shoots him a ‘yes, dad’ look, he retorts, “Are you trying to go for round two today? I must not have gotten through to you last night about the safety rules.”

She backs down immediately. “Oh no. You got through loud and clear. It’s just gonna take me a little time. You’ve been away for a while, you know.”

Troy plates the eggs and hands his sister her breakfast. “Keeping safe isn’t just a part-time job, Trace. You are the only relative I have left. You are important to me. I need to know you are taking care of yourself, even when I’m not here.” When his sister looks doubtful, he adds on the incentive he knows will hit home. “Fine. Don’t do it for me. Consider it practice for when you meet Mr. Right. I’m sure he would have gone harder on you last night than I did.”

“Somehow I doubt it. Heroes from romance novels rarely jump off the page to spank women’s butts, as much as we readers would like it.” She at least smiles sheepishly.

Troy can’t help but chuckle. “Yeah, well I noticed your choice of reading material while I was waiting for you last night.”

His sister is blushing a rosy pink. “Just great. My big brother is gonna tease me about my immoral reading habits.”

Troy steps up to his sister to look her in the eyes, making sure she knows he's telling the truth. "I just want you to be happy, sis. You can read or even watch whatever you want. Makes me no difference. It's when you get around to acting where I'm going to make sure I stick my nose in. No woman has ever been hurt by reading a racy romance novel. Going to a bar to pick up a stranger, on the other hand, has landed many a young woman in the hospital, or worse... the morgue. Got it?"

He sees the regret in her eyes. "Got it."

"I'm sorry, but I just have to ask. I love you, Trace, but did I overstep my bounds last night? I know I've never played that kind of role in your life, but honestly, it was more because I've never felt the need to before. You're normally so levelheaded that I've never felt like you were off course like you were last night. Did I read you wrong?" When his sister silently looks into his eyes, he pushes her. "Please tell me I didn't damage our relationship by disciplining you."

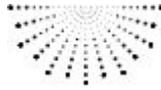
Tears flood her eyes just before she launches herself into her brother's arms, letting loose a stream of hot tears. "Oh Troy, I love you so much. I know at the time I hated it, but you were right. I've been so lonely lately and I was feeling sorry for myself. It just felt like no one loved me, but I was wrong. I know how much you love me and want me to be happy and safe."

Troy holds his sister close until her tears are spent. He reaches for a tissue from the nearby counter and offers it to her to dry her eyes. "Your Mr. Right is out there, and he won't be happy when he finds out you were acting so foolishly while he was looking for you."

His sister's half smile tells him his message might have gotten through. She confirms it with a quiet "Yes, sir." Music to his ears.

"Let's eat before it gets cold. Then we can go feed your houseguest."

CHAPTER FIVE



The promise of caffeine stirs Hallie awake. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingles with the heavenly scent of bacon. Her passion for bacon had not been popular in California. Hallie suspects she's even thinner than normal considering it's been days since she's had a really good meal. The promise of one now has her opening her eyes.

Hallie is relieved that it's the woman of the house, Traci, sitting in the chair at the end of the bed and not her domineering, albeit freaking hot, husband, Troy.

“Good morning. You must be hungry. Troy made you a big breakfast. I know you're still stuck with the IV so we thought it would be easier if I brought it in to you on a tray. You feel up to eating a bite?” Traci is being really polite considering Hallie had basically committed her own special version of breaking and entering the night before.

Hallie's stomach does the answering for her. The loud rumbling of her tummy has both women bursting into giggles. Traci speaks first. “I'll take that as a yes. Here, let me help you sit up.”

The women spend a few minutes getting Hallie into a sitting position, back resting comfortably against the fluffed pillows. As hungry as she is, Hallie beelines it to the coffee

first, and the tall, cold orange juice second. She hadn't realized how thirsty she was. Only when she's drained both beverages does she turn her attention to the bacon on the plate. Not too crispy. Not too wobbly. It is the Goldilocks of bacon. Just right.

She digs into her bacon, eggs and toast with gusto before remembering she's not alone. She glances up to see Traci studying her from the chair at the end of the bed. She has curled up, her legs drawn up under her, looking completely at ease, which in turns helps Hallie relax.

Hallie can see she is a beautiful woman. Probably a half dozen years older than herself, she takes the time to admire Traci's thick, dark hair. Hallie has always hated how thin and straight her own hair is. What she'd give to have thick, wavy hair like Traci.

"Don't let me interrupt your eating. I can see you're hungry and thirsty. Let me know what you need refills on."

"Thanks. You're being really nice to me, considering..." Hallie's voice trails off.

Traci picks up her thought. "Considering you broke into my house in the middle of the night." The grin on Traci's face tells Hallie she's just teasing.

Still, embarrassed, Hallie has the decency to blush. "Yeah. That."

Traci's smile turns more serious. "Want to talk about why you did *that*?"

"What do you mean? I could hear you all the way outside as I was coming up your driveway. I could hear you crying out and knew you needed help. I mean, yes, it was rude to barge in, but at least it got him to stop beating you."

Traci is remarkably calm talking about something so serious and personal. “Is that what you thought Troy was doing to me? Beating me?”

“Well... yeah. Don’t deny it. I saw it with my own two eyes.” Hallie lets the vision of Troy standing behind Traci as her ass was being thrashed with his belt return. For the hundredth time in her life, Hallie hates that with memories like this come much scarier feelings than just fear and anger. She feels that strange fluttering in her tummy again and she works hard to squelch it.

She wasn’t expecting Traci’s answer. “What you saw as a beating, I prefer to call a spanking. And I can assure you, it doesn’t happen very often, but I had earned this one.”

“That’s what men try to tell us so they can get rough. Nothing we do deserves a beating.”

Traci’s smile is sincere. “Oh, I completely agree with that. No one ever deserves a beating. I just think we might have different definitions for the word.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Okay, let me ask you what the word spanking means to you?”

“I don’t know. I guess of being a kid and my grandma spanking me when I didn’t clean my room or when I was late getting home, and she had been worried.” She doesn’t include her last spanking at the hands of her Uncle Adam the last summer she had spent with them. He had only spanked her that one time, but she would never forget it. She’d wanted to be so angry with him at the time, but she had found she just couldn’t get mad because she absolutely knew she’d deserved it. As much as she wanted to hate him for hurting her, she had

found the spanking had brought her closer to her uncle because he had told her at least a dozen times, he was correcting her because he loved her.

Traci is continuing on. “Well, those of us living in Eagle’s Pass believe that the value of spankings doesn’t stop when we grow up. Have you ever heard of domestic discipline or DD?”

“I think I’ve heard... people... mention DD before, but I never really knew what it meant.” Memories of the night of her spanking courtesy of Uncle Adam return. She remembers her aunt and uncle arguing about if they had the right to spank their sixteen-year-old niece since she didn’t really understand anything about DD. She hadn’t understood at the time, but in the end, they had agreed that doing something as stupid as borrowing their car to drive into town to see friends was bad enough to warrant correction. Borrowing the car without permission had been bad. Driving without a valid driver’s license had been plain stupid. The lesson over Uncle Adam’s knee with Aunt Gina’s wooden spoon had ensured she would never repeat that particular mistake ever again.

Lost in memories for a few minutes, Hallie looks up to see Traci still watching her patiently. She smiles kindly. “Welcome back. Want to share what you were remembering?”

“Not particularly.”

Tracy smiles. “That’s okay. You don’t have to. So do you want to tell me what you’re doing in Eagle’s Pass in the first place and more importantly, what had you out walking in the middle of the night in a blizzard?”

Hallie tries to deflect. “Not particularly.”

“Hmmm. I see a pattern.” Traci’s smile grows. “So how about telling me if there is someone I can call to let them know

where you are? Surely someone is out looking for you and is worried.”

Traci must see the look of sadness on Hallie’s face she had failed to mask. “No one is looking for me. No one knows where I am and more importantly, no one cares.”

“I find that very hard to believe.”

“Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but it’s the truth.” Then something Traci had said hits her. “Wait. You said the people of Eagle’s Pass believe in the value of spankings. How the hell would you know that? I mean it’s a town. How can everyone feel the same way?”

For the first time, Traci looks like she is a bit uncomfortable, but to her credit, she answers Hallie’s question head on. “Well, that’s the thing. This town is unique. It is a co-op where the residents buy in shares to live here. In order to be approved, everyone is screened and only those people... families... believing in the domestic discipline way of life are approved.” Pieces of a very strange puzzle start clicking into place for Hallie. “Wait. You’re telling me everyone in Eagle’s Pass feels this way? That it is okay for men to beat their women? It’s part of the town bylaws?”

Traci is laughing at her now. “You aren’t listening closely enough, Hallie. Yes, everyone here believes in relationships where one member of the family is the Head of the Household or HoH and the other is the submissive partner. Sometimes called Taken in Hand or TiH. In most couples that means the man is in charge of all major family decisions, but there are some couples where the woman of the house takes the lead. We also have several gay couples living here, but all relationships have one thing in common. Someone is the HoH and someone else is the TiH.”

Before Hallie can comment, Traci continues on, making sure Hallie is paying attention. “Hallie, look at me. This part is the most important part. What you saw last night. What we practice here in Eagle’s Pass, it has nothing to do with beating. Ever. DD is about loving people enough to guide them when they get off course. Protecting them, sometimes from themselves when they make poor choices.” Hallie can’t help but notice the sad look on Traci’s face and she suspects she had made some poor decisions recently. “The HoH’s in Eagle’s Pass do use spanking or corporal punishment if you prefer the term for punishments, but they also use traditional things like grounding, loss of privileges, corner time... stuff like that. Never anything to do lasting harm. Never striking anything but a bare bottom.”

“That can’t be right. I mean Aunt Gina would never stand in the corner.” Too late Hallie realizes her error.

“Is Gina Newberry your aunt?” Traci looks pleased with the new information.

Hallie is not. “You know my Aunt Gina?”

Traci smiles indulgently. “Honey, I know every person who lives in Eagle’s Pass. It’s not that big of a town and we are... well let’s just say we are a very close-knit community. Everyone knows each other.”

Hallie is starting to panic. “Aunt Gina doesn’t even know I was coming. I haven’t seen her or Uncle Adam for over five years. It’s just... well I didn’t really have anywhere else to go. I was hoping they might put me up for a few days while I figure out what I’m gonna do next.”

Traci has stood up and crossed over to stand next to the bed. It startled Hallie when Traci takes her hand. “Hallie, I can absolutely promise you that your aunt and uncle are going to

be thrilled to find you are here in town. They never told me your name, but they have talked to me several times about their regrets over not insisting on having you come live with them when your grandma died. They've been so worried about you. Please trust me. You are going to make them very happy by coming to stay with them."

The relief of hearing that her aunt and uncle had loved her enough to talk about her with complete strangers has tears streaming down Hallie's face. She has to fight not to melt down into an emotional mess. "Do you think you or your husband could call them and tell them where I am? I really would like to see them."

The surprise on Traci's face has Hallie pausing, afraid she had said something wrong. "Hallie, I think you've totally misunderstood. Troy is not my husband."

Anger flairs again that this wonderful woman who is fast becoming a friend would put up with the abuse of someone who didn't even have the decency to marry her. Great. He's just as bad as Eddie is. Wanting his cake and to eat it too. "What a jerk. I can't believe you'd let a boyfriend treat you like that."

"Hallie, Troy isn't my boyfriend, either." Hallie gets a flutter in her tummy at the sight of Traci's sly smile. "Troy is my brother."

The flutter in her tummy turns to a rolling churn. She had thought Troy was dangerous before. Him and his sexy five o'clock shadow and dimpled grin just turned damn right lethal. Hallie remembers her anger at seeing him beating his sister. She's not sure if the possibility of what she'd witnessed being a consensual spanking versus a more sinister whipping make

her feel better, or worse. She just knows she needs to get the hell out of here.

“Come on in, Officer Leano. Join the party.” Troy shakes his hand before stepping aside to allow the uniformed officer to come into the quickly filling house. After taking his boots off at the front entry, the men make their way to the kitchen where it’s close to pandemonium.

Troy watches as the officer makes his way straight to the tallest man in the room, Brent Carmichael. He had returned this morning, his pretty wife and adorable toddler, Kayla, in tow. Troy hadn’t known it before they arrived, but he’s been able to piece together that Char and Traci are not only good friends, but he suspects Char sees Traci professionally based on some of the comments they’ve shared. Not more than five minutes after the Carmichaels had arrived, a man introducing himself as Lelo Stevens had arrived, trailed a few minutes later by Jason Rolson. Apparently, they are planning an impromptu board meeting in Traci’s kitchen.

Young women barging into unlocked homes is apparently big news in Eagle’s Pass.

Troy manages to stand on the fringe of the commotion, feeling a bit like a fifth wheel. He’s not an official member of the community and as such, isn’t exactly sure what his role is in the current situation. The only thing he knows with certainty is that he isn’t deserting his sister or the waif of a houseguest in the back bedroom currently being examined by Dr. Devon.

Speaking of the devil, Troy glances up to see the good doctor walking down the hall to join in the fray.

After several minutes of catching snippets of conversations he wants to be part of, Troy loses his patience. He takes charge the only way he knows how... letting loose with a loud whistle. The kind his dad had taught him as a kid on a camping trip. It's come in handy many times since.

It works like a charm. There is dead silence in the room, short of Kayla playing quietly with her doll. Seven pairs of eyes point his direction.

"I'm sorry if this seems rude, but I was hoping to hear all the updates that are going on. So if you don't mind, can we have one person talking at a time please?"

Brent breaks out into a grin. "Damn. We could use a man like you on the board. You're one bossy HoH if I ever saw one."

Troy isn't sure if that's a compliment or not. "Not quite yet." Flashing a glance at his sister, he finishes that thought. "I'm working on it though." He's rewarded with her blush. "Anyway, officer, I'm sorry to make you repeat, but I am interested in finding out more about Hallie's car."

Officer Leano clears his throat, not entirely comfortable being bossed around by the new guy in town, but complying with Troy's request, nonetheless. "We found what we presume to be Miss Boudreaux's older model car, slid off the road. It's lodged in a rather deep ditch about one and a half miles outside of town. She's lucky the car hit a tree, which prevented it from sliding even deeper into the gulch. Had that happened, I fear she would've been trapped with no way to get the doors open. The vehicle was completely out of gas so she would have found herself freezing before too long."

A pain akin to heartburn has started in Troy's chest as he thinks of the panic Hallie must have felt being out there in

those conditions alone. No wonder she was frozen to death by the time she arrived. How long would it take to march through deep snow one and a half miles, especially for a little thing like her?

The policeman has continued on and Troy has to drag his thoughts back to pay attention. “The strange thing is that the car is not registered to Miss Boudreaux. The vehicle is registered to a...” He takes a small notebook out of his pocket, flipping pages to an entry before continuing on...” a Mr. Edward Kingston, Santa Monica, California.”

Dr. Devon jumps in. “Her driver’s license had her living in Santa Monica. Perhaps he’s her boyfriend.”

The officer continues. “Well, I’ll get to the bottom of that when I interview Ms. Boudreaux. The car had traces of cannabis in the glove compartment. It’s too late now to run tests, but I want to find out if she was under the influence of drugs at the time of the accident.”

Alarm bells are going off for Troy. “I was one of the first people to see Ms. Boudreaux after the accident. She didn’t look impaired to me. How about you, Trace?” Troy looks at his sister, sending her silent instructions to back him up.

“I agree with my brother, officer. I would have detected if she were impaired in any way. She just looked exhausted and wet. And honestly, she did end up collapsing, but it was due to the concussion she sustained in the accident.”

Leano looks back and forth between the brother and sister knowingly. He then looks at Brent who keeps a straight face before folding. “Fine. My report will show Ms. Boudreaux was not impaired. I do need to interview her, though, to understand how she found herself off the road. Do we know

why she was heading into Eagle's Pass that late on a Friday night, anyway?"

The timing of their arrival couldn't have been timed better. The policeman's question hangs in the air when Gina Newberry crashes through the front door without knocking, ironically, exactly as her niece had done less than twelve hours before. She looks like she's rushing out of a burning building she's moving so fast. Her stocky husband is following at a more reasonable pace, stopping to close the door behind them. Gina's eyes are flowing across everyone assembled in the room, trying to decide who to talk to first. She picks Traci.

Gina rushes towards Traci. "I got your message. We were at the store when you called and I came as fast as I could. Is it true? My Hallie is really here?" The worry for her niece is evident.

Troy is so proud of his sister. She's so good at keeping everyone calm in a crisis. "Yes, Gina. Hallie is here and she's doing well. She has a concussion and mild hypothermia, but Dr. Devon has been treating her and we've decided she doesn't need to go to the hospital."

Gina looks relieved before she lets her own confusion add to that of the rest of the room. "What happened to her? Why didn't she call and tell me she was on the way?"

Leano answers. "That's what I'm trying to get to the bottom of. So Ms. Boudreaux is your niece?"

Gina turns her attention to the officer in the room, but it's her husband Adam who steps up to answer the question. Troy recognizes him taking over the questioning now that the police are involved. "Yes, sir. She is the daughter of my wife's sister, Julie. I'm afraid Julie passed away just over three years ago, and we've lost touch with our niece somewhat. We've been

praying she would come to us for help if she needed it. It looks like our prayers have been answered.”

Troy is relieved for Hallie. Knowing her family loves her and is happy to have her in Eagle’s Pass with them will help her recover from whatever has her on the run in the first place. She hasn’t fooled Troy. He knows there is much they don’t know about Hallie’s story.

With the arrival of two additional occupants, the room has once again deteriorated into controlled chaos. Giving up on organizing the discussions, Troy glances down the hall just in time to see Hallie herself ducking into his sister’s office, the room closest to the kitchen. The little sneak is trying to get close enough to find out what’s going on without having to announce herself. Taking a last look at the crowd all talking at the same time, Troy can’t say he blames her.

He’s sure no one notices when he backs out of the space, heading to his sister’s office. Hallie’s waiting just inside the door, her eyes widen when she realizes she’s been caught eavesdropping.

Troy tries to put her at ease. “Mind if I hide in here with you? It’s chaos out there.”

She gives him a nervous look and he can see tears pooling, threatening to spill down her cheek. “I said I was sorry for breaking in here. Did you have to call the damn cops on me?”

Troy can see the panic rising in her eyes and he moves closer, reaching out to take her hand to keep her from bolting. He catches her before she steps out of reach. Her hand feels small and warm, with the slightest tremor of fear. “Oh no, Hallie. We didn’t call the police. At least not the way you think. The police found your car in the ditch. They were worried about what happened to you.”

“Oh. Thank goodness.” The relief is short. True terror fills her eyes.

“Hallie? What’s wrong?” Troy tries to get her to answer, but she’s frozen in fear. He moves to catch her as she looks like she might collapse. “Hey... what’s this? You should be happy. Your aunt and uncle just arrived. They can’t wait to see you.”

Instead of cheering her up, he hears a sob escape instead. Troy is surprised when she hugs him tightly as if he might be her lifeline. He hates to see her in distress, but can’t help but like how she feels in his arms, so warm and feminine. Her head tucks neatly under his chin and her scent stirs inappropriate feelings under the circumstances.

He holds her until she calms. Reaching to the box of tissues on Traci’s desk, he grabs a few and helps wipe at her tears. In spite of their red rims, her green eyes are intoxicating.

Her nose is running courtesy of her crying jag. Troy grabs another tissue and holds it out to her. “Here you go. Blow for me.” She blushes, embarrassed, yet she grabs the tissue to comply. “Good girl.” It’s in that second Troy knows how important praise is to Hallie, making him suspect she hasn’t received much of it in her twenty-three years. He watches her relax under his simple compliment.

“Now, why don’t you tell me what has you so upset? Don’t you want to see your aunt and uncle?”

Her answer is quiet. “Yes, of course I do.”

“So why the tears?” She tries to look away. He suspects she’s remembering how they’d met the night before as she tries to yank out of his grasp. He lets her step back but remains close enough to gently tilt her chin to look up into his eyes.

“Please don’t be afraid of me, Hallie. I know we got off to a bit of a rough start, but I promise you. No one, including me, is going to hurt you.”

She hesitates before answering softly. “Okay.” It’s not much, but it’s a start.

“Why the tears?”

“It’s not my car I was driving.”

“Yes, the police said it belonged to an Edward somebody. Is he a friend or something?”

“Or something.” Yep, there’s a story there.

“Boyfriend?”

She just nods her head, too afraid to speak.

“Let me guess. He didn’t know you were taking the car, did he?” This time a slight shake of the head.

“And he isn’t going to be happy to find it... and you... gone?”

Several tears streaming down her face is his only answer. He hates the next question, but he has to ask. “Edward is the person who hurt you, isn’t he? Traci said she and the doctor found old bruises all over your body. Edward gave them to you, didn’t he?”

He can detect her trembling and knows he’s put the pieces of her puzzle together. “Do you think he’s chasing you? Is that why you were running in the middle of the night?”

She finally tries to speak. “I really don’t think he could give a shit about me, so no. I think he might miss the car though. It’s the gopher.”

That was unexpected. “Gopher?”

She's wiping at her tears again, reaching for more tissues. "Yeah. Edward is Eddie. He's the lead singer of The Kings. You've probably never heard of them before but..."

"You mean the band The Kings that started out a few years ago in New Orleans and has been touring with several larger bands? I think they were the opening act out in DC when I went to see Matchbox 20."

Hallie's face lights up. "Hey, I was at that concert. Isn't it cool we were both there?"

Troy isn't as impressed. "I've heard some not-so-great things about his off-stage antics. I'm hoping it was all just gossip-rag shit."

"I doubt it. Eddie loved to call the paparazzi on himself. He used to say it was free advertising. It made him feel important."

"Sounds like a real smart guy... not."

"Well, his brains aren't his best quality." Hallie blushes beet red after she realizes what she'd said. Troy wants to punch something when he thinks of this young woman in the clutches of an asshole like Eddie Kingston.

He tries to bring the conversation back to safer territory. "So Gopher?"

"Right. We used the car when we needed to make short runs for supplies. It was a pain to have to drive the tour bus around town for stuff like groceries."

"Ah. Gopher. Well, he can call a fucking cab now." Hallie looks surprised at his choice of words and Troy realizes he needs to rein his temper in. "So, you ready to go out and talk to everyone? The sooner you get through explaining what

happened, the sooner you can get back to bed and get more rest.” “Do I have to?”

“I’m afraid so. It won’t be so bad. We’ll all be there to help you.”

She gets a reticent look on her face. “You too? I mean... you’ll be there?”

Hallie’s long hair has fallen softly around her heart-shaped face. The winter sun illuminates the patch of light freckles that dot her cheeks. She looks so young and Troy hates the pang of vulnerability in her eyes. It makes him want to pound on his chest and drag her back to his mancave to protect her and...

Don’t go there, old man. She’s over ten years younger than you.

“I guess that’s up to you, Hallie. I don’t want to upset you... like last night.”

The energy is charging between them as they each remember the odd circumstances of how they met less than twelve hours earlier. Troy worries she’s going to bolt from the room as she recalls the spanking she’d interrupted. He’s relieved with her quiet reply. “It won’t upset me... I mean, if you want to be there, that is.” Her voice betrays how emotionally frail she is.

She needs a friend. He can be that. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Troy holds out his hand as an official peace offering. She stands stock-still, staring at his open palm, a pensive look on her face. He’s amazed when Hallie slowly slides her hand into his. Based on the events of the previous twelve hours, Troy is surprised she’s not running from the room instead.

They both stand and stare at how one hand so large, the other so small could fit each other so neatly, fingers intertwining together perfectly. Troy's gaze moves to her face, waiting for her to look up and satisfied that when she does, he sees no fear in her green eyes. Progress has been made. "Let's go get 'em, shall we?"

She rewards him with what he suspects might be a rare smile. He feels privileged to witness it.

Troy leads Hallie from the room, down the hall and into the open living space. They must stand there for thirty seconds before they're noticed in the craziness. Aunt Gina's piercing scream of "Haaallliiee!" manages to bring an end to all conversation.

Hallie shoots him a nervous glance as she squeezes his hand for moral support. She waits, glued to her spot, for her aunt to bowl her over. Gina scoops her up into her arms and Troy is forced to release Hallie's hand as she's pulled away.

Adam isn't far behind. Now that they're closer, Troy vaguely remembers meeting the couple at the picnic last summer. His impression of them at the time was that they're good people and for that, he's relieved. The protective look in Adam's eyes as he watches his wife and niece hugging tells Troy everything is going to be okay for Hallie.

Gina is looking over her niece like she would were she about to buy a new car. She circles Hallie, tsking the whole while. Hallie throws an embarrassed glance Troy's way and he gives her a supportive smile. In the end, Hallie handles the inspection with grace, even when her aunt starts talking about how she's going to have to fatten Hallie up now that she's going to be living with them.

Troy doesn't miss the concerned look passed between Brent, Jason and Lelo. He wonders what it's about. He doesn't have to wait long.

Brent speaks first. "Adam, maybe we should convene an emergency Housing Board meeting to talk about this a bit later this afternoon."

Adam's first reaction is of surprise, but he seems to catch on quickly. Troy wishes he did.

Adam answers with a simple, "I understand. Let me get the girls home and then I'll meet you at the community center."

Troy butts in. "What? What's going on?"

Brent is nice enough to humor him, considering he's not an official member of the community. "We have strict rules in our co-op. Were Hallie a minor, there would be nothing to discuss. As a twenty-three-year-old niece, things are not that cut and dried. As an adult, she'll need to apply to Eagle's Pass and participate in the co-op if she wants to live here."

The room breaks out into multiple conversations until Troy injects and once again, everyone stops talking. "With all due respect, I think there are some extenuating circumstances. Not to mention, Christmas is less than two weeks away. I'd think you could defer any discussion on this point until after the holidays. Can't you let Hallie and her family focus on their reunion and try to figure out what she wants to do before you make any decisions? She may decide she doesn't want to stay in Eagle's Pass, after all."

Aunt Gina gasps at that suggestion, clearly unhappy with the possibility Hallie may choose not to live with her family.

Brent's eyes are intense as he sizes Troy up. Finally breaking into a grin, he agrees with Troy's plan. "You're right,

Troy. There's no rush. We'll put this matter on our January agenda. That's about three weeks from now. Would that be better?"

For some curious reason, Brent's looking to Troy for his approval, not the Newberrys. "I think that's more than fair." Glancing to Hallie, he can see relief on her face.

"Great. Well Char, let's get our little munchkin packed up and ready to go home. Adam, you'll of course go through the co-op rules with your houseguest, right?"

Adam has approached his friend to shake his hand. "You know I will, Brent and... well.. Thank you. This means a lot to Gina and me to give us time to get Hallie settled."

Brent smiles. "We're a family here, Adam. Of course we'll give Hallie some time to get settled. Just make sure she understands what being a guest in Eagle's Pass entails before the weekend is over."

Troy moves to talk with Hallie, but he's too late. She's being whisked away by her aunt across the room to confer with Dr. Devon.

Traci notices him standing on the sidelines and comes to talk. "Hey. You did good."

"Yeah. Well, I just want to give the kid some time to get it together, you know?"

"I do. That's why she's gonna begin meeting with me a couple times a week starting Monday."

Troy looks down at his sister. "That's great, Trace. I can tell she really likes you. I think you're going to be able to help her."

"Thanks, but I can tell I'm not the only one she likes."

Troy thinks he knows where this is going. “Oh no you don’t. Don’t look at me like that. You’re forgetting she burst in here because she thought I was the devil incarnate, here to beat you to death.”

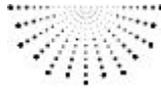
“Yeah, well I set her straight on that this morning.”

Troy hates how much that pleases him. “Thanks, sis. I appreciate you sticking up for me, even though sometimes I can be a pain in the ass.”

“You can say that again... literally.”

While Troy and Traci were bantering, Gina and Adam have bundled their niece up in a heavy blanket and are shooing her out the door to their waiting SUV. At the last minute, Hallie looks back to connect her green eyes with his and then she’s gone. Thirty minutes ago, he would have done anything for some peace and quiet around here. Now, Troy hates how empty Traci’s house feels.

CHAPTER SIX



“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in with you, honey?” It’s only the fifth time Aunt Gina has asked since breakfast.

Hallie takes a deep breath, trying to keep the impatience out of her reply. “Thanks for the offer, Aunt Gina, but really, I think it’s best that I go in by myself.” Moving quickly, Hallie opens the door to the SUV and is standing in Traci’s driveway, ready to close the door, quick before Aunt Gina could insist on coming in.

“Well, okay. What time would you like me to pick you up?”

Hallie honestly didn’t know. “How about I call you when I’m done. I have your cell number and my phone is charged.”

Gina doesn’t look happy, but she still plasters an indulgent smile on her face. “Sure, honey. I’ll just wait for your call. Have a good time, okay?”

Hallie can’t help but chuckle. “Well, considering I’m going to get my head shrunk, I’m not sure about how much fun I’m gonna have.”

“Now, Hallie. Don’t say rude things like that about Traci. She’s a wonderful lady and therapist. You need to let her help

you.”

“Yes, Aunt Gina.”

Hallie is nervous. It feels like she’s about to spring out of her skin. It may have only been forty-eight hours since she was here last, but it feels like a lifetime ago. She takes a deep cleansing breath, trying to lower her heart rate. The front door swings open before her finger connects with the doorbell. A smiling Traci greets her.

“Dr. Jackson. Thanks for seeing me.”

“Oh no you don’t. I’m a psychologist, not a psychiatrist so technically, I’m not a doctor. I’m just Traci. It’s great to see you again, Hallie. You look about a thousand times better than the last time I saw you. Please, come on in.” She swings the door wide, ushering her newest client in.

Hallie stomps her snow-covered boots on the mat and takes off her proper winter coat, gloves and scarf to hand to a waiting Traci. “I see someone’s gone shopping. I like your new winter gear.”

“Thanks. Yeah, I’m glad the storm cleared enough on Sunday that Uncle Adam and Aunt Gina could take me on a marathon shopping spree yesterday in Denver to pick up a lot of the things I needed.”

“That’s really great of them. Were you able to get your stuff out of the car before they towed it away? I heard it’s totaled, but I was hoping you’d be able to save some of your belongings.”

They’d been walking and talking, arriving in the kitchen where the smell of coffee welcomes her. Hallie notices a steaming cup already waiting for her at the island. She takes a

sip to try to calm her nerves before answering the question hanging in the air.

“Well, I left in a hurry, so I didn’t really have that much stuff with me. We were on the road and I only had clothes with me on the tour bus. Uncle Adam is trying to find someone to go to my apartment in California to pack up the rest of my belongings there and send them.”

“Wow, I hadn’t realized you had so little with you. It’s nice of them to buy you what you need. At least you can take your time now with moving.”

Hallie chuckles. “Well, if it were up to Uncle Adam, they’d be packing up my apartment today.” When she sees the confused look on Traci’s face, she answers her unasked question. “He’s afraid I’m going to change my mind and decide to go back to Eddie. I think he’s trying to hurry and get me all moved before I can back out.”

Traci’s smile seems genuine. “I’m sure they’re just worried about you. They love you, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Unfortunately, they think I’m still that eighteen-year-old girl they last saw. If someone finds me dead, have it investigated as ‘death by smothering.’”

That draws a chuckle out of the therapist. “How are your injuries? Are you in any pain?”

Hallie’s been here for several minutes and is growing more and more anxious. “Um... aren’t we supposed to go into your office? I mean, have me lay down on the couch and shit?”

Traci’s grin is contagious. “Well, we can do that if you’d like to, but truthfully, I meet with most of my patients here in the kitchen over a cup of coffee. It just seems easier to talk freely this way.”

“But... I mean, what if...?” Hallie doesn’t know what she’s trying to say and then she blushes pink. “What if Troy comes in and hears us talking? Isn’t there doctor-patient privilege or something?”

Traci stutters in surprise. “Of course... how would... Hallie, I thought you knew. Troy doesn’t live with me. He was just visiting for the weekend to help me celebrate my birthday.”

The figurative kick to the gut is unexpected. Hallie has already spent more time than she’d like thinking about Troy Jackson and the unusual circumstances that had brought them together. Now she hates to acknowledge her disappointment in not seeing him today. “Oh, it’s just as well... I mean... it’s good... he can’t overhear...”

“Until a few weeks ago Troy lived near Washington D.C., but he recently transferred back to the Denver base.”

“Base?”

“Troy is an officer in the Air Force. To be honest, I don’t know all that much about what he does, but I do know he had to get top security clearance before his last assignment. Several members of the FBI interviewed me when they were validating his status. He can’t talk about what he’s working on. Sometimes I like to tease him that he’s like James Bond.”

As exciting as his career might sound, the unexpected news that he doesn’t even live in Eagle’s Pass brings conflicting emotions.

I should be happy. He scares me, in more ways than one.

“Hallie?”

Lost in thought, Hallie finally hears Traci. “Yes?”

“Are you okay? You look upset.” Traci’s concern is written on her face.

“I’m fine.” Hallie works on changing the subject away from Traci’s handsome older brother. “So how does this work?”

Traci sips her coffee. She looks like she’s trying hard to appear casual. Hallie detects the sliver of uncertainty in the therapist’s behavior. “There’s no formula. We just talk about whatever’s on your mind. If you get stuck, I ask some questions, but for now, why don’t you just start by talking about how things are going over at your aunt’s house?”

Hallie sighs. This topic should be an easy one for her. It’s not. “Aunt Gina and Uncle Adam have been great. I know they are happy to have me here and have done so much to make me feel welcome and not just like a burden.”

Traci smiles. “But...” She’s observant.

“No *but*... really. I’ve spent most of my life dreaming of having a family care about me like they do. I know I should be grateful.”

“But, you’re not? Grateful, I mean?”

“Sure, I am. It’s just... they forget I’ve been on my own for a long time now. I’m not used to having people looking after me and telling me what to do.”

“So, Eddie didn’t do that for you?”

Hallie can’t stop her snort. “Oh, hell no. I was the one who did the taking care of, not the other way around. He blamed his antics on being an artist. I think it was just because he’s an immature prick.”

Traci's eyes widen briefly at her choice of nouns. "So, you had to take care of him? What exactly does that mean?"

Hallie drains her coffee mug. "Mind if I help myself to another cup while we talk?"

Traci rises to serve her, but Hallie cuts her off. "No, sit. I'm happy to serve myself. In fact, would you like more?"

"Sure, thanks. But pouring coffee won't get you out of answering the question."

Hallie looks over her shoulder to see a kind smile on Traci's face. "I know. No, I may be over five years younger than Eddie, but from day one, I was the mature one. He'd still be playing sets for beer in podunk towns in backwoods Louisiana if I hadn't pushed him and got him organized."

Traci's confusion lets Hallie know she doesn't know anything about Eddie. Hallie asks her. "Troy didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Maybe you've never heard of him, but Eddie is Eddie Kingston, the lead singer of The Kings, a band."

Traci doesn't seem impressed. "I've never heard of them."

"I'm not surprised. They're just starting to take off now that they got their first recording deal and they've been traveling as the opening band for Matchbox 20."

"That sounds exciting. You seem pretty young to be managing a band. I'm not wrong in assuming Eddie was more than just a band member to you, though, right?"

Hallie has taken her seat across from Traci again. "No, you're not wrong. He was my boyfriend before I even knew he

was in a band. We were both working part-time in a restaurant in Baton Rouge. I was going to the community college. He was trying to get the band rolling.”

“What kind of a guy was he back then?”

“Oh, he was charming, in a totally carefree kind of way. The rest of my life seemed so intense and he was a breath of fresh air at the time.”

Traci’s eyes never stop looking for cues. Hallie feels under a microscope. “So what was going on in the rest of your life that was so intense?”

The wave of sadness blankets Hallie’s heart like a heavy weight. She doesn’t like to remember that time in her life. She knows Traci has no clue that she’s just struck the therapist’s equivalent of gold by getting Hallie to tap into the hardest two years of her life within ten minutes of their time together. The old temptation to run from her memories flares and Hallie has to force herself to take a deep breath.

Traci’s voice is soft and reassuring. “We don’t have to go there yet, if you’re not ready.”

Hallie doubts she’ll ever be ready to talk about it. What she does know is she’s tired of running from her own memories. Tired of expending the energy of being angry with a man who probably hasn’t thought of her even once in the three years since she left home.

Home. Where is that anyway?

Traci must wait a full minute for Hallie’s internal debate to conclude. In the end, it’s the kind woman patiently waiting for her across the kitchen island that finally has Hallie ready to relive memories she’d never shared with another living soul. Memories that she’d buried in the hopes they would be

forgotten. Only as she'd matured has she figured out the impossibility of that task. She tried running away from them with Eddie and that failed. Maybe talking about them will help.

"Everything was fine until my grandma got sick my freshman year in high school."

"Did you and your parents live near her?"

"I never knew my dad. My parents were never married and talking about him made my mom and grandma argue, so I tried not to ask too many questions about him."

"So you and your mom lived with your grandma?"

"Yeah, and honestly, I had a great childhood. I know I'm supposed to feel upset that I never had a dad, but I'm not."

"Hallie, you're not *supposed* to feel anything, at least not with me. All I ask is you just be honest with me... and more importantly with yourself."

"Yeah, well thanks for that."

"So your grandma got sick?"

The panic of realizing her grandma had a terminal illness hits her as if she'd just heard the news. It has a way of sneaking up on her when she allows herself to wallow in memories.

"Fucking lung cancer. She didn't even smoke."

"That really sucks. I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Yeah, me too. As Nana got worse, my mom started to freak out. I had never realized how much she depended on Nana before. She had dated a couple times over the years, but nothing serious, but within a month of Nana's funeral, she had

this loser of a guy staying overnight at the house. I'd hoped it was just how she was dealing with her grief, but no such luck. She married the asshole a few months later."

"Oh wow. That must have been a big change for you having a man in the house."

"That's the understatement of the century."

"I'm guessing you didn't like your new step-father."

"I hated the prick."

Traci smiles. "You like that word, I see."

It takes Hallie a few seconds to realize what she's referring to. "Yeah, well I guess I do. I've had more than my share of pricks in my life."

"What was his name?"

"I told you. The Prick." Traci isn't smiling anymore. "Fine. Gene. His name is Gene."

When Hallie sits silently, hoping for a change in subject, Traci smiles kindly. "You know my next question, don't you?"

The therapist's candid and honest approach is refreshing and not at all what Hallie expected from her first session with a professional. "I don't like to talk about Gene."

"Then don't. Save him for another day when you're feeling up to it."

"Really? You aren't going to pelt me with intrusive questions, making me spill my inner angst?"

Traci's laughter is genuine. "I hate how Hollywood has everyone thinking all psychologists are prying idiots, only interested in getting their patients to break down into tears in every session. Sorry to disappoint, but I actually like people to

leave here feeling better than when they arrived. One day, I hope you'll feel like talking about Gene will help you feel better.

I'm not sure you're there today. So why don't you tell me more about Eddie."

Hallie can't help but giggle. "Well, sure because talking about him is so much better." "Fine, what do you want to talk about?"

Hallie hesitates, unsure if she wants to really know more or not. "How about Eagle's Pass and well, you know... what makes it different."

Traci's watching her carefully, as if she's unsure what to share. Hallie is reminded that she is technically not an official member of the co-op. Still, she's curious.

"I'm happy to answer any of your questions, Hallie, but before I do, have you talked to your Aunt Gina or Uncle Adam about this? They have lived here longer than I have and as a married couple, they can answer any questions about the town and its guidelines better than I can."

"Maybe, but my questions aren't necessarily about the rules as much as they are about..."

Hallie can see understanding in Traci's expressive eyes. Her own heartbeat has increased for some unknown reason. "I see. You're more interested in understanding why a woman like me would choose to live here."

"Not just you. Why would *any* woman want to live here? Like Aunt Gina and that wife of the guy that was here on Saturday. She was beautiful. She could have any guy she wanted. Why marry some guy who makes her live in a place where the men can beat their women?"

For the first time, Hallie sees a flash of anger in Traci's eyes, but she quickly tamps it down. Her voice doesn't betray her irritation when she speaks. "Like I explained to you on Saturday, those of us choosing to live here see a very wide divide between things like beating and abuse and what we practice here."

"So if not beating and abuse, what words do you use?"

"Discipline. That can take the form of many things, but there is one key difference in my mind." She stops, making sure Hallie is paying close attention. "To me, a beating as you are thinking of is done to hurt someone. To tear them down. It makes them feel bad or humiliated. A beating is done to make someone feel powerless."

Hallie butts in. "Exactly. So why would you or Aunt Gina allow that. You both seem way too smart for that."

Traci smiles indulgently. "Well, thanks, but you just made my point for me. I'm not sure I can speak for your Aunt Gina and certainly not for every TiH resident in Eagle's Pass, but I know that most of us feel that the discipline provided by our HoH is the antithesis of what I just described as a beating. We know how much our they love us. They don't like to make us feel pain, but they know that the discipline they provide is helping us to grow and feel safe. Let me ask you a question, and you don't have to tell me what, but have you ever made a mistake that made you ashamed of yourself or feel guilty for days or weeks later?"

Several stupid mistakes of her youth come to mind. "Well sure. Haven't we all?"

"Exactly. How great would it have been if you could have put that behind you right away and felt less guilty while learning your lesson not to make that mistake again?"

“Is this a trick question?”

“No. I’m just telling you that’s what I get out of domestic discipline. I like being held accountable and knowing someone cares enough to notice and correct me if I screw up. I don’t think there could be any more intimate thing to share between a couple.”

Her use of the word intimate surprises Hallie. “So…” She thinks twice about her question. Traci catches it.

“Go ahead. Ask. I can tell you have something you want to ask me.”

Hallie’s question is soft. She hates the flutter in her core as she recalls the vision of Traci on the receiving end of Troy’s discipline. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but what in the world could you have possibly done that could have made it okay for Troy to use his belt on you?”

Hallie regrets asking the question immediately. The blush on Traci’s face grows deeper as the seconds pass. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have asked that. I don’t want you to feel guilty.”

“That’s the thing, Hallie. I don’t feel guilty anymore. Troy helped me understand my mistake and even why I made it and I’m positive it will never happen again. I’m so lucky Troy was here that night. I shudder to think what would have happened if he hadn’t been.”

“What, it could have been worse than being belted?”

“Unfortunately. Listen, I’m not proud of this and under normal circumstances, I would tell you it’s none of your business, but you and I got off to a rather strange start. I feel bad that you seem to think that my brother is the devil incarnate for spanking me. Can I trust you to keep what I am

about to tell you confidential? It would be very embarrassing for me should it get out and more than that, I'm afraid it could damage the confidence the people in Eagle's Pass have in me."

"Wow, that sounds pretty serious. You don't have to tell me, Traci, but if you do, I would never tell anyone. It's none of their damn business."

"Friday was my thirtieth birthday. A few of my friends had taken me out for a very nice lunch to celebrate, but everyone had plans that night and I confess, I was feeling sorry for myself that I was turning thirty and haven't found my Mr. Right yet. I decided to go out to celebrate on my own. I went to a bar and flirted and ended up picking up a stranger. Worse, I was stupid enough to drive home after drinking several drinks, but had Troy not been here waiting, who knows what that guy would have done to me once he got me alone here in my house."

"Holy shit. When you cut one loose, you do it good."

"I've never done anything like that before, and I'd like to think that I would have never done it ever again regardless, but Troy being here just made sure I'll never forget the lesson."

Hallie feels weird even asking. "So... Troy and you. I mean, wasn't it weird? He's your brother, right?"

"I know what you are thinking so let me stop you right there. Troy had never given me a spanking before, and I pray he never has to ever again. It was a one-time deal for us. You just have to know that we grew up in a DD family. Our parents were the best example of a loving marriage based on respect and love. It carried over to our whole family. We all knew that Dad was the head of our house. Like Troy said, if Dad had been here waiting for me to get home that night, I wouldn't

have sat down for a week, and the scary thing is, he's probably right. Troy was easy on me compared to Dad."

She may not understand why, but the flutter in Hallie's tummy has migrated lower as the discussion has continued. "So you really aren't mad at him?"

"Mad? No. I love him for being brave enough to do what he knew I needed that night. I'm embarrassed that he caught me making one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made. I'm worried that it might make things a little weird between us for a while, although he stayed the weekend and everything seemed back to normal by the time he left."

"So, my Aunt Gina really does let Uncle Adam spank her too?"

Traci looks more uncomfortable. "I think you need to talk to her about that, Hallie. Even if she and I had discussed it in the past, I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about that with you.

I'm sure you understand. I do encourage you to talk to her about it though. More importantly, I'd like you to watch the couples and families as you interact with them here in town. Then compare what you see to many of the other people you've met in the past, and then we can talk about the differences you notice, okay?"

Hallie's heart has spiked. "What the hell? You mean everyone spanks each other out in public for everyone to watch?"

Traci is laughing at her again. "No silly. Well, I guess you might see a swat here or there, but that's not what I'm talking about. I mean to look at how happy everyone is. How peaceful things are. Outsiders think Eagle's Pass is more violent

because we believe in corporal punishment but the irony is, the discipline we follow actually keeps angst to a minimum. That's what I'd like you to see if you can pick up on and maybe we can talk about that on Wednesday when we get back together."

The women talk for another thirty minutes before Aunt Gina joins them for a final coffee. Hallie's head is swimming with new information by the time she heads to her new home with Aunt Gina. She has so much to think about.

One week later, the weather is nice enough for Hallie to walk for the first time to Traci's house. In some ways, it feels like she's been living in Eagle's Pass for much longer than she has. She's sure it's because the people in town have all welcomed her with open arms.

At first, she thought everyone was stopping by Aunt Gina's just to meet her and get the gossip on the young woman who had burst into Traci Jackson's house in the middle of the night. But as the week progressed and Aunt Gina would take her on visits to her friend's houses, Hallie had started to realize this was the norm for the quiet town nestled in the mountains of Colorado.

Hallie has never felt safer than here in Eagle's Pass, yet she's begun to recognize an uneasiness within herself that she's been reluctant to examine too closely. Traci has danced around it with her during the two other sessions they've had together and now, on her way to Traci's on this new Monday morning, she wonders if she might figure it out today.

The piles of snow lining the streets are melting in the vibrant December sunlight, making Hallie choose her steps carefully to avoid the slushy puddles encountered on her way to Traci's. She needs to zigzag across several tree-lined streets to reach Spanking Loop.

She's about two blocks away when she hears the unmistakable sounds of a woman crying out. Several long seconds of silence have her wondering if she'd imagined the whole thing before the sound of a loud crack followed by an even louder wail of pain breaks the silence of Eagle's Pass. Over and over in a steady rhythm, paddle... cry... paddle... cry...

Hallie stands rooted, unsure what to do. As the sounds of a harsh punishment filter down through an open window, she has to fight down unwanted and conflicting emotions. Her brain is furious for the poor woman being abused. She has to resist her natural urge to take action, although what action that might be escapes her as she stands on the sidewalk in Eagle's Pass, Colorado, a community founded for people who believe in corporal punishment of submissive partners.

Her brain sees this issue as cut and dry. Spankings are violent and therefore they are abuse. Period. She tries valiantly to hold onto her anger as she remembers what the abuse had felt like at the hands of her stepfather and more recently her ex-boyfriend, but having lived through true abuse, she begrudgingly acknowledges that what's happening behind closed doors on this sunny morning feels different. Her last trace of anger fizzles away when the thrashing finishes and the clear sound of passionate sex replaces the pounding punishment.

Hallie resents the flutter she gets in her nether region every time she is confronted with anything having to do with corporal punishment. The flutter turns to pulsing sexual need as she eavesdrops on the couple crying out in joint passion. She is acutely aware of an imaginary ache centered surprisingly not in her sex, but at the tender place where her ass meets her thighs. With shame, she feels the tingling in her pussy as she imagines being bent over on the receiving end of a correction like is in progress in the house she's standing in front of. As unsettling as it is to feel the cream gathering between her legs, her pulse heats up when she realizes it's always Troy Jackson she imagines standing behind her, delivering the spanking. She reasons with herself that it's only because she has a clear picture of what he looks like in action, but if she's honest with herself, she knows that's only part of the story.

She's spent hours talking with Traci and Aunt Gina trying to understand why women would ever want to live in a place like Eagle's Pass. She'd started with the intention of convincing them they were both crazy, but in one short week, their gentle reassurances about the values of the DD way of life already have her doubting her own conviction. Both women have assured her there is nothing wrong or even unusual with how she feels. While she still doesn't understand how she can feel both dread and excitement at the thought of a punishment, she's coming to terms that she can no longer deny at least to herself that the thoughts of a punishment excites her on some level. With the history of real violence in her past, these feelings are more than confusing.

Hallie resumes her walk to Traci's, anxious to escape her inner turmoil. The second Traci opens the door, the emotions

she had been holding in bubble up and Hallie finds herself with unwanted tears streaming down her face.

“Come on in and tell me what’s wrong.” Traci ushers her in.

“I’m just being silly. It’s nothing.”

She has her coat off and they are headed to the kitchen. Hallie swipes at her tears, trying to downplay the effect of the walk over. As always, Traci has a coffee waiting.

“So, what happened?”

“It’s warm out there.” She takes a sip of her coffee to calm her nerves.

Traci is confused. “And that’s reason to cry?”

Hallie hedges. “Some people have their windows open.”

Instant recognition. “Oh boy. You walked over past Danelle and Carrie Ann’s.”

“Who are Danelle and Carrie Ann?”

“They are a couple here in town. Danelle is the HoH and let’s just say that Carrie Ann is disciplined... often... loudly. It’s kind of their thing.”

“What do you mean, their thing?”

“Exhibitionism. Everyone here is pretty open about the lifestyle, but most keep the details behind closed doors. Danelle and Carrie Ann are a little less private. Parents of young children who may not understand the dynamics of Eagle’s Pass yet have learned to steer their kids clear of their block when the weather is nice enough to have the windows open. You never know what you might hear.”

“So everyone knows about this and it’s okay?”

“Theirs is a consensual relationship, Hallie. Just like the outside world, no two relationships are exactly the same, but we are accepting of all types here in Eagle’s Pass. We have several couples who live a BDSM lifestyle and other couples who live a domestic discipline lifestyle, but don’t incorporate spanking, choosing to use other less severe punishments instead, and every flavor of DD in between. Each couple has to figure out what it means for them on their own through communication.”

The women sit in silence for a while as Hallie thinks things over. She finally breaks the silence. “I’m pretty sure Aunt Gina got spanked last night.” Hallie is embarrassed, choosing to look at her coffee mug instead of her new friend and therapist.

“What makes you say that? Did you hear the punishment?”

“Not really. I could just tell at dinner Uncle Adam was not happy about something when he got home and they excused themselves right after dinner to go up to their bedroom, which was out of the ordinary. They were gone over an hour and when they came back down, I could tell Aunt Gina had been crying and she seemed to wiggle a lot while she was sitting watching TV with us.”

“Did you talk to her about it yet?”

“No. It just seems like it’s none of my business, you know?”

“Maybe, but she knows how much you’re struggling with the whole idea of DD and trying to decide if you want to stay here in Eagle’s Pass after the first of the new year. She’s told me how worried she is that you’re going to want to leave. She really hopes you’ll stay in town with them. I keep trying to tell her to give you time. You are making progress.”

“Am I? Sometimes I wonder.”

“It’s only been a week, Hallie. How would you have acted a week ago if you’d heard Carrie Ann being paddled through that window?”

Hallie smiles. “I’d probably have rushed through the front door and tackled Danelle like I did Troy.”

Traci lets loose a hearty laugh. “Oh boy. What a memory that is. I’ll never forget the look on Troy’s face when you were on his back trying to strangle him.”

The girls spend a minute laughing about what, at the time, had been a very traumatic event for Hallie. That’s when she knows Traci is right. She has made a lot of progress in the last week.

Traci brings things back down with an unwelcome question. “So, are you ready to tell me about Gene yet?”

Hallie takes a deep cleansing breath. “You know, I think I am. I want him gone, and I’ve been carrying the baggage of him around with me for way too long.”

“So, your mom married him. How old were you at the time?”

“Sixteen. At first, I thought he was just a blow hard, but I soon figured out he was so much worse. He made us use all of Mom’s income to take care of the house and our living expenses because he said he wasn’t gonna pay to raise some other bastard’s kid. He then spent all the money he made on himself.”

“Sounds like a real peach.”

“You don’t know the half of it. He was pretty big into gambling. He went out almost every night, often coming home

late drunk and in a bad mood if he'd lost that night. At first, he would just take it out on Mom. Do you have any idea how I felt as a sixteen-year-old virgin having to sit in my room and listen to my mother being roughed up by that asshole before he would... well... he got off on really rough sex. I broke in there once when she was crying out for him to stop and fought him off of her, but he backhanded me hard enough that I saw stars. Then the asshole forced me to sit in a chair in the corner and watch him finish her off that night, telling me if I didn't behave, he would do the same thing to me. That was my introduction to sex, watching my mother be basically raped by a man she was stupid enough to marry."

"Oh, Hallie, I am so sorry, for you and your poor mother. What a terrible trauma for her to live through."

"Thanks, but that was just the beginning. Things changed pretty quick after that night. He didn't even try to hide what he was doing to Mom after that. In fact, I think he loved the humiliation we both felt being controlled and afraid of him. I begged her to leave him. I don't think I'll ever understand what happened to my mom those last few years of her life. It's like she was brainwashed by him or something. She stopped even trying to fight back."

"Oh, Hallie. It breaks my heart that you had to go through seeing your mother as a battered wife. I have treated several women that have been able to recover, but I saw first-hand how hard it was for them to fight through their fear. Still, I'd have hoped she could have kicked him out if not for herself, then for you."

Hallie feels the tears pooling as she remembers her mom. "She tried. Once. After a really bad night, she called a locksmith and had all of the locks changed while he was at

work. We boxed up his shit and put it outside. I was so proud of her that day.”

“So what happened?” Traci’s quiet prodding helps Hallie keep going.

“He came back, all apologetic with flowers, promising he would change and that he would get help for his gambling addiction. She bought his line of bullshit. Things were better for a few weeks, but then went back to the way they’d been before, if not worse. By then it was my senior year and I had hoped to just make it until I could move away to go to college. Looking back, Aunt Gina offered to let me come live with them after graduation. I wish I’d taken her up on the offer, but I ended up staying home. I felt guilty leaving Mom there alone with him, you know?”

“She made her choices, Hallie. I’m sure she would have been happy for you to get away from him. What happened to your mom?”

“About a year after I graduated from high school, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She hadn’t been feeling good for a while. I had begged her to go to the doctor, but she was so afraid to go because she knew she would have to explain the bruises all over her body. By the time they found it, she was already stage four. She only lasted a few months. I don’t think she was afraid of dying, but I know she was terrified of leaving me alone with Gene. She made me promise to leave and go live with Aunt Gina, but the very night of Mom’s funeral, Gene tried to rape me. The bastard actually thought I was going to take Mom’s place, can you believe that shit? I fought him off and went over to Eddie’s. We really weren’t all that serious, but I had spent a lot of time with him and the band to avoid going home. They were just about to leave on

their first tour, basically playing beer gardens across the south. We traveled in two cargo vans.

Slept in tents in campgrounds more often than real beds.”

“Sounds like an adventure.”

“Honestly, it was fun. At least more fun than the last couple of years before had been.”

“What happened with Eddie? How did you find yourself driving across country in the middle of the night in a snowstorm to get help?”

Her heart contracts. She understands how it's said that people can have a broken heart. That is what Eddie did to hers, but not the way most would think. Eddie had been her friend first, and the loss of his friendship is what cuts her to her core. “I started feeling less and less like his girlfriend and more and more like his mother about a year ago. He was so fun before he started having some success. I've heard that fame can change people. He hasn't even become that famous yet, but he's already out of control. It started with him fucking around with groupies that would follow the band from gig to gig. At first, I tried to pretend it wasn't happening, but eventually, I'd had enough. We pretty much broke up, but I stayed on as the band manager. It was like trying to herd a bunch of grown children around the country, trying to keep them sober and showing up to shows on time. Still, I helped get them a recording deal and then landed them the opening gig for Matchbox 20. They really are talented, and they have what it takes to make it big, but they are hell bent on throwing it all away.”

“That must really make you angry to see them messing up something that you've put so much time into.”

“I’m fucking furious, at all of them, but especially Eddie. They’d all started drinking and doing drugs so much that it was starting to remind me of being surrounded by a whole group of Genes every night. I had told them if they were going to keep doing drugs, I was going to be out of there. The night I left, they’d taken Gopher, the car, out to try to find a score. They actually missed the whole fucking opening show. Blew it off. Left me there to get reamed out by the tour manager. When they dragged themselves back to the bus hours later, I already had my one bag packed. I had planned on bluffing, trying to scare them all into cleaning up their act or I was going to leave. I told them the record company was done putting up with their shit and they would be replacing me with someone who could control them. Well, my threat didn’t turn out the way I thought it would.”

“What happened?”

“Eddie was high. I know he had to be, because he had never hurt me before, but that night... It was my worst nightmare. It was Gene all over again. He was so violent. We hadn’t slept together in almost six months, but he almost raped me that night, in between slapping me around and trying to choke me until I’d agree to stay. One of the guys in the band, Justin, finally broke into our room and stopped him or who knows if I’d still be here. I didn’t stick around to see what happened between Eddie and Justin. I just grabbed my bag, purse and the keys to Gopher and drove away. I didn’t really even know for sure where I was going until I had time to calm down and turned towards Eagle’s Pass.”

As soon as she stops talking, Hallie feels a wave of relief, followed closely by a wave of exhaustion, felt deep in her bones. Traci doesn’t try to say something clever to make it all better. Hallie suspects she knows no words can really change

anything. Only time can do that. As her tears continue, Traci stands and comes around the island to scoop Hallie up into a strong bearhug. The strength of her embrace breaks down her last emotional wall that had been holding all of the shitty memories of the abuse her and her mother had survived since losing their beloved Nana. There in Traci's kitchen, Hallie cries for her Nana, for her mom and for her own innocence lost. When the women pull apart several minutes later, Hallie can see the tears on Traci's face.

Hallie reaches for the box of tissues, grabbing several and handing one to her new friend, before blowing her own running nose. "I can't believe you're crying too. I'm the one that's messed up. I hated what Mom did so much and then I went and did the same thing with Eddie."

The flash of anger in Traci's eyes surprise Hallie. "Are you kidding me? You are nothing like your mother. Don't you dare say that again. I know you loved her and she didn't deserve the hell that Gene put her through, but she has to take some responsibility for her own choices. You, on the other hand, escaped the cycle of abuse not only once with Gene, but you refused to put up with any violence from Eddie. If you were a battered woman, like your mom had been, you would still be on that tour bus right now, putting up with Eddie's escalating violence until he gets the help he needs to straighten out his life. You did all you can do for him. It took great strength to pick up and leave everything that you had known for the last few years, especially not really knowing you had a safe place to go to."

Traci's words have a direct hit with Hallie, and she is suddenly filled with optimism for her future for the first time in a long time. She'd been feeling like she was a failure for running away from the tour, but Traci has held up a mirror,

forcing her to examine the last few weeks through a neutral lens, and Hallie begins to like what she sees.

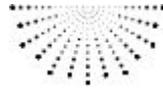
“So, you think there might be hope for me after all?”

“Oh, Hallie. There was always hope. The only thing that’s changed today is that you are finally going to start believing it. I think you are already on the road to recovery.”

“Whatever that means, right?”

“Right. The good thing is you’re young and you have your whole life ahead of you. So the real question now is, what does Hallie Boudreaux want to do with the rest of her life?” Hallie smiles a sad smile. “If only I knew.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Troy hasn't looked this forward to Christmas so much since he was eight years old and had asked Santa for a new bike. He's pretty sure the excitement he feels as he sees the sign announcing Eagle's Pass three miles ahead would rival finding that bike under the tree that Christmas morning so many years before.

It's been less than two weeks since he was here last, but the time has dragged by. He's been busy at work, so it wasn't too bad during the day, but the nights have found him distracted and obsessing over the events of his last visit to Eagle's Pass. He'd been tempted to drive out last weekend, but Traci had talked him out of it. His brain knows he'd done the right thing in spanking his sister, but he can't shake the feeling that she may not feel the same. As a result, he's phoned and texted her more often than normal. It's important to him that they get to spend this first Christmas in four years together reconnecting.

He might also have an unconscious motive for checking in with his sister frequently. Thoughts of a petite young woman with a fire in her green eyes have haunted both his waking hours and sleep. Troy is ashamed to admit he'd hoped his sister would let information about how Hallie was doing slip into their conversations. Ever the professional, Traci has been

careful not to share anything more than passing information on Eagle's Pass's newest resident. Troy respects his sister's careful confidentiality with her patient's private conversations, yet he's anxious to know more about Hallie Boudreaux than that she's doing well.

He'd timed his arrival to pick up Traci in time to head to St. Michael's Parish for the Christmas Eve service. He'd hoped to have time to come in and chat with his sister before heading out, but traffic had been heavy and she is already coming out her front door as he pulls in the drive.

"Hi, Troy. I was getting worried I might need to go save us seats. It fills up fast on holidays."

Troy leans over to kiss his sister on her cheek as she slides into the front seat of his SUV. "Hey, Trace. Yeah, I'd hoped to be here sooner too."

Troy backs out and heads the few blocks drive over to the church. There's a light dusting of snow coming down and the night has the kind of magical feel like only Christmas Eve can.

"So does the whole town show up at church on a night like this?"

"Mostly. Some people go out of town to visit family, and there are two services, one at seven and one at eleven so I'm hoping it won't be too crowded at this first one."

"Well, you may have to help me if I forget people's names. Everyone seems to remember me because I'm with you and I met them once at the picnic. What's the pastor's name again?"

"Father Henry Beauchamp. I'm not sure who else will be there for sure other than Brent, Char and Kayla. They called earlier to make sure we'd be going to the Christmas Eve party

at the Community Center between services. I told them I'd need to check with you, but I thought we'd at least stop by."

"Hey, I'm the guest here. If that's what you normally do, then let's go."

They're already pulling into the church parking lot. With only fifteen minutes to spare before the start of the service, the lot is almost full. Picturesque brown-bag lanterns light the sidewalk. Troy stays close to his sister as they enter the crowded entryway full of people waiting to shake hands with the greeters at the door to the sanctuary. Only as they move closer does Troy recognize it's Dr. Devon, surrounded by three young boys and a very pregnant woman he assumes is his wife. They make a very nice-looking family, and since they know everyone in town, the line is moving at a snail's pace as neighbors share jovial holiday greetings.

As the line inches forward, Troy scans the foyer, hoping to catch a glimpse of Hallie. It's not until they're through greeting the Devon clan and headed into the sanctuary that he spots her in one of the pews near the front, sitting between her aunt and uncle. He'd forgotten how petite she is, yet as she turns to speak to her aunt, he can see her face light up into a smile.

Traci was right. She is doing well.

Only as he allows the relief of seeing her looking so happy register, does he realize just how much he'd been aching to see her again. His brain knows she is not available to him. He's too old for her for starters, and while he still doesn't know what her history is, he's pretty sure there's violence in her past that will make living in a DD community very difficult for Hallie.

Regardless, when he caught himself thinking about her at frequent intervals throughout the day, he'd eventually had to acknowledge he feels a magnetic pull to the feisty young woman he'd met under the most unique circumstances. There's something about her that's captured his full attention, yet that's where it needs to end. As tempting as it is to pursue getting to know Hallie better, the odds are not in their favor. Remembering the fear in her eyes after bursting into Traci's to stop her spanking always tamps down his excitement.

Better to remain mere acquaintances than start something that won't end well.

The service is uplifting and spiritual and Troy finds himself grateful for the many blessings in his life. The music is traditional and several times, Troy gives up singing Christmas carols just to take in the profile of Hallie as she enjoys her first Christmas with family in over three years. Her eyes twinkle with excitement during the final hymn, Silent Night. The sanctuary is lit with dozens of candles held by the congregation.

When the service concludes, the crowd begins to head out, many in the direction of the Community Center. Troy and Traci are delayed as several people stop to talk with his sister. The loitering allows for Hallie and her family to approach their row as they head to the exit.

“Merry Christmas, Hallie.”

She'd been talking with her aunt, so she's surprised when she looks up to see Troy. He's relieved she doesn't appear to be afraid of him. He detects a slight blush on her cheeks as her eyes widen as she recognizes Troy, and he wonders if she'd just been thinking about how they'd met. Still, he's happy she isn't running in the opposite direction. It's a good sign.

“Merry Christmas, Troy. Traci told me you’d be coming to visit for a few days. I just didn’t know you’d arrive in time for tonight’s service.” She continues hesitantly. “Are you... and Traci going to the party over at the Community Center by chance?”

“I’m pretty sure we are. How about you?”

“Yes, we’re going, although Uncle Adam has already said he doesn’t want to stay too late. Something about Santa needing his rest.” She shoots her uncle a playful smirk.

The man standing next to her chuckles, holding out his hand to Troy. “Hello young man.” Adam continues to pump Troy’s hand vigorously as he continues, although he looks uncomfortable with the social interaction. “I didn’t have the opportunity to properly thank you for helping our Hallie the night she got to town. She told us about how you and Traci took care of her.”

Troy allows his eyes to drift down to Hallie’s, searching for clues on exactly what she might have told her uncle about the events on the night of her arrival. Troy detects a full-blown rosy blush as she shuffles her feet subconsciously. Troy is on his own.

“Yes, well it was certainly a shock having someone arriving at the house at that hour. I’m just glad we were up and had lights on to help her find her way.”

Hallie glances up through her long lashes. They share a private look that tells Troy that Hallie had kept the fact she’d broken in to stop Troy from spanking his sister a secret from her aunt and uncle. Troy is happy, for Traci’s sake. She lives and works here in town, and he’d hate for anyone to lose confidence in her based on her foolish actions on one night of her life.

“Well, Gina and I are so happy to have her here, and we’re grateful to you and your sister. What are you two doing tomorrow for your Christmas celebration?”

“Honestly, we haven’t talked about it yet, but I assumed we would have a quiet day at her house considering we don’t have any other family to celebrate with.”

“Well, that won’t do. You two should come to our place around ten. We have a tradition of opening gifts and then Gina serves a wonderful brunch. We normally invite a lot of people over, but the crowd is going to be smaller this year with a lot of folks visiting relatives out of town. We’d love it if you would join us.”

Troy glances at Hallie, trying to gauge her reception to the idea. He doesn’t want to accept her uncle’s offer if it will make her uncomfortable. The only hint he has to her feelings on the topic is the small smile playing on her gloss shimmering lips.

Turning to his sister, Troy lets her make the final decision. “We haven’t talked about tomorrow yet, Trace. What did you have planned?”

“Well, I’d like to drop in at Brent and Char’s in the afternoon and we’ve had a few other offers, but I had mostly just wanted to spend time with you.”

Adam wraps his arm around his niece’s waist, pulling her close against him. “It’s settled then. You two can come and spend time together at our place. I insist. Drop by after ten.”

Troy is a bit annoyed at the forcefulness of the elder man, but Aunt Gina joins the conversation to add on her own gracious invitation in her charming southern drawl. “Yes, we’d love it if you’d both join us tomorrow. Hallie doesn’t know

that many people in town, so having familiar faces there will help her feel more at home.”

The look on Hallie’s face tells Troy his presence isn’t going to have the desired effect, but before he can decline, Traci answers for them. “We’d love to join you tomorrow, Gina. Thanks for the invitation. What can I bring?”

Traci and Gina take the lead as they finally exit the church, talking menus, leaving Adam to make his next bold request. “So you and your sister are going over to the community center, eh?” He doesn’t even stop to give Troy a chance to get a word in edgewise. “Hallie has her heart set on it, but Gina and I prefer to just head on home. You wouldn’t mind taking her along with you and dropping her off later, would you?”

“Uncle Adam! If you really don’t want to go, that’s fine. You don’t need to try to pawn me off on Troy and Traci.”

“I’m not pawning you off, young lady. You just haven’t had much fun since you got here and going to the party at the community center tonight with people closer to your own age would be a lot more fun than going home with your aunt and me.”

Troy snorts. “Well, thanks for the compliment, but I might be a bit older than you give me credit for.”

“Well, you’re a hell of a lot closer to her age than her aunt and I are. Just have her home before midnight. I’d hate for her to run into Santa on her way to bed.” He has a twinkle in his eye as he drops a quick kiss on his niece’s forehead before heading off in the direction of his wife.

Hallie shuffles awkwardly, watching her uncle’s fast retreat, deserting her. She’s fidgeting nervously with her plum scarf. Troy had remembered her being shorter, but then notices

she's once again dressed in totally inappropriate, albeit fashionable, high-heeled leather boots. She appears unstable on her feet until he then realizes she is subconsciously shuffling to distance herself from him.

“So, I guess you're stuck hanging out with Traci and me tonight. You ready to head over?” Troy tests the waters by offering his right bent arm. He holds, watching the indecision flit through her eyes. He is patient.

Stepping forward, Hallie slowly reaches out, linking her left hand through the crook of his arm just in time for Troy to support her as she almost wobbles to the floor after teetering precariously on her too-tall heels.

“Fuck these stupid shoes!” Hallie's outburst would be better suited at the local truck stop rather than St. Michael's sanctuary on Christmas Eve. As least she has the decency to look guilty.

“Well, I think I'll pass on that suggestion and I'd watch your language if I were you. You're lucky all of the families with young kids have already left or you might find yourself over some HoH's knee in Eagle's Pass for language like that.”

Troy had meant the comment to lighten the awkwardness of the moment, but it has the opposite effect as he feels Hallie visibly trembling, becoming increasingly wobbly on her feet.

“Hey there, kiddo. I was just making a joke. I mean you should curb the truck driver talk until we're at least outside, but I'm pretty sure vulgar language isn't a spanking offense, even here in Eagle's Pass.”

“I'm not so sure. I get the impression they can make anything they want a spankable offense around here.”

“Well, maybe in private homes yes, but you don’t need to ever worry about some other HoH ever disciplining you, Hallie. That’s not how it’s done around here.”

“If you say so.” She doesn’t look convinced. “Can we just get out of here?”

“Sure.”

They catch up with Traci near the exit. The snow has continued to come down during the service and there’s a gorgeous covering of snow blanketing the picturesque town. Troy has to assist both ladies with keeping their balance on the icy pavement. Apparently, his sister has the same taste in shoes as Hallie. By the time they arrive at the SUV, they are all laughing merrily. It is shaping up to be a very Merry Christmas in Eagle’s Pass for Troy.

The drive to the Community Center is short, and in nice weather would have been faster to walk than drive and park. Hallie hasn’t known what to expect but stepping into the community center transports them into a winter wonderland. Whoever is in charge of this party has some serious skills. Every surface of the center is covered with twinkling lights or blue and white fabric arranged to give the appearance of an icy winter scene. Tall artificial trees covered in Christmas lights are the main source of lighting along with two real-life carved ice sculptures decoratively lit by floodlights to enhance the artisanship of the ice statues.

Traci and Hallie release a quiet “wow” in unison as they take in the large banquet tables piled high with snacks and sweets. Excited children, pumped up on the lethal combination

of Christmas excitement laced with too-much sugar, dash around the room chasing each other while tired parents mingle.

The newest arrivals are halfway across the room to the first banquet table when they are met by a young woman carrying a big box filled with wrapped presents.

“Hi, Traci.” Reaching into her box, the hostess pulls out one of the smaller rectangular gifts wrapped in red paper and hands it to Traci. “Here’s your welcome gift.”

“Thanks, Carrie Ann. Is it the same gift as last year? Every woman in town has been looking forward to getting stocked up. Since I probably won’t need mine, I’m thinking of starting a bidding war to make a little extra cash.” Traci’s comment has Hallie curious as to the contents of the small present.

“Yeah, well it was so popular the committee knew we had to keep the gift the same as last year.”

Carrie Ann briefly looks up at Troy before lowering her eyes shyly. Knowing where they are, Hallie suspects she is a submissive. The hostess reaches into her box of goodies, this time coming out with two gifts, one identical to that given to Traci and the other a larger, long rectangular box wrapped in deep green wrapping paper.

The shy hostess works up the nerve to address the newcomers. “So are you two in a traditional relationship?”

Hallie’s heart does double time thinking about the implications of being in a relationship with a man like Troy. She’s flustered, and can only stutter her denial. “Oh hell no. We’re not... I mean we don’t...”

Troy rescues her by cutting in, a sly smile on his face. “What Hallie is trying to say is we are just friends. She is

staying with her aunt and uncle and I'm here visiting my sister."

Carrie Ann looks confused on how to proceed so Traci jumps in to help. "It's okay, Carrie Ann. Just give them the traditional gifts. That will be fine."

She holds out the smaller red box for Hallie and the larger green to Troy. She looks relieved that her duty is done and is ready to shuffle off to find other newcomers when like a shot, the woman's name clicks into place and Hallie stops her retreat with a blurted question.

"Are you the Carrie Ann that lives between my Aunt Gina's and Traci's houses?"

Carrie Ann's blush deepens. "Oh no. Yes, I'm afraid so."

Troy is confused. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Having a few seconds to think better of her line of questioning, Hallie decides to retreat. "It's nothing. Let's get going." She begins pulling at his sleeve, trying to move them to the chocolate fondue fountain.

Troy stays planted until Carrie Ann eventually answers his question. "I suspect she heard one of my recent discipline sessions. My HoH believes that naughty girls should be punished so everyone knows how naughty they've been. I'm sorry if we disturbed you, miss."

Hallie tries to laugh, but it comes out as a choked croak instead. "Hey, whatever floats your boat. If you're crazy enough to allow yourself to be beaten, who am I to complain?" Even Hallie is surprised by the obnoxious tone of her voice.

Carrie Ann is too shocked by her outburst to say a word, but Traci tries to smooth things over. "Hallie, we've talked

about this. What happens in Eagle's Pass is consensual between loving partners. You've never even met Danelle. She loves Carrie Ann very much."

Digging herself deeper, Hallie snorts with laughter. "You guys keep telling yourself that. Whatever gets you through the day, but you won't convince me that was love. I heard you screaming." With a start, she realizes she's still touching Troy's arm, and she yanks her hand free as if he were on fire, turning to move deeper into the party to try to get away from him and the awkward conversation.

Troy doesn't let her get far. Grabbing her wrist and pulling her back into the conversation, Troy warns Hallie. "That was rude. I want you to apologize to Carrie Ann. She was just trying to be friendly."

Eyes wide at his authoritative command, Hallie tries to yank out of his grip, but he won't have it. "Now, Hallie."

"Who died and left you in charge?" Hallie isn't exactly sure why she's trying to pick a fight in the middle of the Community Center, but pent-up frustration over the crazy by-laws of Eagle's Pass are pushing to the forefront leading Hallie into melt-down territory.

Carrie Ann looks like she might be ready to apologize again, but Troy holds up his hand to shush her. "Hallie, I'd like to speak to you in private please." She regrets looking up to see if he's serious. "But before we speak, I mean it. Apologize to Carrie Ann."

Hallie really does feel sorry. She can see she had upset the woman. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me."

Carrie Ann quietly replies. "It's okay. I think I understand."

Hallie wishes she understood. She looks up at Troy. His eyes look stormy as he reaches out to grasp her upper arm, pulling her in a different direction.

She can hear Traci calling out to them. “Troy... be careful. This isn’t your problem to solve.” His sister’s comment only spurs him on faster. Hallie has to almost run to keep up with his long strides and in her new boots, that’s no easy feat.

“Troy... please. My feet are killing me, damn it. Slow down.”

“Well, I don’t feel sorry for you since you’re old enough to know how to buy more sensible shoes to wear in the Colorado snow, and that’s the second curse word not far from young children in the last hour. I’m no prude so that language doesn’t bother me in private, but I’m warning you now, I don’t want to hear any more profanity in front of children.”

He pulls them down a short hallway into an empty alcove, decorated and lit by twinkle lights in large artificial Ficus trees. Hallie is helpless to fight his strength as he backs her into the private cutout, pressing her back against the wall and caging her in by placing his hands, one still holding a gift, on the wall above her head. She’s grateful that while he is close enough to smell his masculine scent, he’s keeping a few inches between them.

The burst of resentment and anger she had felt just a few minutes before are dissolving, quickly replaced with a cocktail of guilt and fear of what Troy is going to do. She’s witnessed first-hand what he’s capable of. They’re far enough away from the loud party music that Hallie can hear her own labored breathing as she tries to calm herself, choosing to focus on the fashionable tie knotted at the collar of his dress shirt directly in front of her. It gets harder when Troy cups her cheek with his

palm, pulling her chin up so she has no choice but to look into his stormy eyes. She expected to see anger, not his calm disapproval. For some reason, seeing his disappointment takes her guilt to a new level.

“Now, why don’t you tell me what that was really all about?”

“I don’t want to talk about it with you.”

“And why not?”

“Because... you’re part of the problem. All of the men in Eagle’s Pass think they can do whatever they want and us women will just fall at your feet, begging to have our asses lit up for no good reason. Thanks, but I can pass on that.”

Hallie isn’t sure why she is going off on Troy since she really had thought she was adjusting well to the strange rules of the town. As an outsider, she was coming to terms that there were people who lived a life of domestic discipline. But tonight, being confronted with both an example of punishment she had witnessed first-hand and Troy trying to act like her long-lost father, Hallie’s tolerance level has sunk to a new low.

She’s prepared for his anger, so the broad smile he flashes releases a few unwanted butterflies in the pit of her stomach instead. “Well then, I guess I’m glad I don’t live in Eagle’s Pass, so you can’t lump me into that bucket. And if you’d stop acting like a brat, I wouldn’t feel the need to manhandle you away to cool off out of ear shot of impressionable children.”

Hallie’s mini meltdown has run its course. “Fine. I might have over-reacted... just a bit.”

“You think?” Troy is laughing at her now.

“You can stop laughing any time now. It isn’t that funny.”

“If you say so.” She knows the second he realizes how close they are. She’s relieved when he takes a step away from her, giving her a bit of breathing room again.

“So, I wonder what kind of gifts they give out to everyone. You game to open our gifts and take a look?” Hallie is surprised he’s giving her rude behavior a pass. She doesn’t know how to interpret what feels like disappointment with Troy’s change of subject. His question hangs in the air. It feels like a dare.

Hallie is curious and more importantly, she welcomes the chance to steer the subject away from her less-than-admirable conduct of the last ten minutes. “Sure. I love opening presents. I’ll go first.”

Hallie rips through the red wrapping paper to find a box of what, at first glance, looks like simple lotion, but upon closer examination, she sees the box touts its medicinal value in ‘helping to relieve pain and cool heated skin.’ Hallie blushes as she realizes she is holding lotion to rub on her ass after getting a hard spanking. “Oh goody. A gift I’ll never use.”

His laughter is back. “I wouldn’t go giving it away if I were you. If you decide to stay in

Eagle’s Pass, I predict it won’t be long before you’ll be in need of a dab of that.”

“Very funny. I can’t wait to see what they buy for the Doms around here.”

Troy grins. “I guess there’s only one way to find out.” Troy rips the paper off his present and takes a short peek in the box without showing Hallie. He whistles. “Oh, you’re gonna just love this.”

“That bad?”

“Depends on your perspective I would guess.” Hallie’s eyes almost bug out as he pulls a heavy-duty wooden spoon out from the tissue paper wrapping. His grin is disarming. “Somehow,

I don’t think most of the HoHs are going to be cooking with this.”

“Fucking great.” The second the bomb leaves her mouth, she regrets it. “I’m so sorry. It just slipped out.”

“I don’t think so. What I can’t figure out is if you are just being careless or if you are subconsciously trying to push my buttons to see how far you can push me.”

“That’s ridiculous. Listen, for the last few years I’ve lived with a rock band traveling cooped up on a tour bus at least fifty percent of the time. Let’s just say I picked up a few bad habits.”

Troy at least looks like he might be listening. “Okay, say I buy that as a plausible excuse for your potty mouth, I’m assuming your aunt and uncle are not thrilled. Adam seems like a pretty straight shooter.”

Hallie’s heart rate is going up at the mention of her uncle. “We don’t need to bring Uncle

Adam into this discussion, do we? I mean I wouldn’t want him to be disappointed...”

Troy is grinning at her. “He’s already told you to knock it off, hasn’t he?”

Hallie hesitates before answering truthfully. “Only about ten times. Let’s just say that if he finds out about my slips tonight, I suspect I’d be testing out the lotion sooner rather than later. I think the only reason he hasn’t spanked me already is they’re trying not to scare me into leaving Eagle’s Pass.”

Troy is chuckling, a twinkle in his eye. “Hmmm... so what is my silence worth to you?”

She knows he is teasing her, so she plays along. “Blackmail? Really? If you tell him about my cussing, I might be forced to... to...” Her mind races to come up with something she might hold over his head. She doesn’t think things through before she replies. “I’ll be forced to tell him about why I broke into Traci’s that night in the first place. I’m sure he’d like to know all about that.”

Troy’s humor is gone instantly. He has backed her up against the wall again, hovering over her so close she can feel his warm breath. “Leave my sister out of this. She doesn’t need the gossips around town getting a hold of the story of how she celebrated her thirtieth birthday. Do you hear me?” His eyes are hard.

“Troy... I didn’t mean... Well... I would never hurt Traci like that. I was just joking.”

“Your mouth sure does get you in a lot of trouble. I would get ready if I were you. It’s only going to be a matter of time before your uncle gives you reason to test the lotion.”

Hallie has already pretty much come to the same conclusion and as a result, has spent endless hours debating if being near her aunt and uncle who love her is actually worth living in a place like Eagle’s Pass.

“Well, just the same. I’m just glad you didn’t try to test your newest gift out on me tonight.”

The worry lines around his eyes crinkle before he answers her seriously. “Hallie, I will never spank you. I am neither a relative nor your HoH, so as much as I may want to take you

over my knee like the naughty little girl you act like at times, you don't need to live in fear of me."

She should be happy, right? He has just pledged not to hurt her, no matter how obnoxious she might get. So why does she feel disappointed instead of relieved? More importantly, why does her tummy flutter at the thought of being Troy's naughty anything?

He doesn't give her time to sort out her jumbled emotions. Troy backs off, giving her space to breathe. "Come on. Let's go rejoin the party. I'm sure Traci is worried."

Almost two hours later, it's way past time for Troy to leave this party. Coming here hadn't been one of his brightest ideas. As if their earlier sparring match hadn't been fun enough, spending time around Miss Hallie Boudreaux was proving to be akin to plunking a diabetic down in front of a huge table of sweets. It's so tempting to reach out and sample the tasty treats right there within his reach, but he knows damn well she is no good for him.

Setting the eleven-year age difference aside, the fact she talks and drinks like a rock star, and rejects the idea of a domestic discipline lifestyle with vehemence pretty much closes the door on the idea of getting to know her better. His brain accepts these truths, but unfortunately, the rest of his body seems drawn to her as if she's the tempting treat. There's something unique about her Troy can't quite put his finger on. With so much he doesn't know about her yet, it makes his growing attraction to her even more troublesome.

When Hallie starts to wobble on her high heels standing next to the punch bowl, Troy decides it's time to intervene. He had tried to give her some space, mingling away from her for much of the party. About ten minutes ago, he'd sent Traci over to retrieve Hallie so they could leave, but his sister had ended up joining her instead. It looks like he's going to have to go in himself.

Arriving next to the small group gathered near the refreshments, Troy prods them. "Come on ladies. It's getting late. Time to head home. Santa has a few gifts to wrap."

"Oh come on, Troy. Don't be a party pooper. You need some more punch." Hallie is holding a plastic cup filled with spiked punch out for him.

"No thanks. I'm driving and I already had one."

"Light weight. I guess I'll have to drink it instead." It's subtle, but her words are beginning to slur. Hallie diverts the adult beverage to her lips and takes a swig before Troy calmly takes the cup.

"I think you've had enough, Hallie. Your aunt and uncle are not going to appreciate me bringing their niece home sloshed. It's time to get going."

"You're not the boss of me. I'm sure I can get someone else to drive me home. You can leave if you're going to turn into a pumpkin at midnight or something."

She doesn't make a very good drunk. "Come on ladies, time to go."

When his sister looks as if she might say something in return, she stops, thinking better of the idea and begrudgingly agrees. "You're right. We do need to head out. It's late."

"Oh, not you, too! Don't let him spoil your fun."

Troy is relieved his sister is headed to the coat check area without additional prodding, leaving him to deal with Hallie. “Come on, Hallie. Time to go.”

“I’m staying. Just leave.” She whines with attitude.

“Nope. Your uncle put me in charge. You’ve had enough to drink. Time to head home.”

“Or what?” She has a fire in her eyes. She is throwing down an intentional dare. A group of teenagers gathered nearby are watching the interaction with interest.

“I’m not playing this game.” He reaches to secure her upper arm in his tight grip. He turns to head towards the exit, but she digs in her fashion heels and tries to hold him back. His anger is simmering. He hadn’t missed that she’s curvier than he had remembered, and he suspects Aunt Gina has been feeding her well, but it doesn’t change the fact she’s petite enough that he can hustle her along easily.

They’re at the coat check room before Troy releases her arm in order to dig out the claim check. They move aside to make room for the people lining up. Before the young attendant can return with their coats, Hallie is heading back towards the party.

His patience is at an end. He doesn’t know her story yet, but one thing is for sure, Hallie Boudreaux is in sore need of some discipline. Unfortunately, that job will fall to her uncle as her relative. All Troy can offer at this juncture is a stern lecture. A wave of resentment festers within him directed at Hallie. He was already feeling like an old man around her, but he hates that she’s turning him into her father.

He shuffles them to a nearby doorway, out of the path of the other partygoers, trapping her against the closed door. He

presses in close, allowing his towering body to try to intimidate Hallie into compliance.

“Now, I’ve had enough. I have no idea what happened in your past that makes you think acting like a brat is acceptable, but here’s your wake-up call. You are on dangerous ground with me, Hallie. We’re leaving.”

They are in a silent showdown of wills, staring into each other’s eyes as the group of teenagers she had been socializing with walk by, taunting them. “Hey, look at the lovebirds! They’re standing under the mistletoe. You guys better kiss or you’ll have bad luck.”

Troy’s gut lurches. Hallie’s eyes widen. As if they choreographed this moment, they each slowly look up to confirm the validity of the teenager’s taunt.

When their eyes meet next, he expects to see fear or anger. Those would be preferable to the confused longing reflected in her green eyes. It’s only there briefly, but he’d seen it. It’s a stupid tradition. It means nothing. He should walk away. He *will* walk away.

And then she licks her lips... slowly... sensuously. It’s an invitation and one he is helpless to resist. His brain shuts down, turning the moment over to the rest of his body. Their eyes are locked, and he watches for even a hint of fear... a hint that she doesn’t want this. What he sees instead is eagerness as her kissable lips part as excitement jumps in her eyes.

Suspecting he will never have this opportunity again, Troy closes the distance between them, lowering his lips to hers. The kiss is gentle... chaste even, right up until he feels Hallie’s arms circling his waist, tucked under his suit jacket, his dress shirt the only fabric preventing skin on skin connection. When she hugs him to her, Troy’s control slips

and the kiss turns to pure passion. He can taste the liquor on her tongue as she uses it to invade his own open mouth. The effects of her intimate proximity has him pressing his body into her own, trapping her against the unforgiving closed door. The added friction of their pressed bodies has his cock growing thick with desire to plunder her sexy body.

The kiss is too short. The hoots and catcalls of the surrounding teenagers remind Troy they have an impressionable audience. With great effort, he pulls out of her warm embrace, taking a few seconds to burn the memory of her flushed face into his memory to call up later when he has time to think things through more clearly.

He briefly contemplates apologizing, but he'll be damned if he's going to apologize for something that felt so perfect. It would have been a lie anyway. He's not sorry at all. Cupping her face gently in the palm of his hand, he tries to regain control over the moment. "Hallie, honey. Open your eyes for me."

She takes a few long seconds before she complies. He's relieved to see the heat he'd felt in her still smoldering in her bubbling green eyes. "That's my girl. It's late. Let me get you home. I don't want to piss your uncle off on Christmas Eve."

At the mention of her uncle, the fire in her eyes begins to douse, returning her to reality.

"You're right. We should go."

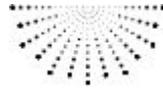
His body is still pressing into her. He sees a flicker of recognition as she acknowledges his hardness pressing into her with a slight shudder. He finally steps back, willing his dick to retreat before other party patrons notice. Troy grasps Hallie's hand in his own and leads her the short distance back to where Traci stands holding their coats, a smug smile on her face. He

purposefully avoids meeting his sister's eyes as he grabs Hallie's coat first, holding it out to assist her in getting it on before grabbing his own coat.

Troy needs a few minutes in the cold Colorado air to put out the flames Hallie Boudreaux had lit. "You ladies stay here. I'll get the car and bring it around, so you don't have to walk through the snow in those ridiculous things you two call shoes. I'll be right back."

And with that, Troy stalks out into the winter's night, determined to stay out there as long as it takes to get back into control before he has to see Hallie again.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Hallie has been showered and dressed for over an hour. Not even the lure of Aunt Gina's coffee and baking cinnamon rolls has managed to convince her to leave the relative safety of her bedroom this Christmas morning. She had slept fitfully, waking often to the memories of the intensity of Troy's chocolate brown eyes after their shared kiss the night before. She'd had a few drinks so she's sure her memory is playing tricks on her. She's told herself a hundred times that it was just a kiss. It didn't mean anything.

The problem was, her mind can repeat that it was just a kiss all it wants. Her body knows the truth. The night before, the three occupants of the car had been silent for the short drive to Aunt Gina's from the Community Center, each lost in thought. Always the gentleman, Troy had walked her to the front door, yet he hadn't lingered for longer than it took to drop a quick kiss on her cheek and quickly retreat. Only after the front door had closed behind her did she admit to herself how much she had been hoping for a second taste of his demanding lips when he walked her to her door. Thankfully, her aunt and uncle had been in bed, so she wasn't subjected to well-meaning questioning.

Unable to wind down, Hallie had tossed and turned for hours until she had finally given in to the urge to pleasure

herself around three this morning, hoping to help her body release the tension it had been carrying since Troy had primed her and then left her wanting more.

Her reaction to their kiss and even the fact that she'd masturbated doesn't scandalize Hallie. It's the vision that had taken hold as she rode her fingers to orgasm that has her shaken even now in the light of day. She's consumed with a mental image of Troy pulling her over his lap to deliver a bare bottomed spanking just before plunging that hard cock she had felt through their clothes into her waiting pussy. Knowing she will be seeing him this morning; her body is betraying her as she can actually feel the skin of her ass and upper thighs tingling with anticipation; a phenomenon that honestly just pisses her off. Clearly all of this talk about spanking in this damn town is starting to affect her.

A soft knock on her closed door drags her out of her tortured thoughts. "Come in."

Aunt Gina sails in with a cheery greeting, "Oh good, you're up."

She deposits an armful of folded clothes on Hallie's dresser before coming to wrap her arms around her only niece. "Merry Christmas, Hallie. I'm so happy to have you home with us so we can have a real Christmas celebration. It just wasn't the same celebrating without you these past few years." Hallie can see the mix of sadness and love in her aunt's eyes.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Aunt Gina. It's great to be here with you and Uncle Adam."

Gina pulls out of their hug to scurry around the room, putting clothes away in their proper place. "Aunt Gina, I told you. You don't need you to wait on me hand and foot. I can do

my own laundry and I wish you'd let me do more of the chores around here. I'm not here on vacation you know."

"Oh no you don't. You are still recovering from the accident and anyway, I love having someone to take care of. You are like the daughter your uncle and I could never have."

Hallie can see tears threatening to stream down her face, so she backs off. Her aunt continues on. "So how was the party at the community center? You stayed pretty late, so it must have been fun."

Hallie had been hiding to avoid answering these exact probing questions. She doesn't know what to make of the events the night before herself, so she sure as hell doesn't want to talk about them now.

"Oh, it was fine. The decorations were amazing, and I could have gained ten pounds just eating all of the sweets they had on display."

"Well, that's good. You were too thin when you got here. I've been trying to fatten you up, young lady. You ready to come out and start your day? Traci and Troy are going to be here any minute."

Oh goodie. Just what she needs, the man himself here to confuse her more than he already has.

Hallie answers truthfully. "Well, I could use coffee, that's for sure."

The ladies join Adam, and they spend time chatting over coffee and rolls, meant to tide them over until they eat the full brunch in a couple of hours. Hallie is just finished helping her aunt by putting the large ham in the oven when the doorbell rings. While Uncle Adam heads to receive their guests, Hallie takes the stick of lip-gloss out of her front jeans pocket. She'd

done it subconsciously and quickly shoves it back in her pocket when she realizes what she'd done, angry with herself for feeling nervous.

She takes a deep breath, hoping to calm herself so her guests never suspect how nervous she is to see the tall, handsome spanker. Yes, that is how she vows to think of Troy from now on in an attempt to remind her body how much she doesn't want to be attracted to a barbarian who thinks it's okay to light up a perfectly good ass.

Her resolve crumbles the second she turns to see him walking confidently into the room. His presence commands her full attention, his eyes trained on her as if to assess how she is doing this morning. He must approve because his face lights into a broad smile that has her knees feeling weak. She's luckily close enough to the island to nonchalantly reach for the counter to hold herself steady.

Had he kept his distance, all would have been fine, but he circles the end of the island stopping first to hand a bottle of wine to Aunt Gina, hugging her back when she throws her arms around him to deliver a big hug. Their eyes meet over her aunt's turned back, proving she has his full attention. The second he is out of Aunt Gina's hug, he continues forward to scoop a panicking Hallie into his arms for a similar greeting, although Hallie is pretty sure he hadn't allowed his hands to rest against Aunt Gina's ass during their brief hug.

Hallie pulls back far enough to look up into his mischievous eyes. He's in no hurry to release her. "Good morning, sunshine. How did you sleep?" Did he have a camera in her room or is it just her own worry making her feel as if he knew exactly how she'd slept?

“Oh, I slept like a baby. How about you?” Two can play at this game as Hallie lifts her right leg until her knee presses up against the package between his legs. She knows she struck gold when she hears his sharp intake of his breath followed by a long, quiet groan. She smiles up at him sweetly.

After a long exhale, he answers her quietly. “Honestly, I didn’t sleep all that well. I felt a bit like a little kid waiting for Christmas morning so he could see what presents he might find under the tree.” Was it her imagination or did he squeeze her ass on the word present?

“Well, sorry. I didn’t have time to go out to get you the new bike you asked for.”

The look on his face is playful. “How did you know I wanted a bike? Oh well, I’m sure we can come up with an alternate gift.”

She’s thrown off by his bantering and even more flustered by the fact that while he’s moved his hand to her back, he continues to hold her against his body, forcing her to crane her neck to look up into his playful eyes. Troy had been dangerous last night. This playful Troy is lethal.

Hallie is saved by Uncle Adam stepping into the kitchen. Troy releases Hallie quickly, stepping back trying to put distance between them.

“Merry Christmas again, Traci and Troy. We’re so glad you could make it.” Uncle Adam has moved to hug Traci before shaking Troy’s outstretched hand. “Who’s ready for some eggnog?”

“Now, Adam, isn’t it too early for eggnog? It’s not even noon yet.”

“It’s never too early for your eggnog, Gina.”

Memories of wonderful Christmases past flood Hallie. “Is it Nana’s recipe? She used to make the best eggnog.”

Gina smiles sadly. “Of course. Mom always did have the best recipes. You know what else I remember?” Gina has moved to the entertainment center in the alcove and a few minutes later Christmas music fills the space. Songs Hallie remembers listening to as she baked Christmas cookies with her Nana and mom in Baton Rouge what seems like a lifetime ago. She loses herself in her memories until she senses Troy nearby again.

“Everything okay?”

She feels a tear trekking down her cheek and swipes it away, hoping not to bring the mood down. Troy moves closer, replacing her own fingers on her cheek, taking on the job of tear swiper. She wants to be angry with him for overstepping his bounds. They barely know each other, yet she can’t be angry because it just feels too good to have someone actually giving a shit about how she feels.

He is still waiting for her answer. “I’m fine. It’s just this music. It’s special. My Nana, Aunt Gina, Mom, and I used to bake Christmas cookies every year. We called it ‘cookie day’ and we would bake non-stop from sun-up to sundown, drinking eggnog, singing these same Christmas carols over and over and making treats we would pass out to neighbors and friends. I just haven’t thought about cookie day in a long time.”

Aunt Gina is there, scooping her into her arms and the two women spend a few minutes hugging, grateful they have each other again, but mourning the loss of their Nana and Gina’s older sister. It’s Traci, not Troy, who joins the women in the

kitchen and Troy eventually heads out to the living room with Uncle Adam, eggnog in hand.

Troy is disgusted with his own lack of self-discipline. He hadn't slept well the night before, running over in his brain the twenty reasons why being attracted to Hallie Boudreaux was a bad idea. He had coached himself endlessly as he took his shower, resorting to lecturing his reflection in the mirror as he shaved about how he was going to keep his distance from her today. He'd had to lie to Traci and tell her he'd been on a cell call when she'd asked whom he had been talking to in the bathroom this morning.

He's relieved his sister finally stopped trying to psychoanalyze him last night when they returned to her house after taking Hallie home. Traci had tried to pump him for what he was thinking... what he was feeling... It was the first time he had ever been personally aware that his sister was indeed a therapist. Now today, he doesn't like the way she keeps looking at him as if she can read into the depth of his internal struggle where Hallie is concerned. The fact that she is smiling like the cat who ate the canary when the women join Troy and Adam in the living room tells Troy she is enjoying watching him torture himself.

Troy had wanted to exchange gifts quietly with his sister at her house before coming to the Newberry's, but Traci had put her foot down, insisting they open their gifts as a group. Luckily, Troy does have an awesome gift for Hallie, something he is pretty sure she might have had to leave behind on her escape to Colorado and is most likely missing. He wishes now he had brought more than a bottle of wine as a gift

for Gina and Adam as it feels rude to be sitting around to open gifts empty handed for the hosts.

Adam takes charge. "It's time for opening gifts. I'll go first. Gina, I've been dying to give this to you. It took all of my self-control to keep it a secret." Adam hands a small box to his wife who looks surprised.

"Another gift? I thought... well... you gave me a gift last night." Troy can see Gina blushing pink and he can only imagine what kind of a gift Adam had given his wife in private that elicits a blush like that. At least that explains why Adam had been anxious to pawn Hallie off on Troy and Traci so they could have the house to themselves.

"Now, just get opening this, will you woman?"

Gina opens the box and must look at the contents for thirty seconds before letting out a wail of a cry. "Oh Adam, you didn't? New York, really? You know I've been wanting to get back east for a visit. And you've already bought the plane tickets and everything?" Gina is so happy she has launched herself into her husband's beefy arms.

Troy and Hallie's eyes meet across the coffee table between their couches, and he can see happiness in her eyes for her aunt and uncle.

Troy decides to jump in with the next gift giving opportunity. "I'll go next. I hope you like what I got you, Traci." He gets up to hand her the rectangular box wrapped in silver paper. Everyone watches with interest as Traci opens the box and squeals.

"Troy, this is awesome, but you spent too much!" She pulls the Macbook Air out of the box, showing the slim laptop off to

everyone in the room. Her eyes seek out his own. “Seriously. You need to take this back. This is too much.”

“Trace, I know your old laptop died and you’ve been getting by with an old desktop, but that’s crazy. You need this for your work. I know you’re still working on the paper to present at next year’s conference and going to the library in Denver for research. You need a laptop.”

Troy doesn’t miss the look of panic on his sister’s face before she replaces it with a strained smile. He’ll have to ask more about that later when they are alone.

“I’m not taking it back, sis. It’s all yours.”

She launches herself up and into his lap, hugging her brother tightly. “You really didn’t need to do that, Troy, but thank you. It is an awesome gift.”

When his sister heads back to her own love seat, Troy gets up and walks to Hallie to give her the gift he had wrapped for her in the same silver paper. He had briefly considered taking it back this morning because after last night, it seems a bit much, but he knows it is the perfect gift for her and he just can’t miss seeing her face light up like he knows it will when she opens it.

She looks confused when he holds out the gift to her. She looks up at him from her perch below. “What is this? You never should have gotten me a gift... I mean... I didn’t have time...”

“Hallie, it’s okay. I didn’t expect to get a gift from you. I just saw this while I was out shopping for Traci, and I knew the second I saw this that I had to get it for you.” She still hasn’t reached to take the gift so he leans down to place the

package in her lap before returning to his own seat on his couch to watch her open his gift.

It takes her Uncle Adam urging her on to get her to pick up the package and gingerly start to unwrap it. He knows the second she realizes what she holds because her eyes fly up to meet his own. As if she had been mistaken, she peeks under the wrapping again, before raising her surprised eyes to his.

All she can say is “No way.”

Troy smiles broadly. “Yes, way.”

Traci is curious. “What is it Hallie? He wouldn’t tell me what he got you.”

She repeats with an extra flare. “No. Fucking. Way.”

It’s Uncle Adam’s turn to inject. “Hallie Marie Boudreaux. I am not going to have that kind of talk in this house. I’m about at the end of my patience, young lady.”

“Sorry, Uncle Adam.” But Troy doesn’t think she looks very sorry. A quick vision of draping Hallie across his knee to make her sorry invades, but he tamps it down quickly. The fact that can never happen is reason number one on the list of twenty reasons why Hallie is off-limits for him.

Aunt Gina prods her, trying to smooth over the unwelcome tension in the room. “Show us what it is, honey. We all want to see.”

Hallie opens the box in her hands and takes out the iPad tablet. Troy had made sure it was charged and he can see her slide to unlock the front screen. She sits there silently flipping through apps and screens for a few minutes, telling Troy she’s obviously used one before. He wishes he could see what she is looking at on the tablet, because when she finally does look

up, he can see tears streaming down her face. He smiles a supportive smile.

“How? I mean...” A true sob escapes while Gina gets up to get a tissue for her niece, delivering it to her and sitting next to her to look over Hallie’s shoulder.

It’s Gina who looks up with tears in her eyes next. “Oh Troy. This is a priceless gift. When you called and asked me if I had any old photos of my sister and mother, and of Hallie when she was a little girl, I had no idea what you were going to do with them. What a thoughtful gift.”

Troy had spent hours tracking down photos of Hallie’s life, converting them to digital photos for the iPad. Other photos he had downloaded from her old school on-line yearbooks and against his better judgment, The Kings official website which had many photos of the band. He had intentionally left off any photos that included Eddie the Asshole as he likes to think of him, but considering managing the band had been such a major part of her life, he didn’t feel it was right to leave those photos off completely.

She had gone back to playing with her new toy when her eyes fly to meet his again, total surprise. “Troy, there is even music already loaded on here. How the hell did you do that? Please tell me you didn’t buy all of that music.”

“There’s not all that much, but since we both attended the Matchbox 20 concert together, I’m taking a guess that we might share the same taste in music. I just thought I’d give you something to get you started. There are a couple books on there too, but I’m not sure if we share the same tastes in those.” Glancing at his sister, he teases her. “I know Traci wouldn’t really care for the books I read.”

His sister gives him a threatening glare to keep his mouth shut about her addiction to erotic romances.

Hallie has gone back to looking at her new gift, but when he sees her shoulders shaking, he feels bad because he can see his gift has upset her. He is just about to get up to go to her, when she launches out of her seat, rushing around the coffee table and throwing herself into his lap, burying her head against his chest.

He should regret making her cry, but he can't. She feels too perfect in his arms. So small... fragile in so many ways, and yet oddly strong in others. She is different than any other woman he has met, and twenty reasons or not, the bottom line is he wants her... and bad. He wants to comfort her... protect her... spank her until she moans with desire and then... fuck her long and hard until they are both spent.

“Shhh. Don't cry, Hallie. I never wanted to upset you. It was supposed to make you happy, not sad.”

Her face is mashed against his chest so her reply is muffled. “I am happy.”

Troy chuckles. “Well, you could have fooled me. I'd hate to see you if you were sad.”

He holds her tight against him, stroking her back lightly to try to help calm her. He looks up over Hallie's head that is tucked neatly beneath his chin and sees three pairs of eyes taking in the picture of Hallie and Troy in this intimate embrace. If he was worried Uncle Adam was going to kick his ass, he would have been dead wrong. When his eyes meet the older uncle's, Troy sees nothing but approval from Hallie's uncle. Shifting his gaze to his sister, he sees approving tears in her eyes, too.

He might be in a little trouble here.

Hallie stays in his arms for a few more heavenly minutes while the rest of the room visits. When she pulls away from him to finally look into his eyes, the depth of emotion in her eyes would have knocked him on his ass were he standing. He has to remind himself they are not alone.

“Are you feeling better now?”

She nods her head, afraid to speak. Her eyes are red rimmed from crying. He can smell her lip-gloss and longs to capture her lips in another kiss like the night before, but suspects that is best not done with an audience.

Traci breaks into their private connection by shoving cards in envelopes into both Troy and Hallie’s laps. “All right you two. Time for you to open my gift to each of you. I had already planned on getting this for Troy, but then Hallie started talking about this too last week so I thought it would actually be a great gift to give to both of you.”

That hint confuses Troy. “Well, you have my attention now. I can’t wait to see what you have cooked up here, Trace. You open yours first, Hallie.”

Traci replies. “No! You both need to open at the same time.”

Hallie and Troy’s eyes meet, and they silently communicate the plan. Together, they open their envelopes and pull out the thick packet of information. Troy recognizes it immediately. Hallie is taking longer to figure it out. The gift itself is awesome, but the fact that his sister has given Hallie the same gift is the best part in Troy’s humble opinion.

Hallie finally asks. “What is it?” She turns her eyes to Troy and not Traci.

“I love to ski. We grew up in Colorado and I was on a ski team for several years. Unless I’m mistaken, Traci got me a weekend package at one of my favorite ski resorts, Copper Mountain. She knows how much I missed skiing when I lived out east.”

He looks at his sister. “This is awesome, Trace. Thank you so much. This is the perfect gift to get me back in the groove being home in Colorado.”

Hallie is looking at Traci now. “But why did you get me this too? You obviously weren’t listening. The story I told you about skiing was about how much I suck at it and how the one and only time I’d gone, my friends who promised to teach me had taken me to the top of a big mountain and then left me there to figure out how to get myself down the mountain. I hated every single minute of skiing. I would never go again. Not in a million years.”

Troy can hear real panic in her voice and tries to calm her. He’s glad she’s stayed on his lap so he can rub her back lightly. “Hey... it’s okay. It sounds like you just went with the wrong people is all. If they left you at the top to fend for yourself with no training, then they’re not real friends.”

“Still...”

Hallie is looking down at the packet in her hands and he can feel real fear as she trembles. He tries to reassure her. “I bet if you’d take some lessons and start out on the bunny slopes until you got your confidence up, you’d learn to like it. It’s awesome being out in the mountains, close to nature. Just you against the mountain.”

Troy suspects Hallie is holding it together, trying not to make Traci feel bad about not liking her gift, but looking up to see Traci’s face, Troy knows immediately his sister did this on

purpose. While Hallie sits oblivious to the others in the room, Troy scans the room to find Adam and Gina smiling knowingly.

They've been setup by a room full of matchmakers.

Apparently, he forgot to send the memo outlining the twenty reasons why falling for Hallie Boudreaux was a bad idea to the other occupants of the room.

Troy has a brief moment of anger at being manipulated, but it fades quickly at the possibility of spending a weekend at Copper Mountain with Hallie. Ironically, it's not the skiing he's looking most forward to. He's pretty sure he's projected his less-than-gentlemanly thoughts to his face because he sees Adam's frown.

Okay, get your mind out of the gutter, Jackson.

"Hallie, look at me." When she doesn't comply, he adds a gentle, "Please."

When she turns, he feels her fear. He links his open hand with hers while he continues to stroke her lower back gently. "Okay, here's the deal. I'd be honored if you would trust me enough to let me take you skiing and I promise you, we'll start out with me giving you lessons and work up to small practice runs and bunny hills. I will never leave your side. Not even for one minute. I'll push you a little bit, but never past what I think you can do and if you really want to stop, we will." She was listening and he can see her softening. "The question is. Do you trust me enough to let me teach you to ski?"

They may be talking about skiing, but there are so many other important implications riding on Hallie's answer to this question. *Trust*. It's what every successful relationship comes down to. Without it, nothing else really matters. If Hallie can

trust him to guide her through her fear of skiing, maybe there would be hope he could guide her through her fear of other things... like spanking.

The second the thought hits him, he looks up to see his sister's approving nod. She may guard Hallie's private conversations carefully as her therapist, but he can see as Hallie's friend, Traci is doing her best to help her new friend overcome some of her fears and build her confidence.

Troy doesn't have time to reflect for long because Hallie has turned in his lap to face him.

Her ass wiggling against his cock, pressing it into his jeans is the best kind of slow torture.

"You promise me. You won't leave me on my own. Not even for one minute?"

"I promise, although people may look at me funny if I follow you into the ladies' room when you need to pee."

Her blush is sweet. In some ways Hallie is so worldly for a twenty-three-year-old, but there are moments, like this, that she seems so young... vulnerable. He's not sure which side of Hallie he likes more.

"I guess I'll let you off the hook then."

"So... I need to hear it. Do you trust me, Hallie?"

The question hangs heavy in the air and they both know the question is way more than just about skiing.

Her answer is a whisper. It's intimate, meant only for his ears. "I trust you, Troy."

He releases the breath he hadn't known he was holding, relief flooding in. He pulls her into his arms to hug her tightly

to him. He'd love to kiss her but thinks better of it with their current audience.

They are torn out of their brief interlude by Adam's clearing of his throat and standing to walk across the room to deliver a gift to Hallie's lap. "Here you go, Hallie. This is your gift from your Aunt Gina and me." Troy detects uncertainty in the older man and suspects the confident HoH is feeling unsure. It makes Troy curious about what is in the package.

Hallie doesn't open it right away. When she starts pulling at the ribbons and wrapping paper, he can see her fingers trembling. He whispers into her ear, "What's wrong?"

She turns to him whispering, knowing everyone is watching them. "I know what this is.

I... well... I heard them talking about it the other night."

Troy doesn't know what's in the package, but he understands Hallie isn't happy about it.

"Well, okay. Is it something you don't want?"

Tears are spilling from her red-rimmed eyes. Her answer is almost choked out. "I don't know."

He smiles, trying to comfort her. "Well, there's only one way to figure this out. Go ahead and open it. It can't be that bad, right?"

He sees her push her fear aside, and she finishes opening the gift box to uncover a big folder with the Eagle's Pass logo all over the front of it. Troy doesn't need to open the folder to know what's inside. It isn't a surprise to him at all.

Aunt Gina's crying is the only sound to be heard over the Christmas carols playing softly in the background.

“Your aunt and I know you don’t have the money to buy into the co-op on your own, but this is where you belong, Hallie. Here with your only family. We’ve gone ahead and put your name in on an application and paid the down payment so you can stay here in Eagle’s Pass with us. Merry Christmas, honey.”

Adam and Gina obviously meant well, but Troy could belt them for springing this on Hallie like this. Deciding where she is going to live needs to be discussed. Deciding to live in a town based on the principles of the domestic discipline way of life is not something to be taken lightly for anyone, but for Hallie, who has obviously experienced violence in her life, it is a huge decision. No wonder she was afraid to open this present. She doesn’t want to hurt her aunt and uncle’s feelings by rejecting the gift, but she also doesn’t want to get railroaded into living in a place that could make her miserable.

A pregnant pause has fallen over the room, all eyes on Hallie. Maybe he’s being a hypocrite by jumping in with his opinion on the matter. At least Adam and Gina are blood relatives. Who the hell is he to butt his nose into this decision? Yet, when Hallie turns to him, vulnerable and sad, there is nothing he wouldn’t do to make her feel better.

Troy looks up to the HoH in the room, choosing his words carefully. “That’s quite a generous gift, Adam. I know having Hallie here with you and Gina has made you very happy. Hallie is lucky to have family that loves her so much.”

The men are in a visual showdown. Adam is intuitive enough to pick up on Troy’s protective stance. “But...” Adam is defensive.

Troy stays calm. “But nothing. It is a very generous gift. I’m just not sure Hallie is ready to decide where she wants to

live yet. She still has a lot to work through with Traci.”

Adam snaps back. “And she will be able to do that since she’ll be living in Eagle’s Pass full time.”

“But what if Hallie decides this isn’t the right place for her? Let’s face it. This is a very unique town with very unique rules and customs. I’m not sure Hallie is ready to commit to living in Eagle’s Pass. I thought she had more time before the January Housing Board meeting to make up her mind?”

“She doesn’t need to wait that long. She needs to stay here with her family.” Each of Adam’s answers are coming back faster and more terse. He isn’t used to having his decisions questioned. As the only other male in the room, Troy suspects he’s the only one who can say what needs to be said with a hope of getting through to the older man.

“With all due respect, Adam, none of us, including myself, can push Hallie into accepting a domestic discipline way of life. To make her live here if she truly cannot accept the way of life is actually worse than the kind of judgmental crap all of us who have lived outside of Eagle’s Pass are faced with when friends and neighbors find out about our unique kinks and practices.

You choose to live here so you could be with like-minded people who won’t judge you. Doesn’t Hallie deserve the same courtesy?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, young man. You don’t live here either. The people of Eagle’s Pass will welcome her with open arms. They will love her and protect her as their own.”

“I’m sure they will, but that isn’t the real problem now, is it?”

Adam looks like he is about to blow, so upset he is not able to come up with a new retort to Troy. Troy looks down at Hallie in his lap and finds her staring up at him in awe. It gives him the courage to push forward.

“Let me give you just a couple of examples from the last twenty-four hours. Last night at the party, we were welcomed with party gifts. Hallie was given a lotion for TiHs to use on her ass after receiving a harsh punishment. She took her gift in stride, but you should have seen the look of fear on her face when I opened my heavy wooden spoon. We all know the men of Eagle’s Pass are not home using those spoons to cook Christmas brunch today, now, don’t we?”

Adam is listening intently, so Troy continues on. “The biggest example however was that the woman who was passing out the gifts happens to be the same woman Hallie got to know by innocently walking from your house to Traci’s for a counseling session. Hallie heard a submissive crying out in pain while being paddled by her HoH through an open window. Hallie had to go through the torture of having to walk by without helping. To you and me, we understand what was happening in that house was consensual and if done right, even loving. But to Hallie, she had to turn her back on someone who was being abused. Are you really sure you want your niece with you so much that you are willing to constantly put her into these types of uncomfortable situations as she goes about her normal everyday life? Trust me, Adam. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking on this very topic myself.”

Troy stops and looks back down into Hallie’s eyes, tears now streaming down her face. His anger at Adam is fading as he reaches out to cup her face, never taking his eyes from hers as he continues on. “If we really care about Hallie, we need to give her the space and time she needs to figure out what it is

that's going to make her happy. I don't know all of the things she's had to go through, but I know it's been a long time since she's... since *you've* got to decide what you really want in life. I'm not willing to force you into something I know you could never accept in the long run. You're too important to me for that."

There. He's said it. He's outed himself. Twenty reasons or not, he wants Hallie in every sense of the word. They barely know each other, but it doesn't matter. During the two weeks apart, he had convinced himself his memory was faulty. He was sure that when he saw her again last night he would realize his attraction to her had been a fleeting result of the extraordinary events that brought them together. Now, less than twenty-four hours after being back in Eagle's Pass, he is just as sure that his life has been irrevocably changed by the spitfire in his lap. The depth of his feelings for her should scare him, but the only emotion he can recognize is excitement.

Adam clearing his throat brings Troy back to the moment. Looking up, he can see he had gotten through to the older man. Troy can hear the emotion in his warbling voice as he addresses his niece. "Hallie, honey. I never thought of it that way. You have to know, your aunt and I just love you so much that we want you to be happy and safe. I'm sorry if I tried to railroad you into staying here with us if you aren't going to be happy here."

Hallie speaks for the first time since opening the gift. "I know you both love me, and I love you too, but I am just so confused right now. I'm not saying I won't want to stay here... but I'm also not ready to say that I am ready to stay for good. Can't you please give me a little more time to figure things out before I have to make a decision?"

Aunt Gina tries to reassure her. “Of course, honey. You can have as much time as you need.”

It’s her husband that corrects her. “Gina, we both know that’s not true. She has some time to decide, yes, but as an adult, she is going to have to join the co-op if she decides she wants to stay. I’m on the Housing Board. I can’t go breaking the rules, not even for family.”

Gina snaps at her husband. “That’s crazy, Adam. Hallie is way more important to us than Eagle’s Pass.”

“I’d watch your tone, my dear.” Adam shoots his wife a look that Troy recognizes from the HoH’s handbook that says to straighten up or you’re gonna find yourself over my knee. When Gina looks properly quieted, Adam continues on. “And of course, Hallie is more important to us. What I’m trying to say is that if Hallie is not happy here, then we can’t break the rules and have her stay. We’ll just move back to New England so we can be together there.”

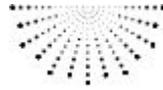
A choking cry escapes from Hallie. “Oh God. Stop! You both love it here. I’m not going to let you move away from Eagle’s Pass because of me. I’ll just sign the papers. Thank you for the thoughtful gift.” She is trying to be brave... and failing miserably.

Troy is happy Adam beats him to the punch. “Nobody needs to be signing anything yet, young lady. Troy is right. We have a few more weeks before we need to make any decisions. I’m sure you want some time to explore what is available for you here in Eagle’s Pass in the way of going back to school or finding a new job. I’m sorry I tried to rush things along, but there is no harm in waiting a bit longer and then we can decide what we need to do closer to the next Housing Board meeting. Is that okay?”

Troy can feel her relaxing into his arms at being given more time. “That would be great, Uncle Adam. Really. Thank you so much. It is a wonderful gift. I just need to think things through is all.”

Troy reluctantly lets Hallie out of his lap to cross the room and give her aunt and uncle a big hug. Troy looks at his sister for the first time in a while and she is grinning from ear to ear. Damn. He is never going to live this down.

CHAPTER NINE



Two days later, Hallie is up at the crack of dawn for no other reason than the butterflies in her tummy were fluttering strong enough she was feeling sick to her stomach. The problem is, she isn't quite sure what has her more nervous. The fact that she's about to go skiing again after swearing she'd never again hit a ski slope, or the fact that she is going skiing with Troy Jackson.

Troy. She'd given up trying to resist him. She's fallen hard and fast. She'd at least had a chance of pretending he hadn't caught her attention up until Christmas morning, but between him giving her the most thoughtful gift she's ever received and his standing up to her Uncle Adam for her, the protective wall she'd been trying to erect between them had crumbled down.

The really hot kiss on Christmas Eve didn't hurt either. Hallie would be lying if she didn't admit to being disappointed that in spite of spending a lot of time together the last few days, Troy has yet to try to kiss her again. Granted, they've been surrounded by their families almost every minute, but she can't help but wish he'd been able to sneak in a kiss at some point.

Which brings her full circle to the butterflies this morning. For the next two days, she is going to be alone with Troy. Her

aunt and uncle had been thrilled with the planned ski outing up until they realized it included a night away at the ski lodge at Copper Mountain. They had insisted Troy needed to drive her home tonight, but Troy had put his foot down that would be silly considering the package Traci had bought him was for a two-day pass with a night's lodging and dinner in the fine dining restaurant.

In the end, Uncle Adam relented because Troy had reminded him that Hallie was twenty-three years old and had been living on her own for many years before coming to Eagle's Pass. It also didn't hurt that Troy had sworn he would never do anything to put Hallie at risk. It had been nerve-racking watching the two dominant men go head-to-head and Hallie's respect for Troy only grew as she watched him expertly handle her sometimes old-fashioned and always bull-headed uncle.

It is barely seven and Hallie is already showered, dressed, and packed. She heads out to the kitchen in search of caffeine in hopes it will calm her nerves while she waits the last half hour for Troy's arrival.

Aunt Gina is already up, putting a pot of coffee on. "Good morning, Hallie. I'm not surprised to see you up early."

"Morning, Aunt Gina. You knew I would need coffee, did you?"

"Well, you always need coffee. I was talking about how nervous you must be to be going skiing for two days with Troy."

Hallie had been getting the mugs out of the cabinet, but she turns she sees her aunt's smiling face. "I'm that obvious, am I?"

“Not at all, honey. But anyone would be a little nervous in these conditions. It’s perfectly normal.”

“Well, I still think I’ve lost my mind to give skiing another try.”

Aunt Gina tsks, shaking her head with a giggle. “Oh, Hallie. You don’t need to be nervous about skiing.”

Hallie is confused. “Well, then what?”

Gina has come to stand in front of her niece, looking down the few inches gap with a loving smile. “Hallie, it must be so exciting to be falling in love. I can tell he cares about you very much. I’m so happy for you.”

“Whoa. Aunt Gina, I barely know the man. Let’s not get carried away.”

“Whatever you say, dear. I see the way the two of you look at each other.”

Hallie is panicking. It was one thing for her to admit to herself that she might be falling hard. It’s another to have her aunt having them married off already. “I do like Troy, Aunt Gina, but that doesn’t mean anything. There are... things... that will make a relationship with him very hard.”

“Pish-posh. If you two care enough, you can make it work. He’s a good man, Hallie. Those are hard to find.”

Hallie is torn. Her aunt has given her the perfect opening to ask some hard questions she’s been wanting to ask but was too afraid. She decides with the Housing Board’s meeting less than two weeks away, there is no time like the present.

“Aunt Gina. I have some more questions I’ve been wanting to ask you, but... well they are personal and probably none of my business, but if I am going to stay in Eagle’s Pass,

well... they are the questions I need answered to help me make my decision.”

Her aunt is smiling broadly. “I know we’ve talked about DD in generalities, but I’ve been waiting for you to ask the harder questions, honey. I knew you would when you were ready.”

“I’m not sure I’ll ever really be ready, but... well... Troy...” Damn this is hard. “We’ve never talked about it, but I think it might come up this weekend. I’m pretty sure he would like to live in Eagle’s Pass one day. Do you know what I mean?” Hallie is having trouble spitting out exactly what she means.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure you’re right about that, dear.”

“Well, then you know what I’m worried about. It’s one thing to live in Eagle’s Pass and accept how everyone here chooses to live their personal relationships. It’s an entirely different thing to be in a relationship with a man who believes strongly in the founding principles of the town.”

Gina’s smiles indulgently. “You can’t even say it, can you? Everyone in town believes in spanking. More than that, many of us believe that relationships should have one dominant decision maker and one submissive partner.”

Hallie has to fight the surge of anger. “And that’s okay with you? Really? I mean, I love Uncle Adam, but he can be a real bully sometimes. I don’t know why you put up with it, Aunt Gina? And more importantly, I’m not sure I ever could, even with a man like Troy.”

Gina’s laugh lines are lighting up her face. She looks more radiant than Hallie has ever seen her. “Oh Hallie, I’m sure that to many outsiders, yourself included, that it looks one sided or

even abusive, but nothing could be farther from the truth. That's the secret that every one of us here in Eagle's Pass all share. There is an intimacy to a DD relationship that makes couples like your uncle and I close. The power dynamics in a relationship like ours requires a level of trust and communication most married couples never can achieve. I love doing things to make your uncle happy. That's the easy part for me to talk about. The other part... well that is harder."

"What other part?"

Gina finally looks uncomfortable, but she steels herself to forge ahead. "The discipline. The punishments. On one level, they are meant to keep order in our lives, but Hallie, I never feel closer to your uncle than after he has taken the time to discipline me and then hold me, hugging me tight, reassuring me of how much he loves me. Reassuring me that I'm forgiven." Gina's face has turned a bright red. "Oh, and the sex. Well, I won't go into details, but let's just say that your uncle and I may be getting older, but we still have a really hot sex life. This lifestyle lends itself to a kind of intimacy few outside of a DD relationship can understand."

Hallie is sure she has turned as red as the Christmas hand towel on the nearby kitchen counter, but as long as her aunt has opened this door, she doesn't want to waste the chance. "But... doesn't it really hurt when Uncle Adam spanks you? How is that sexy?"

"There are a lot of different kinds of spankings, honey. Before we came to Eagle's Pass, we pretty much only did the not-so-fun kind when I had done something dangerous or broke one of our marriage rules. I won't lie, those spankings hurt... a lot, but I still feel better after they are done than I did before. But since moving here, well... Surrounded by so many

reminders of spanking, we have experimented a lot more and let's just say that most of my spankings these days are the fun kind that I really like. I know it may not have sounded like it, but even that harsh paddling you heard Carrie Ann getting brought her and Danelle closer. I've talked to Carrie Ann about it at length. I would bet they had sex soon after the punishment."

"Oh, they did. I stuck around long enough to get an earful of that too."

Gina is smiling. "I'm not surprised. Troy was right about you being subjected to the lifestyle if you stay here. If you decide to stay in Eagle's Pass, you'll hear a lot of talk about the kinky things our Heads of Household like to do to us Taken-In-Hands. Whether you decide to practice DD or not, you won't be able to escape the implications."

"What if Troy... I mean, I know for a fact that he believes in giving spankings. So, what if I just can't get over this fear I have?"

"Interesting that you know Troy believes in spankings." Gina pauses, waiting for Hallie to expound. Hallie doesn't take the bait. Gina moves on. "Let me ask you a question. The last time you visited your uncle and me while we still lived in New England, your uncle spanked you a good one if I remember. You carried on something terrible, but I'm pretty sure you don't hold a grudge or hate Adam because of it, do you?"

Hallie has thought a lot about that spanking since coming to Eagle's Pass. "Of course, I don't hate him. I don't blame him at all. I totally deserved it. I was a brat and I shudder to think what could have happened if I'd gotten in an accident that night. It was not one of my finer moments."

“How did you feel after? Not your butt, but your other body parts?”

“Well, besides being mortified and so sorry, I felt relieved. The thing I remember the most about that night is that I think you and Uncle Adam told me like ten times how much you loved me.”

“Oh Hallie, you already have your answer. That is exactly what a good DD relationship will feel like if your HoH is doing his job and taking care of you.”

“But what happens if you don’t agree with the spanking? What if you don’t feel like you deserve it?”

“I honestly never feel that way. Adam has done a very good job of laying out our family rules. I know what will and won’t get me a real punishment. Every family makes their own guidelines, but Troy is a levelheaded young man. I don’t see him making unreasonable rules just so he has an excuse to spank you, if that’s what you are worried about.”

Hallie still has so many questions she needs answers to, but the doorbell interrupts. Her heart lurches into her throat and she feels lightheaded.

Aunt Gina to the rescue. “Just breathe, Hallie. I don’t know how I know, but I do. He is a good man. You can trust him not to hurt you, honey. But...” Gina pauses. “If something happens that you want to come home, you just call me, okay? I’ll drive up to get you in a heartbeat if you need me. But try to give him a chance. Can you do that?”

The doorbell is ringing again, and Uncle Adam has joined them. “For Christ’s sake, ladies. You’re right here. Don’t you hear that doorbell? I heard it all the way from the bathroom.” He opens the door and Troy steps in, towering over Uncle

Adam by a few inches. He looks like an Olympic skier, athletic and intense. His sunglasses hide his chocolate eyes, but lend a movie star quality to his appearance. Those butterflies in her stomach just flew lower as Hallie feels her core pulsing. When he takes off the glasses to flash her a sexy grin, she swears she can feel cream escaping to wet her panties.

“Good morning, Hallie.” Only after devouring her for a few long seconds does he glance at Gina. “Hello, Aunt Gina. How are you today?”

Gina tries to cover for her flustered niece. “Oh, we’re doing fine, Troy. We were just getting our first morning cup of coffee, but I haven’t had time to feed Hallie yet. You two want to stay for breakfast before heading out?”

“Thanks for the offer, but there is an awesome pancake house about halfway there that I always loved to stop at. If it’s okay with Hallie, I’d like to stop and grab some breakfast together.”

He is waiting for her reply. She hates that she feels like putty in his hands when he is around. She wants to be strong and sassy, independent. Maybe later. “That sounds great, Troy. I love pancakes.”

“Great. You packed yet?”

Uncle Adam had already gone to Hallie’s room and grabbed her bag and has returned. “She’s packed. I’m still not sure I’m in complete agreement with this plan, but I’m trusting you with my niece, young man. I expect her home in one piece, happy and healthy. Do you get my drift?”

The men are in another show down. “Yes, sir. I understand perfectly. You have my word.”

Adam finally sticks his hand out to pump a handshake with Troy. “That’s all I can ask for.”

Troy grabs her bag with one hand and holds out his other to Hallie. “Ready?”

She takes a deep breath and places her hand in his. “I’m ready.”

The first leg of their trip has gone off without a hitch, although Troy can feel the tension rolling off Hallie. He’s tried to get her talking so she’d relax, but so far it hasn’t worked. He’s glad to be pulling into the parking lot of Pattie’s Pancake House, not only for the food, but to have a chance to sit across the table from Hallie. He does better when he can see her eyes.

She moves to open her door. “Stay put. I’ll come around to help you out.”

“That’s okay. I can manage.” Hallie opens the door, but Troy stops her with his hand on her left forearm.

“Hallie, I’d really like it if you’d please let me open your door.”

“Troy, this isn’t 1950. I can open my own damn door.” They are locked in a stare down. Troy briefly contemplates backing down, but in the end, he knows he doesn’t have a long time between now and the Housing Board’s meeting to accomplish all he hopes to accomplish.

“I know you *can* open your door. I’m asking if you will allow me to open your door for you.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“Honey, I’m not sure I do either. All I know is that it’ll make me happy. Please.” He can see her blush at his use of the endearment.

Pulling her door shut, she smiles. “If it means that much to you, then fine.”

Her bending to his will in this small request makes Troy happy. He leans across the center console to place a quick kiss on her cheek. “Thank you.”

Troy hustles out and around to open her door, helping her step down onto the snowy parking lot. “Hey, you do actually own some sensible shoes.”

Hallie swats his arm playfully. “Very funny. Even I don’t wear high heels skiing.”

“Too bad. I kind of like seeing you in them.”

“You do?”

“Hell yes. Not only are they hot, but I like how you’re always needing to lean on me so you don’t fall.”

“So, you have some ‘help a girl in and out of a car fetish?’ Is that what you’re saying?” Troy laughs. “Damn, you caught me.”

The restaurant hasn’t changed at all since the last time Troy stopped in probably over ten years or more. The service is fast and only once they have their coffee and have ordered do they feel an awkward silence fall over their table.

“I still can’t believe you talked me into trying skiing again. You have to know how much I absolutely hated it last time. I was terrified, Troy. I swear to you. I will kill you and then revive you so I can kill you again if you desert me today.”

“Wow, that would be a good trick. Listen, I promise you that we’re going to start nice and easy, and we’ll only do harder things if you feel up to it.”

He’s glad he can see her eyes, because he knows she’s picked up on the double meaning of his promise. The question is will she comment on it. He is patient.

“So, is that how you do everything? I mean, start out slow and ease me into it nice and easy?”

He can detect her breathing has picked up the pace as if she is getting excited. He’s not surprised. He’s had a semi-erection for the last three days. “I’d like to think so, yes.” He can see her relaxing.

“So, Traci tells me you’re in the Air Force. I hardly know anything about what you do.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t share all that much. I work in the IT/security division.”

“How long have you been in the service?”

“Just over eleven years. I joined right after...” Troy hasn’t talked about his parents with anyone in a long time. Hallie is watching him closely. “My parents were killed on their way back from a mission trip the summer after I graduated from college. Traci had just graduated from high school and was preparing to go to college in the fall. It sort of knocked us both on our ass for a while there. Traci was the strongest. She threw herself into college and worked hard. I pretty much took almost a year off, sitting on my ass feeling sorry for myself.”

He can see the sympathy in her eyes. He doesn’t want her to feel sorry for him. “Oh, Troy. I wish I didn’t, but I know exactly how it feels to lose a parent you love too soon. It fucking sucks.”

Her choice of words brings a chuckle. “You really do like to talk like a truck driver, don’t you?”

“Sorry. Bad habit. Does it really bother you? I know it drives Uncle Adam crazy.”

“Oh, it doesn’t bother me as much as it does him, although I usually prefer to save that kind of language for specific times where it might be more appropriate.”

“When would...” her voice trails off as she blushes a very cute pink. “Oh...”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“Yes, you did.”

Such sass. “Okay, maybe I did. Do you mind?”

“I guess not, as long as you don’t threaten to spank me for it.” Her eyes grow as big as saucers as soon as the words are out of her mouth.

Troy can’t help but laugh out loud. “If you could see your face. You’re adorable when you blush like that.”

“I don’t want to be adorable.”

“What do you want to be?”

“I don’t know. Sexy. Smart. Sassy.”

“Oh Hallie, believe me, honey. You are all of those things and so much more.”

The passion burning back at him from across the table has Troy about to leap over to take her in his arms. Only the arrival of the pancakes puts a kibosh on that plan.

When the server leaves, Hallie grins at him. “Saved by the pancakes.”

“You have no idea.”

“So, I know you used to live in Washington DC. Where else have you lived?”

“Well, I was stationed in Florida, Texas and briefly in Germany before transferring to a big project three years ago that had me in DC. I’ve been trying to get back to Colorado for years so I could be closer to Traci. We are the only family each other has and I hated being away so much. I’m grateful for the close-knit community of Eagle’s Pass. I know it’s not the same as real family, but she has made some very close friends here. I just wish she’d find her own HoH and settle down. I know she’s always wanted to have a big family and she’s anxious to get started.”

“What about you? Why haven’t you settled down yet?” She’s trying to act nonchalant, but he can tell she’s fishing for information on his past relationships.

“No big reason. I guess I just haven’t found the right person... yet.”

“So, no marriages? Engagements?”

“Nope.”

“Wow, what’s wrong with you?”

Troy laughs. “Gee, I don’t know for sure, but I guess I’ve never found the right kind of

woman”

“What kind of woman is that? A 1950’s woman?”

He takes a bite of pancakes to give himself time to think. “Is that what you think the whole DD lifestyle is all about? Turning women into housewives, barefoot and pregnant, ready

to service their husbands on a dime and turned over his knee for a hard, bare-bottomed spanking if she fails to please him?”

Her chest is heaving as she takes deep breaths.

“Which part of that rant has you out of breath, Hallie?”

Her answer is barely more than a whisper. “All of it. Oh God. Is that really what you expect?”

Troy could kick himself. She isn't ready to see that for the ridiculous joke that it was. He quickly slides out of the booth, moving to slide in next to her. Hallie actually slides as far as she can, turning so her back is against the restaurant wall to face him. She's panicking as he moves forward, trapping her.

Troy reaches out to cup her cheek with his right hand, trying to calm her. “Hallie, baby. I'm so sorry. That was a bad joke. That isn't what I want out of a relationship at all. Take a deep breath.” Amazingly, she listens to him. “You want to know what the right kind of woman is for me? The woman I've been looking for?”

She answers with a whisper. “Yes.”

“Well for starters, she has to be smart... witty... able to keep me on my toes. Kind of like this conversation we're having right now. It's anything but boring, wouldn't you agree?” He ends with a grin.

“I guess.”

“Good. Next, she has to want to be my partner in life. Someone who compliments me. Who accepts that I am going to be better at some things and she at other things, but when we put our skills together, we make a whole. To me that is what DD is all about. Each person has an equal but different role to play, but when we come together it can be like magic.”

“I’ve never believed in magic.”

“Oh, Hallie. I may have never found it either, but I believe in it. I saw it with my own eyes in my parent’s marriage and my grandparent’s before them. I see it in so many of the wonderful relationships in Eagle’s Pass. You don’t think they’ve found a little bit of magic?”

She thinks about that for a minute. “Maybe.”

“There’s one other really important requirement left.”

“Yes?”

“She has to make me want to fuck her senseless the second she walks in a room”

“Oh God.” Troy is worried she is going to hyperventilate soon. He’s close enough to smell her arousal in the confined space.

Troy grabs her hand, holding it in his own while they size each other up. He slowly moves their joined hands to place her palm onto his now raging hard-on. Hallie’s eyes dilate, turning from green to almost black with veiled lust.

“This is what you do to me, Hallie. I’ve pretty much had this problem since I kissed you under that damn mistletoe on Christmas Eve. Three damn days I’ve been walking around, telling myself you’re too young for me. Telling myself you’re too innocent. Too afraid of a DD lifestyle. That you’ll freak out the first time I try to spank that beautiful ass of yours. I’ve come up with at least twenty reasons why falling for you is a bad idea, but in the end, it doesn’t matter. I want you, Hallie Boudreaux and I’m going to be patient and take my time proving to you that you should want me too.”

He’s done it. Laid all of his cards on the table. He hadn’t even made it two damn hours alone with her. He holds his

breath, praying he didn't just make the biggest mistake of his life.

She never does answer him. At least not with words. Hallie catapults forward into his arms with a groan. Troy captures her mouth in what is easily the most passionate kiss of his life. It's full of emotion and promise. They lose themselves in the moment until their waitress clears her throat next to their table. They pull out of their kiss reluctantly.

"I'm really sorry to interrupt, but there is a family nearby that has complained about your... well... They'd appreciate it if you could get back to eating your breakfast."

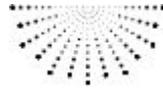
Troy and Hallie both burst out laughing. "Yeah, sure. We'll behave ourselves."

"Thank you."

When she's gone, Troy reaches out to tuck a stray strand of blonde hair behind Hallie's ear. "Oh Hallie, you're dangerous."

"That's my line."

CHAPTER TEN



“Don’t touch me! I can get up on my own.” Hallie looks up at Troy hovering over her for at least the tenth time in the last four hours. Just when she starts to feel like she might be getting the hang of things, she finds herself on her ass again.

“Don’t be stubborn. Let me help you up. You were doing really good there that time. Right up until you realized how fast you were going and then you panicked.”

Troy has hoisted her back on her feet where she stands hopping on one foot while he reaches down to grab her dangling ski and reattach it to her boot. As he stands, Hallie can see the humor dancing in his eyes. She has to give him credit. He has honored his promise to stick to her like glue. He’s even proven to be a very patient teacher and with the exception of making her use one of the chairlifts, he hasn’t pushed her too far out of her comfort zone.

“Are you getting hungry? We could take a break and grab some lunch before we head up to the next run.”

“The next run? You mean we need to do it again?”

Troy can no longer contain his laughter. “Honey, the object is to get as many runs in as you can in a day. No one does just one run.”

“No one but me. That is exactly how many I did last time I came.”

“Well, that’s because you went with idiots. Tell me the truth, are you hating it?”

“Honestly, I’m mostly having fun. I wish the small little kids would stop zipping past me.

They make me feel like a loser.”

“Well, you’re not a loser. You’re doing great for your first time.”

“As much as I’d like to take a break, I’m afraid if I sit down, I might not get up again. I’m pretty sure I’m using muscles I never even knew I had, and I’m really wishing I’d thought to bring that damn lotion to use on my sore bottom. I suspect it might come in handy tonight on my bruises.”

Troy hugs her to him tight. “Oh Hallie. You’re adorable.”

“Sexy.”

“Adorable *and* sexy. Let me demonstrate.” Troy captures her Chapstick-covered lips in a tender kiss. As cold as it is outside, he does a fine job of warming her up before reluctantly coming up for air.

Hallie has a better idea of how she’d like to spend their afternoon. “Sure you don’t want to just check in at the lodge?”

“Oh boy would I ever. Unfortunately, they’re full at this time of year and there’s no way they have our room ready yet. Anyway, what kind of an instructor would I be if I let you quit now?”

“The best kind. You could move on to instructions in other things.” The words have left her mouth before she realizes she does not want to pursue this line of discussion.

“Oh baby, I hope you’re going to let me instruct you on a great many things. But first, let’s grab food. I need you to keep your energy up.”

They manage to get three runs in after lunch and Hallie is proud that she hadn’t fallen even once since her disastrous crash trying to disembark a particularly scary ski lift. It was the only time she’d been ready to kill Troy because once he knew she wasn’t hurt, he had trouble helping her up and out of the line of fire of the skiers coming up behind them because he’d been laughing so hard. Apparently, it was a very graceful fall... not.

Hallie can’t remember being as happy as she is at this very minute. She has the perfect view of Troy as she sits in the comfortable leather chair next to the roaring fire in the lobby of the Alpine lodge. He’s at the desk checking them in and she is absolutely positive that he’s the most handsome man in the entire lodge.

As nervous as she’d been skiing, a whole different kind of anxiety is consuming her now. In a matter of minutes, she’ll be truly alone with Troy for the very first time. In many ways they barely know each other. She doesn’t know what his favorite color is or his favorite classes in school. She’d love to hear more about his childhood or trouble he’d gotten in with his childhood friends. All of those things can come over time. She has more immediate knowledge she needs from Troy Jackson.

The upcoming Housing Board meeting, where she’ll need to decide if she wants to stay in Eagle’s Pass, is never far from her mind. Like a threatening rain cloud, it hangs over every

part of her life. Traci, Aunt Gina, and Uncle Adam have all tried to help her investigate her options for school and employment, but more importantly, sort through the confusing feelings about spanking. In the end, she knows that only Troy is going to be able to really help her make her final decision. She's combed through the admission packet and has decided she's pretty sure she could get used to living in a town where everyone practices DD. Everyone she's met has been friendly, and if it takes getting cheesy spanking gifts as party favors to live near her aunt and uncle, she's pretty sure she can manage.

If only it were that simple. Her heart lurches... and her damn panties cream... as she recalls the section in the admission packet that outlined the community rules and more importantly, the punishments available for sanction should the rules be broken. For the HoHs, that could be stiff fines, community service or worst case, expulsion. But for the TiHs, it can mean anything from a public apology to public service to a very public spanking. Hallie had nearly thrown up reading the firsthand accounts of both witnesses and punished submissives printed in the glossy color packet. She had to laugh at the irony of the detailed description and photo of the heavy ceremonial paddle used for all public punishments being printed right next to the information touting the state-of-the-art pet clinic and fenced dog park.

“Hey, you okay? You look like you're about to cry.” Hallie had been so lost in thought, she'd missed Troy's return.

She tries to put on a happy face. “Everything is great. You get our key?”

Troy drops the bag he'd been carrying and kneels in front of her, taking her hands in his. “Don't do that.”

“What?”

“Lie to me.”

Hallie doesn't deny she'd lied. There's no point. The tear that had just escaped pretty much blew her cover. “Okay. How about I'd rather not talk about it?”

“Better, but not great.” Troy hesitates. “You aren't having second thoughts about staying here tonight, are you? Because if you'd rather I drive you home, I'll do that. We haven't talked about it, but I'm not going to force you to do anything tonight that you don't want to. You know that, right?”

Hallie smiles through her tears. “Thank you, but I already knew that.” She hesitates briefly before finishing her thought. “I told you, Troy. I trust you.”

She can see some tension leave him. “So why the tears?”

No time like the present. “I was worrying about the Housing Board meeting.”

“You have a few weeks yet. Don't let that ruin our weekend.”

“It won't ruin it, but it's hard for me to stop thinking about it.”

Troy stands, pulling Hallie to her feet before plopping himself down in her seat and pulling her down into his lap. She absolutely loves snuggling close to him and she has never felt safer than when she's enveloped in his arms.

“Now, why don't you tell me what has you so worried. Is it being around people who might talk about discipline? You think that might embarrass you?”

“Not really. I've been talking to Traci and Aunt Gina and it's getting easier.”

“Okay. You afraid you’re going to get the urge to break in to single-handedly rescue every submissive in the process of being spanked by their HoH?” She can hear the humor in his voice.

“No, I’m pretty sure that was a one-time deal for me. I’ve come to the conclusion I would be wasting my time anyway since every woman I’ve talked to about this seems to defend the barbaric practice.”

Troy chuckles. “Well, they all did pay a lot of money to live in Eagle’s Pass, so I think that’s to be expected. So, if not that, what has you rattled? It sounds like you’re close to making up your mind to stay.” Is she imagining the hope she hears in his voice?

“Have you ever read the admissions packet?”

“Would it surprise you if I told you yes, I had? That I hope to live in Eagle’s Pass one day?”

Their eyes are locked. She can see a vulnerability in his eyes. “I was pretty sure that’s what you’d say.”

“What is it? We haven’t talked about it yet, but you have to feel it. There’s something special happening between us, Hallie. I just hope you’ll give us time to figure things out together.”

“Oh, Troy. I do feel it too, but I’m scared.”

“Of me?”

“Not really. Just the whole punishment thing.”

“I would never hurt you, Hallie. If done right, domestic discipline should bring us closer.”

Her tears are back. “Really? And those public paddlings in front of the entire town? Those are supposed to make me feel

better too?”

Troy looks confused for a second before recognition dawns. “Oh, honey. That’s what has you upset? You think they paddle the subs for sport every weekend or something? Hallie, I don’t know exactly how often that happens, but I do know it’s really rare and only used for extreme situations where major rules have been broken.”

“Maybe, but it was very clear that the Disciplinary Board’s ruling stands and anyone joining the co-op is agreeing to abide by their decisions. That means I would have to sign a piece of paper that would make it okay for them to do that to me. I don’t think I can do that Troy. I just can’t. Please, don’t make me.” Hallie’s tears have progressed to a full-out cry.

“Oh, Hallie. Take a deep breath, baby. No one is going to make you sign anything and I would never let anyone hurt you. Anyway, if anyone is going to get to spank this beautiful ass of yours, it’s going to be me, not some old fart who sits on some committee.” She can feel him squeezing her ass through her jeans and a pang of passion attacks her core. Troy is mirroring the passion right back as the air around them charges with sexual energy.

Troy suddenly stands, lifting her in his arms, bride style. Hallie giggles as he reluctantly puts her upright on her feet before throwing their two small bags over one shoulder and reaching to take her hand, pulling her behind as he takes wide strides towards the guest elevator. “Enough talking. We’d better head up to our room before I embarrass myself.”

It's a good thing the elevator had been full of resort guests because had they been alone, Troy is pretty sure he would have been tempted to throw Hallie to the floor of the lift and consummate the damn dance they started a few weeks ago when she burst into his sister's home. Their room is on the top floor and he's back in control of his libido by the time he leads Hallie off the elevator. Just before he opens the door to their room, Troy hesitates, looking down into her excited green eyes. "Hallie, I'm sorry, but I think I'd better ask you out here because I'm not sure I trust myself to ask once we're inside. Are you sure you want to stay here with me tonight? You know what I'm asking you, right?"

He loves her nervous blush. She looks so innocent, right up until she opens her mouth. Then he's reminded that while she may be eleven years younger, she's all woman.

"I hope you're asking if it's okay for you to ravish me until our neighbors call the front desk to complain because they hear passionate screaming coming from our room." The grin she delivers at the end of her answer should be outlawed.

"Oh shit, I might be in some trouble here."

"Only if you forgot to bring condoms. I thought about it, but I
couldn't very well ask

Uncle Adam to drive me to the drug store."

Damn he loves her witty sass. "Oh baby, wait until you see the big 'ole box I brought."

They somehow manage to get the door closed behind them before they fall into each other's arms. Their bodies snap together like magnets. They haven't even made it more than a few feet into the darkened room. With their height difference, Troy lifts her higher and Hallie wraps her legs around his

waist, linking them behind his back to press her core against his hardening cock. The warmth of her in his arms feels perfect.

Refusing to release her, Troy pulls out of their open-mouth kiss long enough to carry her through the room lit only by the ski village streetlights pouring through the expansive wall of windows. He loves how she nestles her lips against the tender spot where his neck meets his shoulder, placing urgent kisses along his collarbone.

Troy gently lays Hallie down on the king-size bed and reaches to turn on the small bedside lamp. It casts a muted light on the space that he's grateful for, as it doesn't ruin the romantic mood he wants to set for their first time making love.

Troy can now see Hallie clearly, and if he had any doubts that she was a willing participant in what was about to happen, his doubts are gone. He has never seen a woman look as innocent and perfectly sexy all at the same time.

He stands transfixed, lost in making this special moment last, until Hallie herself reaches for his hand, linking their fingers, and smiling up at him. "I'm ready, Troy. I trust you."

Emotions choke him and he has to clear his throat before he can speak. "Your trust means the world to me, Hallie. Especially because... well, how we met." Their eyes remain locked until Hallie pushes up to her knees, kneeling on the edge of the bed directly in front of Troy. She reaches out to hug his waist to steady her.

"I know we still have a lot to talk about, and I'm counting on you helping me figure some things out, but can't we wait until later to talk about all of the... well... you know."

Troy suspects they're doing things backwards. What happens if they fall harder, but then find out Hallie can never accept a domestic discipline way of life? He's come to the conclusion that he'll only be happy in a DD marriage and if Hallie can never consent to his discipline, he could be about to take them both down a very dangerous path that could end up in a heart break for either or both of them. Hallie is looking up to him with trusting adoration and he wants nothing more than to consume her in every way, but he can't shake the feeling that he's taking advantage of her.

"Don't do it, Troy. I can tell you're worried you're rushing me." Obviously, she has a pretty good beat on his emotions.

"Aw Hallie, honey. I want you more than I've ever wanted any other woman, but that's the problem. I also want you to be happy. To feel safe. I feel like it's my job to protect you, even if that means from myself. Honey, what happens if you decide you can't accept the domestic discipline way of life? Where is that going to leave us down the road?"

Hallie's smile has a twinge of sadness to it. "I just thought of a saying my mom used to say. I haven't thought of it in like forever, but it just seems to fit. She said it to me a thousand times when I would get wound up trying to figure everything out in my future. She would tell me to take one day at a time and everything would work out. That's what we need to do, Troy. Let's just worry about today, okay?"

"She sounds like a smart lady."

"I miss her. She would have loved you."

"How do you know that?"

Hallie hesitates before answering. "Because you make me feel safe. It was one of the last conversations we had. She felt

like she'd failed me because she hadn't kept me safe. That is what she wished for me. To find my place in the world where I could be happy and feel protected."

"God, I want to be that safe place for you, Hallie. Thank you for giving me a shot at it."

"Well, you've got more than a shot, Troy, considering I already trusted you to teach me to ski. I mean, I never in a million years would have said I would try that again, yet I had fun today. I have a feeling you're going to be very good at guiding me through other things for the first time too, aren't you?" He can hear the hope in her voice.

"Hell yes, if you'll let me."

"I think it's time to guide me through taking our clothes off. I want you so fucking bad."

Troy laughs a relieved chuckle. "Finally, the appropriate place for that potty mouth of yours."

Troy reaches down to the hem of her heavy sweater, pulling it up and over her head as she raises her arms to help. The form-fitting camisole underneath shows the swell of her perfectly curved breasts. He can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she allows the sexual energy to charge. Their eyes are locked on each other as he reaches out to unbutton her jeans before slowly unzipping her fly, pulling her jeans wide and pushing them down her legs to pool at her knees where they meet the bed. He can't resist sliding his hands down her lower back to cup her perfectly curvy ass, squeezing gently over her boy-short panties.

He sees the humor dancing in her eyes. "You really are an ass man, aren't you?"

“You’ve caught me. Guilty as charged.” Troy can’t stop his grin.

“That might explain a few things.” He’s relieved at her playful banter regarding anything related to her ass, but doesn’t have long to think about it as Hallie has begun to reciprocate by unbuttoning his heavy flannel shirt and uncovering his black T-shirt. She pushes his shirt to pool on the floor near her own discarded sweater before moving to his jeans. He can feel her struggling with the button fly and reaches down to help her before pushing his jeans down, kicking first his shoes and then pants off. His socks quickly follow.

They are down to underwear when Hallie smiles broadly. “I feel like we are both unwrapping more presents to each other.”

“Oh baby, this is by far the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

“Well, considering I didn’t get you a Christmas gift yet, you can consider this part one. I already have another gift on the way that should be there when we get home tomorrow.”

“Hallie, you didn’t need to buy me anything. I know you had to leave without anything and you need to save your money until you get settled.”

“Don’t worry about it. Uncle Adam got me access to my old bank account and believe it or not, I do have a nice little nest egg saved up. It should be enough to give me time to figure out everything.”

“That’s great. I was worried you were going to decide to stay in Eagle’s Pass just because you had no other choices. It’s important that... well... I want you to stay because you really want to, not because you’re forced to. Not by your aunt and

uncle and not even by me.” She is grinning at him now. “Do you always talk this much before you make love?”

Troy tackles her backwards, trapping her under him as they lay crossways in the bed. “You’re a sassy wench, aren’t you?”

“Yes. What are you going to do about it?”

“This.” Troy quickly reaches to pull off her boots and then pull her jeans the rest of the way off her body, throwing them to the floor. His hand trails slowly up her leg, lightly caressing as he goes until he reaches the elastic band of her baby blue panties, slipping his fingers inside to slide down and cup her mound. Hallie arches her back, thrusting up to meet his fingers as he grazes her clit on his way to her lower folds. He feels like he has struck gold as his fingers slide easily through her copious cream leaking onto her damp panties.

“Oh baby, you really are ready, aren’t you?”

“Oh God yes. Please, Troy. You can go slow next time. I need you now.”

“Patience. We are only going to get one first time. I’ll be damned if I’m going to fuck it up by rushing too fast.”

“Troy...” Her low groan has his heart racing.

“Hallie, let me lead, baby. Please.” He can see something flash through her eyes that looks like satisfaction, and it spurs him on.

Her frustrated groan when he removes his fingers from her panties to pull her camisole up and over her head makes him smile. Only when it is off does he realize the camisole had a built in bra and she is now laid bare before him. The tips of her breasts are taut... swollen to perfect targets that call out to him. He lowers his mouth to her left nipple, sucking it all into his warm mouth while he returns his right hand to her pussy.

His gentle licks and strokes only last a few seconds before turning demanding. She tastes fantastic and as he begins to finger fuck her, the smell of her arousal fills the air.

“Oh God, Troy. That’s amazing.” She has grasped his head, holding him tight against her breast, running her fingers through his cropped hair. She arches her ass off the bed when his two fingers slide inside her for the first time. He flicks his thumb over her hard clit and within seconds, Hallie is melting into her first orgasm. He has to pull his mouth from her tit to rise up and look down on her. He wants to burn the vision of her coming into his memory bank to recall later.

He waits patiently for her to open her eyes, continuing to slowly massage her pussy, loving how wet she gets. When she finally opens her eyes, he can see she’s ready for more.

“That was awesome, Troy, but I really want you inside me.”

“We really are going to need to work on your patience, young lady.” Troy pulls away from her to kneel at the side of the bed, pulling her body with him, resting her ass on the very edge. Their eyes meet as he hooks his fingers in the waistband of her panties, pulling them down her legs before lifting her legs to place her sock covered feet on the edge of the mattress. He allows his gaze to drop to her pussy laid out before him. A neatly trimmed strip points the way to her core. Troy hugs her thighs, pulling them wide before diving in to taste her.

He starts low, lapping at the pool of cream gathered there. She tastes amazing as he strokes his tongue through her inner folds until he finds her clit. Her hips buck up off the bed as he sucks her nub into his mouth, latching on tight to ride her upward thrusts. Hallie is whimpering as she runs her hands through his hair, effectively holding his mouth to her pussy.

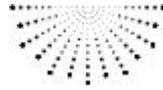
Troy slides his right hand in place to insert two fingers, thrusting deep and curling them within her body, searching for her secret spot that will ensure her climax. He knows he struck gold when her cunt begins to constrict around his fingers as he plunges them in and out, mimicking what his cock will be doing as soon as he can put a condom on.

Leaving a tender kiss to her button, he stands. When Hallie opens her glazed eyes, he lifts his fingers to his mouth, letting her watch him enjoy the taste of her juice as she catches her breath after her second orgasm.

“You look so beautiful, Hallie. I’m going to let you rest for a minute while I go grab my bag. It’s time we break open that box I brought with me, wouldn’t you say?”

Her eyes flash with excitement, but she is only able to silently nod her assent as she recovers. His cock is pulsing with need and he reluctantly tears his eyes from her to go in search of the box of condoms.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Hallie has barely had time to catch her breath before Troy returns. She manages to smile up at him as he stands over her at the edge of the bed. Their eyes are locked as he lifts his black T-shirt over his head, exposing his muscular chest to her for the first time. Her eyes track lower. She has fantasized about what his chest would look like having felt it several times through his clothes. She isn't disappointed. His shoulders are broad, his pecs and abs are toned, but in a really hot way, not the crazy 'I'm a body builder' way she actually finds gross. She can't wait to run her fingers through the small patch of dark chest hair that trails down to point the way to his cock.

Even having had two orgasms in a very short period of time, Hallie is not sated. Troy may have given her an appetizer, but she is ready for the main course. She wants to feel him moving inside her and watch him as he comes. She hasn't been a virgin for over six years, but a bout of nerves suddenly hits as she prays she doesn't disappoint Troy. She's only had one partner, and while Eddie certainly knew how to fuck like a rock star, he was no Casanova. He was more of a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am kind of guy. Hallie is acutely aware of her comparative sexual inexperience, and she's

reminded she's going to learn a lot more from Troy than how to exit a ski lift.

Her eyes drift lower as he pushes his boxer briefs down his body, kicking them away. His thick cock stands at attention, and she longs to lick the glistening pre-cum from the tip. She watches as he opens the condom packet and expertly slides it into place before looking back into Hallie's eyes. She feels special as she realizes he's once again making sure she is still there with him, ready to take the plunge. Too overcome with emotion, she flashes him a smile. His return smile is the sexiest she has ever witnessed. Her heart actually contracts when she realizes this amazing man is about to make love to her.

Troy stops to pull down the bedspread, lifting Hallie in his arms and maneuvering them so the cover lays on the floor and Hallie's head is now resting on the pillows. Troy kneels on the bed between her legs, wrapping his hands around her ankles and opening her legs wide as if he were unwrapping his present. Hallie should feel embarrassed being so bare, her body completely exposed to his probing stare as he takes in every part of her; instead she feels sexy.

Her breaths are coming in pants by the time his eyes meet hers again. She sees raw lust staring back at her and knows his control is finally slipping. She reaches out to him and he grabs her hand, pulling it to his mouth to place kisses into her palm. The act seems so innocent, yet Hallie recognizes she has never felt more treasured than she does in this moment.

With a groan, Troy finally places his cock at the entrance to her waiting pussy. He moves her ankles higher and wider to give him better access and she can feel his hardness slipping the first inch inside. He retracts to slide through her folds

several times, making sure her body is ready before closing his eyes and pushing slowly into her core.

Hallie's body welcomes him. His shaft is longer and thicker than Eddie's, filling her like she has never been filled before. Once fully seated, Troy holds still, eyes closed, taking deep breaths. When he opens his eyes to look down at her, she knows his control is gone. Dropping her feet to the bed, he lunges forward to place his body over hers protectively as she wraps her legs behind his back, trapping him to her. Their faces are only inches apart as he holds his torso on his elbows to keep from crushing her. She feels the void as he leaves her body before thrusting forward hard and fast, filling her so thoroughly they both cry out. The passionate cries spur him on and within several long strokes, Troy is fucking her hard and fast, exactly like she's been dreaming of.

He finally talks to her, out of breath, from emotion or exertion she's not sure. "I'm so sorry, honey. I wanted to try to keep going slow, but you feel too perfect. Oh shit, I'm not going to last long. I'm so sorry if I'm ruining this for you."

"Will you shut up? You're only going to ruin it if you stop."

She sees relief cross his face at her urging him on and his last thread of control is gone as he pounds into her again and again until she can feel him contracting, shooting his cum into the condom. It's all Hallie needs to fall into her third orgasm of the evening. Exhausted, Troy nestles his mouth down to the crook of her neck, placing loving kisses along her neck and shoulder while they both recover.

Once they have caught their breath, Troy rolls off Hallie onto his back, pulling her with him until she's snuggled

against his side, left leg and arm thrown across his body as she uses his arm as her pillow.

She doesn't remember sharing as intimate of a moment with any other human being as she is sharing with Troy Jackson in the afterglow of their first time making love. She's read her share of romance novels on the boring bus tour drives, but she always thought the passion authors would put in the stories was pure fiction since she had never come close to feeling about another man the way a heroine is supposed to feel about her hero. Here, in Troy's arms, she's now a believer. This is what love is supposed to feel like. Troy is her hero. It should scare her, but it feels too perfect to be afraid.

Troy speaks first. "Wow."

Hallie counters. "Fucking wow."

He chuckles. "We really are going to need to work on that potty mouth of yours."

"Oh, come on. If that doesn't deserve a 'fucking wow', what does?"

Troy hugs her tighter. "Touché. It was pretty fucking awesome."

Hallie is giggling. "How long until you're ready to go again?"

His laughter sounds like heaven. "You're gonna try to kill me, aren't you? Aren't you hungry or something? We have dinner reservations in the restaurant downstairs in like an hour."

The absolutely last thing Hallie wants to do is leave this room. "Do we have to go? I mean don't they have room service or something?"

“Oh, thank God. I don’t want to go down either, but I thought I’d at least offer in case you wanted to go.”

Hallie, props up on her right elbow, her head in her hand as she looks down upon the man who has changed her life. “Right now, the only thing I’m hungry for is you, Troy.”

“Aw Hallie.” The simple words are spoken with such emotion. She finds herself on her back, pressed to the mattress, Troy claiming her mouth in a passionate kiss. When she reaches up to hug him, he claims her hands, entwining their fingers and moving her hands above her head, brushing against the headboard. She feels vulnerable as he pulls out of the kiss to peer down at her.

“I’m gonna go get rid of this condom and then run us a hot bath. I’m gonna need a bit of a rest before I’m ready to go again and I’d like to spend that time with you in my arms, in the whirlpool tub they assured at the desk we’d have. I’m sure you’re going to have some sore muscles from skiing and that should help work the kinks out.”

“Are you always this perfect?”

Troy snorts. “You really do have a short memory, don’t you?”

Hallie knows he’s talking about the night they met, but honestly, she can’t conjure up the anger or the fear she had felt that night. Not now after getting to know Troy. A feeling of peace settles in when she realizes that for the first time, she is remembering the spanking she witnessed with a new lens. The lens of a woman who actually wants to be led by a strong man honorable enough to love her... guide her... protect her. She’s lost in thought long enough for Troy to notice.

“You okay?”

Hallie smiles. "I'm perfect."

One hot bath and room service dinner later, Troy looks down at Hallie, lounging quietly in his arms on the bed, wrapped in the oversized fluffy robe the hotel provided. She looks utterly content and for that Troy is relieved.

She slips her warm hand inside his own robe to tweak at his nipple and it's as if she had turned a key to start his engine. Erotic memories of how her body had fit his like a glove have his cock filling, preparing to claim her again. His mind races with all of the things he dreams of doing with her... to her... in her. He can feel her rubbing against his body suggestively, preparing herself as he is.

"Troy."

"Hallie."

She is silent for a long time.

"I think you should spank me tonight."

Shit. He's not ready for this discussion.

"Hallie, honey. There is plenty of time for that later. Let's not complicate tonight."

"It's hanging over us. Don't you feel it?"

The problem is she's right. He does feel it.

He needs to see her face. Rolling her to her back so he can look down at her from above, he can see the seriousness in her eyes. It's as if she is steeling herself to go through with this to prove to Troy and even herself that she's going to be able to handle it.

“Okay, let’s pretend you’re right.”

Her smile is adorable. “I’m always right. You should learn that about me right now.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see about that, won’t we? Seriously, we have so much to talk about before I’m ever going to lay a single finger on that beautiful ass of yours. I’m not going to rush you, Hallie.”

“You may not, but the Housing Board is going to. I need to know. Don’t you see?”

He can hear rising panic in her voice. “Shhh. I understand, but we have some time. You sure you want to talk about this now? Tonight?”

He can see tears starting to pool. “I’m sure.”

“Okay. I have questions. Have you ever been spanked before, even as a kid or... by Eddie the Asshole?”

She giggles at his pet name for her ex. “I like his new nickname. Never by Eddie, although he tried to turn me into his punching bag the last night before I ran out and left in Gopher. “

“That asshole. I swear I’m going to beat him to a pulp if I ever bump into him. How about as a kid?”

“My mom never spanked me, but my Nana did a couple of times. I remember the summer I started high school she used a fly swatter to smack the back of my bare legs all the way home when she found me at this abandoned warehouse hangout she forbid me to go to. I was humiliated and it hurt like a mother... well, it hurt bad, but it worked. I never set foot there ever again.”

“Why didn’t she want you to go there?”

Hallie blushes. “It wasn’t a place for good girls to hang out. She told me only bad girls went there and... she was right.”

“What happened there?”

“I swear, I only watched, but kids would hang out smoking, drinking, making out... you know. Everything they shouldn’t be doing.”

“So, do you think Nana abused you?”

“No. I hate to admit it, but I was so ashamed that I’d let her down. I thought she would hate me, but when we got home, she hugged me and she was crying because she had been so worried about me. I wanted to be mad at her, but when I saw how much I had hurt her, I was so sorry, and I was glad she had spanked me. I really did learn my lesson.”

“That’s what domestic discipline is all about, Hallie. It’s not meant to just let the HoH beat the shit out of you when he feels like it. It is all about being a team where I will lead and you will follow, but it’s still a team. It’s about making rules that we agree to that will help us stay close and when a rule is broken, loving discipline to get you back on track.”

“What kind of rules are we talking about here? I mean am I going to need to break out the computer to type them all up?”

He can tell she’s trying to laugh it off, but the question is a serious one. “Well for starters, it’s the big stuff. Like always being honest with each other, never telling a lie or holding back information. Another big one with me is not doing things that will put you in danger. Things like drinking and driving or texting and driving or speeding.”

Hallie doesn’t speak for a long time, and he gives her the space she needs to process the discussion. “That doesn’t sound

so bad. I mean, it's common sense."

Troy smiles. "Yes, but those aren't all of the rules, baby. Those are just the biggest ones that will never be overlooked. Just ask Traci about how serious I am about the keeping yourself safe rules. She broke a lot of those the night you and I met. You saw how I think they need to be dealt with."

He can feel a tremble in her body as her eyes grow wider as she puts together the words with the picture in her mind to drive it home. "You mean you would use your belt on me, really?"

Troy was not ready to have this conversation. He is not sure how much to disclose to her at this early point in their relationship. Knowing the Housing Board's meeting hangs over them, he decides to error on the side of too much information.

"Hallie, yes, I would if you consent to being in a domestic discipline relationship with me, and let me be very clear, that is what I want, honey. We may have only known each other a few weeks, but you're special. This, what we have, is special. I hope you feel it too."

She smiles up at him with a joy he would give anything to see on her face every day for the rest of his life. "Oh Troy, I do feel it, too."

"Thank God. I was worried it was just me."

She is giggling again, music to his ears considering they are in the heart of a pretty intense discussion. "You're so silly."

"Well then, the answer is yes. It won't happen at first, but I am certain that at some point in our future I will need to use a belt on this beautiful ass of yours." He reaches into her robe to stroke her ass, squeezing it for good measure. "But that will

not be tonight or any time soon. I'm gonna ease you into this. Start out with just this." He reluctantly pulls his hand away from her ass and holds it up for her to see.

"This hand is more than enough to get my point across for now. In the future, depending on how we both adjust to things, I will bring in other implements."

"Like?" It is a quiet whisper.

"You sure you want to know?"

"I need to know, Troy."

"Yes, baby. You do. Just not today."

"Please. Let's lay our cards on the table here. That helps me. I need to know so I can process everything. And let's face it, we aren't going to be able to talk about this once we get home and have Aunt Gina and Uncle Adam in the next room. Please."

He watches her carefully and sees she is being honest with him. She's watching him intently and he could get used to this feeling because as she stares up at him from the few inches below, he drinks in the look of adoration she has on her face. In spite of all they've talked about so far, she is showing no signs of fear or reluctance. He decides to proceed.

"Okay. First, I'll use things other than spankings for smaller punishments. Like corner time or taking away privileges. If we move into spankings, it will always be on your bare bottom. It will sometimes be over my knee or over the end of the bed or couch. I'll always start with my hand as a warmup and if it's serious enough, I'll use another implement. Some are lighter, like the wooden spoon or a wooden ruler. If it is more serious, I might break out my dad's favorite, which was a heavy wooden hairbrush or his wide leather belt. I think

the most serious I would get would be a paddle, but listen to me. This isn't going to happen overnight. We are going to figure this all out together, one day at a time like your mom suggested. I'm not going to push you farther or faster than you can handle. Can you live with that?"

He hasn't taken his eyes off her so he's been able to see the roller-coaster of her emotions as he had laid out his thoughts on punishments. He had seen flashes of fear, but they were tamped down quickly, and he was surprised to recognize what looked like excitement in her eyes several times, especially when he was talking about her bare bottom and the positions he would place her in.

"Okay, now that we talked about implements, I'd like to talk about something else. There are a lot of different kinds of spankings, Hallie. I know so far, the only kind you think of are punishment or discipline spankings which are the kind I think you dread the most and rightly so because they will always hurt, and their sole purpose is to guide you to better choices next time and learn lessons. Very few subs ever learn to like them, but most still welcome them because they help them feel closer to their HoH and also get rid of any guilt they carry. I've heard a very few subs actually like this type of punishment, but they usually have masochistic tendencies and I highly doubt you will fall into that category, baby."

"You think? Wise man. I did talk to Aunt Gina about this a little bit. She... well..." Hallie is turning an adorable shade of pink. "She said that there are other spankings that she actually loves getting. I think she's crazy."

"I hope to prove you wrong, because those will be the first spankings you get. The fun kind. It will be a way to ease you

into the lifestyle and my hope is that by the time you earn a real punishment, we will both be ready.”

“What do you mean, you’ll be ready? I saw you in action Troy. It doesn’t look like you need practice.”

Hallie is chuckling, but Troy can’t find the humor. Unbelievably, a wave of dread washes over him at the thought of having to punish Hallie. It’s how he knows his feelings for her are different than any other woman he has dated. “Hallie, I know you won’t believe this, but I’m

actually dreading punishing you. It’s going to hurt me every bit as much as it will you.”

She snorts. “Fat chance. I’ll remind you of that when you are wailing on my ass.”

“Do you think I’m going to enjoy hearing you cry? Hearing you call out knowing you are in pain... pain that I am causing you? Do you think it’s easy for an HoH to harden his heart to the pleas to stop? Because believe me, you will beg me to stop and if it is a punishment, I won’t be able to until I know you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Oh God. Please Troy. Why do we have to do this? If it hurts both of us this much, why does anyone do this?” She is trembling again, tears pooling in her eyes. He cups her face gently to comfort her.

“We do this because it makes for stronger relationships, at least the kind of relationship I want. I grew up knowing my parents had a much stronger marriage than any of my friends I

would spend time with. When I was young, I had no clue why, but as I grew older I figured it out. My friend’s houses were always full of bickering and chaos. I would hear their parents say mean or rude things to each other or undermine

each other behind the other's back. I saw my friends taking advantage, playing their parents against each other. When I was young, it was kind of funny, but as I grew older, I hated it. Even now, many of my friends who don't subscribe to a DD way of life have marriages that are on the rocks or kids that are out of control. Many are on their way to divorce. I don't want that, Hallie."

"So, your dad really did spank your mom?"

"He did."

"In front of you and Traci?" He can hear a twinge of panic in her voice.

"Oh no. Never, honey. That was a private part of their marriage."

She mulls on that for a minute. "I just don't get why you think spankings will make that big of a difference unless you get to use them to bully me. I mean, in your definition of a strong relationship, is the woman meant to be seen and not heard?"

"Oh Hallie, not even close. I love how sassy and witty you are. I don't ever want to change that about you. How can I say this better?" Troy has to think for a long minute before he takes another stab at explaining how he feels. "It's not the spankings that make the relationship strong, honey. It's so much deeper than that. It's the intimacy and open communication. It's us agreeing to rules we both want to live our lives by and then being held accountable. And that means it's not just me holding you accountable, but you get to hold me accountable too. I have a great responsibility to take care of you... protect you. I want to put you and our relationship ahead of my own personal needs."

Her grin is adorable. “So, if you break one of our rules, do I get to spank you?”

Troy hugs her. “Nice try, but no. I think there are actually some couples that do agree to that arrangement, but that won’t be us.”

“Honestly, that would just be too weird anyway. But what happens if you do break a rule, Troy?”

Troy pauses. “I will apologize and work hard to make it up to you and rebuild your trust in me again.”

“I’ve heard really nice gifts work well in that situation. I love roses and chocolates.” Her grin is playful.

Troy knows he needs more information about her history growing up. “You’ve talked a little bit about your mom, but you never told me what kind of marriage your parents had.”

He knows immediately he’s hit a sore topic and wishes he could call back his words. When Hallie’s tears spill down her cheek, he swipes them away. “Never mind. We can talk about it later.”

“No. I want to talk about all of this now and get it over with. I’m sick of carrying it around like baggage.”

“Okay, but only if you want to and only if you’re going to feel better when you’re done and not worse.”

“I felt better after I talked to Traci about it all so I think it will help.”

Hallie spends the next fifteen minutes reliving the nightmare that is Gene and by the time she finishes, Hallie may feel better, but Troy wants to jump up, throw on clothes and take the next flight to Baton Rouge to pound down his door and pound in his face. The fact that Hallie and her mother

had to live through such violence in their own home is abhorrent to Troy and only now does he truly understand the depth of Hallie's fear of violence, having been a victim in her own home. He has his work cut out for him to help guide her through the tricky days ahead.

"I'm so glad you shared this with me, Hallie. You were absolutely right that I needed to know about this now so I could better understand why you react the way you do to some of the things happening around you. I am so sorry you had to meet me while I was doing to Traci what you had to watch Gene do to your mom all of those years. God damn, I wish I could change that."

"I don't. At the time it looked exactly the same, but now I know it couldn't have been any more different. It's the only reason I'm still here at all and even considering staying in Eagle's Pass... even considering a relationship with a man who I'm certain is one day going to use his belt on my behind. I guarantee you Gene never once had a conversation like this with mom. He didn't care how she felt or if she was happy. He didn't care about me or his marriage. He just wanted control at all costs, and he enjoyed hurting her. I saw it in his eyes. He loved the power our fear gave him."

"Fuck."

"What?"

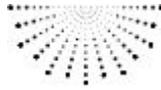
"Well, I will never enjoy seeing your fear or hurting you, but..." Troy hates this. "Hallie, I do like to be in control. I do feel strongly that each family should have one HoH. Yes, we are a team. Yes, I want to hear all of your thoughts and ideas, but in the end, if we disagree, I need to know you are going to bend to my decision and follow the rules I lay out for us."

“Like I said. Just like 1950.” He can see the humor dancing in her eyes. She’s teasing him.

“If you say so. I can live with that, I guess. The question is, can you?”

“I guess we’ll know more after you spank me, won’t we?”

CHAPTER TWELVE



Hallie is beginning to wonder if she's lost her mind. She just had the strangest conversation of her entire life and in spite of talking about very intimate and painful things, she has to truthfully admit she feels the weight of the world off her shoulders. Just talking about the whole DD way of life with Troy and hearing his views firsthand have removed some of the mystery and while she certainly doesn't look forward to being on the receiving end of a Troy Jackson punishment, she is pretty confident that it isn't going to kill her. Most confusing is that all the talk of spanking and being naughty has her core lighting up for their next go-round. The look in Troy's eyes as he looks down on her adoringly tell her he feels the same.

“Now, I think that's enough talking for now. I have a lot more non-verbal activities planned for us.” His look of adoration slips to sexual heat as he moves to untie her robe, opening it so he can look down on her naked body. She has never felt as powerful as she does in this moment as she recognizes his hunger for her. It is the best compliment she has ever received.

Troy lowers to capture her lips in a hungry kiss while he works at stripping them both of their heavy robes. They have to pull apart several times in what is quickly turning into a

frantic race to consummate the pulsing need they both feel to be connected in the most intimate way possible.

Hallie can feel Troy stretching out to reach the box of condoms on the bedside table. She has to reluctantly allow him to move away as he rolls it on. She reaches out to grasp his cock in her hand and loves the guttural groan he emits.

“Oh, baby. I’m not sure how you are going to feel about this, but all this talk about spanking that beautiful ass of yours has me so turned on. You’d better be careful, or I may not last very long.”

Hallie isn’t sure if she should say it, but based on his rule of not keeping secrets, she figures no time like the present to tell him the unguarded truth. “What if I told you it kind of excited me too? I mean not all of it, but well... some of it... most of it.”

Troy doesn’t answer with words. Hallie is confused when he stands next to the bed, pulling her by the hand until she is standing next to him.

Lifting her at her waist, he instructs her. “Wrap your legs around me, baby. We’re gonna try something I hope you like.”

Following directions, Hallie wraps her arms around his neck and her legs around his body as she had done when he carried her earlier, only this time there are no pesky jeans to get in the way. She feels his cock trapped between their bodies, pulsing and ready to spear her sex.

Their eyes are locked as he reaches down between them to first swipe his fingers through her slick folds, acknowledging her wetness with a smirk. He then lifts her up to place the tip of his cock at the entrance of her pussy, holding there for a few

long seconds before he releases her body, letting gravity slam her down onto his pole, impaling her completely in one stroke.

Hallie is in heaven as she feels Troy grab her ass cheeks in his broad hands and begins lifting her body up and off his shaft before letting her fall back down onto him again. They start out with a slow rhythm, each thrust rocking her to her core.

She loves how he observes her constantly, watching over her, looking for signs she's enjoying herself. She has never felt like she was the center of someone else's world, but that is how Troy makes her feel.

She has to stop thinking about it when he begins to move her up and down, faster and harder. The sounds alone from their bodies slapping together as she leans back to get a better angle should scandalize her. She should be embarrassed that she's so wet with excitement; she can hear the slurping sounds emitting from where their bodies connect.

Hallie is so close to coming that she shuts her eyes, about to lose herself in pleasure when she feels his right hand leave her ass before coming crashing down on her flesh... hard. Her eyes fly open to see the look of pure mischief in his chocolate brown eyes. She barely registers what's happened when she feels the burn spreading through her ass cheek. It feels warm and not unpleasant.

He's stopped completely, waiting for her to say something. Waiting for her consent to continue.

“Don't stop! Again!”

With relief, Troy pulls her up again to resume their pounding coupling. This time Hallie watches his eyes carefully and can see when he's decided to land his next spank. This

time it's his left hand that connects with her ass cheek just as his cock fills her. The combination of pleasure and pain is unlike anything Hallie has ever experienced. Until this moment, she didn't know if it was possible, but she's desperate for more.

“More, Troy. I want more.”

He had been waiting for her permission. With pure joy in his eyes, Troy begins to spank Hallie's ass on about every third insertion of his cock. He rotates back and forth, spreading the heat across her whole ass, never letting one area get beyond her comfort zone. He reads her like a book and within a minute Hallie crashes into the strongest orgasm of her life. She's vaguely aware of Troy's continued pounding, going faster and spanking harder until he growls to her.

“Open your eyes. I need to see you as we come together. Come on me, baby. That's it.”

She hadn't thought she had another one in her, but looking into his eyes, hearing him command an orgasm of her has her melting with him as he pulls her tight against his body, clinging to each other as he releases his load with a satisfied grunt.

They embrace together, Hallie's lips nestled against the crook of his neck, placing tiny kisses up and down. Troy manages to sit on the edge of the bed, still buried inside Hallie as he catches his breath. She feels him massaging her warmed bottom, bringing the tingle back to life.

Hallie finds her voice first. “Holy shit. That was intense.”

“You're okay, though, right?”

“Better than okay. You can spank me like that any time.”

Troy chuckles. “Well, just so you understand that was not a punishment. I confess to being very excited that you liked the funishment though. You have no idea how many wonderful things I have planned for this body of yours, Hallie.”

“Funishment? Really?” At his mischievous grin she ups the ante. “Bring it on, babe.”

“Oh shit, I love hearing you call me babe.”

“Rest up. I want to go again... babe.”

Troy wakes first as the morning sun starts to light the room. He wishes he'd thought to close the heaviest drapes the night before, but there's no way he's getting up to do it now. He's perfectly content where he is, spooning a naked Hallie, holding her close in his arms. If he's not careful, his morning hard-on is going to poke her awake.

Regardless of his physical location in a hotel room, his heart feels like he is finally home. Since their intimate talking last night and the incredible sex, Troy is positive that Hallie is his future. He knows he's going to have a lot of things to lead her through before they're home free, but Hallie is the one. He loves feeling her stirring in his arms, listening to the cute little sounds she makes as she sleeps, smelling the remnants of their passionate love-making lingering on the sheets. She is the whole package and the fact that her family and his are both in Eagle's Pass is a sign from heaven. It's where they both belong.

Her sleepy voice draws his attention back to her. “Good morning. It feels like you're anxious for me to wake up,” The

sexy smile on her peaceful face as she rolls towards him makes him want to pound his chest.

“Sorry if I woke you. It’s still early. You can sleep more.”

“I’d rather wake up for a bit and then take another nap.” She’s smiling flirtatiously.

“Be careful. A man could get used to this.”

“Well, you are going to have to feed me soon, though.”

“That can be arranged, as long as you’re happy with room service again. I want to wait as long as possible to put our clothes back on.” Troy is thinking a week should do it.

“Shower first?”

“Only if that’s a shower for two?”

“Oh, hell yes.”

Troy moves in for a kiss, but Hallie diverts. “Ewww. I have morning breath. No kisses before we brush our teeth. That’s one of my rules.”

“Fine. I’ll go start the water. Why don’t you grab our bags and meet me in there?”

Hallie’s face looks panicked. “Wait. Can I use the bathroom first? I mean...”

“After all of the kinky things we’ve done in the last twenty-four hours and you’re gonna get shy on me now?”

“There are some things a woman just needs some privacy on, Troy.”

He kisses her nose. “Okay for now, but I don’t want to let you out of my sight for too long.”

She looks relieved. “Thanks.”

He watches her grabbing their two bags and heading to the bathroom and is just closing the door when he hears his phone on the nightstand receiving a text message. No text message this early on a Sunday morning can be good.

Troy reluctantly grabs the phone and acknowledges the text from his right-hand-man with a groan. He has just enough time to check-in to put out whatever fire they seem to have at work and get back to Hallie.

“Hey, John. Troy here. What’s up?”

“Sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but we have a bit of a crisis going on here. The final testing for the new protocol has uncovered some significant bugs in the code. I’ve had Harris on it since yesterday and he’s getting nowhere.”

“That can’t be. I tested it all myself. Did he say what the issue is?”

“Well, I’ve heard him cursing more than ever and between the bad language, I’ve heard the word sabotage more than once. I know you left me in charge, boss, but I’m really wishing you’d come back in to work on this with us.”

To say Troy is not happy is the understatement of the century. There is no way he is cutting his day short with Hallie. “Listen, John, I’m all the way up at Copper Mountain and I’m not going to be able to make it back to the base until later tonight. You guys keep plugging along today and I’ll check in with you once I leave my sister’s house tonight and if I need to come in and pull an all-nighter I will. That’s the best I can do.”

“Okay, Troy. I just wanted to let you know what’s going on here. I’ll talk with you later then.”

“Later.”

Fuck. He'll be damned if he's going to let this ruin his day. He's sure Hallie will get his mind off work in no time.

When he knocks on the door to the bathroom and hears the shower on, he opens the door cautiously. "Is it safe to come in yet?"

When Hallie doesn't answer, he starts to get concerned and opens the door wider. He finally spots her standing near the long counter, her back to the door. He takes a minute to admire her naked body, checking out the beautiful butterfly tattoo she has on her right hip just above her panty line. He suspects he is going to have many hours of enjoyment looking at that tattoo as she is turned over his lap on the receiving end of more 'funishment'.

Only as he moves closer does he see why she hasn't answered him. He's close enough to look over her shoulder and see his open bag in front of her, the silly party favor, poking out of the opening. He's not sure why he'd even thrown it in at the last minute, but he had. He watches as Hallie reaches out to pick up the heavy wooden spoon, turning it over in her hands, inspecting it.

"Why did you bring this, Troy?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just trying to be a good boy scout and be prepared."

He reaches out to stroke her upper arms up and down, trying to comfort her. "Hey. Just toss it back in. You ready for a shower?" She doesn't answer.

"Talk to me, Hallie. What are you thinking?"

It takes all of his patience to wait for her reply. He wants to turn her around and pelt her with questions about how she is

feeling, but knows quiet patience is what she needs as she adjusts to holding a punishment implement in her hands.

He wishes she'd at least turn around so he could see her eyes. He's just about to pull her to him when she whispers. "You should spank me with this next."

"Honey, you've done nothing wrong. I'm not going to spank you for no reason."

"Fine, then make it a fun spanking."

"Honey, I don't think you're going to have fun with this spoon. It's pretty heavy as spoons go. Come on. Let's get in the shower."

"Okay." She turns and hugs him close and he's relieved, until she pulls away and heads to the massive shower, the wooden spoon still in her hand. Apparently, she thinks it needs a good wash.

Troy takes a few minutes to brush his teeth and take a whiz before heading to join Hallie. The shower is massive, with three showerheads, one on each facing wall and one directly over their head raining down on the center. There is even a long teak bench the width of the shower. This is exactly the kind of shower he would dream of having in his own home in the future and he briefly wonders if any of the houses in Eagle's Pass will accommodate it.

Hallie is standing under the center rain shower, eyes closed, as she lets the warm water pour over her body. She looks like a slice of heaven with her blonde hair wet and falling halfway down her back. He checks out her curvy ass and is disappointed to find no remnants of the previous night's spanking. He's not surprised. It had been pretty light in the wide scale of spankings. Still, he looks forward to the day

when he will see the evidence of his mark on her and then he immediately feels like an ass for thinking it because he shouldn't want to punish her. He has to fight down the guilty feelings he carries when he gets excited at the thought of spanking Hallie.

He steps up behind her, pulling her back to his front and they embrace under the water for a few glorious minutes before he feels Hallie placing the spoon she still holds into his right hand. She doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to.

"Honey, you're trying too hard. You don't have to prove anything more to me this weekend."

"Maybe I need to prove something more to myself, Troy. Please."

Turning her around, he needs to see her eyes. What he finds is guarded excitement and his own cock begins to stir in response. "Are you always this stubborn?"

"Yes. What are you going to do about it?"

"Oh baby, you don't need to try to pick a fight with me to give me a reason to spank you. If this is what you want, then I can do this for you... for us. It's just for fun though, so we'll stop as soon as you've had enough. Just tell me to stop, okay?"

She looks conflicted. "Troy, I know myself. I'm going to tell you to stop right away. Aren't you supposed to give me a safeword or something? I mean that's what happens in some of the books I've read."

Troy can't help but laugh. "Great. First my sister and now you. Both of you being corrupted by naughty romance novels."

"Hey, you should be glad I read those. The good ones really get me going, if you know what I mean."

“Oh, I can imagine. Never fear. I’m not going to take your naughty books away from you, unless you’re naughty yourself. Maybe that could be one of your punishments.”

“Evil man.”

“Safewords are used in more BDSM type scenes. We won’t use a safeword with our domestic discipline, Hallie. You won’t be able to just get out of a punishment with a word or by saying to stop. That’s why it’s so important you know what you’re signing up for in advance so you can give me your consent because I won’t be asking if you agree before every spanking. It’s way too late by then.”

“What about the non-punishment spankings? What if I want to stop one of those?”

“Well in that case, I guess a safeword would be fine. There are actually several couples in

Eagle’s Pass pretty heavy into the BDSM scene. We can talk about that more later.”

She looks settled. “Fine. I choose butterfly.”

“You have a thing for butterflies, eh? I love the tattoo on your hip. I think I’m going to enjoy inspecting it often as I have you turned over my knee.”

He detects the shiver that runs through her body at the thought of being over his knee. “Okay, young lady. One punishment coming up. Let’s get cleaned up first.”

Troy spends the next ten minutes spoiling Hallie, selfishly scrubbing her from head to toe, inspecting every inch of her body intimately with his soapy fingers, being careful to bring her close to a climax, but stopping short of allowing her to come. He finishes up washing her hair, massaging her scalp until she’s moaning with pleasure.

When she opens her eyes, he can see her passion shining. He prays he's reading her right and what he's about to do only flames her fire and doesn't douse it. She wants to push the envelope, so he's going to push.

"You feel nice and clean, baby?"

"I've never felt so relaxed in all my life. That was amazing."

"I'm glad. I'm going to finish up in here. I want you to get out and dry yourself off. Then I want you to go into the bedroom and wait for me." He sees she's about to argue to stay with him in the shower, but he holds up his fingers to shush her. He then reaches down to the bench to grab the now wet spoon.

"Take this with you. When you're dry, I want you to bend over the end of the bed with this gorgeous ass of yours on display for me. Lay the spoon on the bed next to you where you can see it and I want you to wait for me. I'll be in when I'm ready."

Her passion is replaced with panic. "Take a deep breath, Hallie. I'm not going to punish you. Remember, this is just going to be a funishment. I'm layering in some of the other things you can expect when it's a real punishment. I want you to see how it makes you feel so we can talk about it later. Are you okay or did you change your mind? It's okay if you did because I never expected to go this far this weekend anyway."

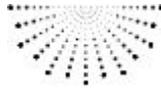
He's relieved the panic is gone, but she is undecided. He watches her steel herself. "So, I

can use my safeword, right?"

"Absolutely."

She slowly reaches out to take the spoon from his hand. She stands under the water, looking down at that spoon for a torturously long thirty seconds. Troy knows he should put a stop to this. She's not ready. Then she looks up and he sees the passion is back. She almost unmans him with her quiet. "Yes, sir."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Hallie is shivering as she lays across the end of the king bed, naked and waiting for Troy. She'd love to blame it on the room being too cold, but she knows it's a mix of anticipation and fear at the heart of her tremble.

She opens her eyes again to take in the sight of the hard wooden spoon only a few inches from her face. She had tested smacking her hand with the spoon before getting into the awkward position. The lightest taps had barely registered, but she had used enough force on her last test to know that Troy could really light up her ass if he wants to.

The fact that she can stop him at any time should make her feel better, but it doesn't. She just wants to get it over with. To know once and for all that she has what it takes to live in Eagle's Pass, at the minimum to be near her aunt and uncle but more importantly, she prays to make it her home with Troy.

Her brain knows it's way too fast. That they barely know each other, but it doesn't matter. She knows with every ounce of her being that she is in love with Troy. She has never met a man like him and she's not willing to throw it away by letting a pesky thing like domestic discipline get in the way. To be truthful, the concept of DD actually sits well with her. It's just

the actual practice when the rubber hits the road that she's just not convinced she can handle.

She's startled when she hears the bathroom door opening. She had purposefully chosen to face away from the bathroom so she wouldn't have to see Troy looking at her as he comes to her preparing to spank her.

She feels the bed dip as he sits next to her, startling her as he lays his right hand on her lower back, tracing the outline of her tattoo.

"Take a deep breath, Hallie."

She hadn't even realized she had been breathing shallow in her anticipation. The fact he noticed reassures her.

"Tell me what you're feeling right now. How waiting here makes you feel."

"Nervous, I guess. I don't really know what to expect yet."

"That's understandable. Do you want to know what I saw when I came in here?"

She whispers, "Yes."

"I see the most beautiful woman in the world choosing to trust me by giving her body over to me. I don't take this lightly Hallie. I really do know that you're doing this for us, aren't you? To prove to both of us that we have what it takes to live in Eagle's Pass?"

"We need to know."

"Yes, we do. But there is time. Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I do have one more request though. We do get to have sex after funishments, right?"

She loves his laugh. “Oh Hallie, just try to stop me. Now, for future reference, when I have you waiting for a punishment or funishment, I want you to spread your legs open a bit more.” She feels his hands on her inner thighs, spreading her open until her toes leave the floor and she is left hanging over the bed awkwardly. “That’s perfect.”

He’s moved around her body so that she can see him as he leans down into her line of sight. She sees he is as naked as she is and that thrills her, especially when she spots his growing erection.

“Let me help you up.” She’s confused. She’d thought he would just spank her over the bed, but he instead sits where she had been laying and pulls her close to stand between his legs, hugging her to him. With their height difference, they are almost eye-to-eye. She can sense him evaluating her readiness to proceed and she’s relieved when he doesn’t ask her again.

“Drape yourself over my lap, resting your chest on the bed here next to me.” He pulls her into position, holding her body close to his with his left arm draped over her waist. She can feel his cock pressing against her left hip and is surprised when he uses his right hand to spread her once again, splitting her legs on either side of his left leg. She feels exposed, which she’s sure is exactly how he wants her to feel. He wraps his right leg around her left, intertwining them intimately, but also helping to immobilize her further. He’s been moving slowly as not to freak her out, but only now does she realize just how vulnerable of a position she’s in.

They sit silently, each of them mentally slipping into their new roles. She knows he’s ready when she feels his right hand massaging her ass, taking the time to graze across her wet folds and clit.

“Keep your hands above your head, Hallie. I never want you to try to reach back to stop me. I don’t want to risk hurting your hand.”

“Oh, but hurting a perfectly good ass is fine?” She meant it to be funny, but her voice is too strained and comes out sassy.

“And here I thought you were smart enough not to sass me when you’re in such a precarious position. It’s a good thing this is a funishment or I’d be adding on for a comment like that.”

“Sorry. I’m just nervous.”

“Well, I’ll let you in on a secret. I am too.”

“You are?”

“I want to be your HoH, Hallie. That means I want you to trust me to always do what’s right for you. I’m nervous that we are rushing you on the punishment thing. There is time for us to ease into this.”

“It’s a funishment and I have a safeword. Please Troy. I need to know.” She can’t believe she is actually begging him to light up her bottom and the strangest thing is she really means it, although she already has one answer. Even draped naked over his lap waiting for his first slap, she still feels safe.

His first spank lands on her right cheek. It’s surprisingly tentative and she’s about to call him on it when his next spank connects with her left side and it’s much harder. He’s methodically slow and steady, using his hand to spread heat to every part of her bottom, but careful not to overwhelm her. She’s conscious of his left hand holding her hip, massaging her gently even as his right hand delivers pain. If she had any doubt about him enjoying himself, it’s gone as she feels his cock pressing hard against her hip.

Just as the heat level is becoming uncomfortable, he stops to intimately inspect her exposed pussy. She's embarrassed to feel how easily his fingers slide through her lower lips.

"Oh Hallie, honey. You are making me a very happy man right now, you know that, don't you?"

She says the first thing that pops into her head. "Yes, sir."

"Oh Christ."

One minute he's massaging her ass, bringing the tingle to the surface, the next his hand is crashing down, slapping her harder than before.

"Owee."

"Shh. Take your funishment like a good girl." Oh God. He'd said it. She does want to be his good girl.

The next few minutes stretch out for Hallie. The heat is building up, but just as it starts to get unbearable, he moves on to cover a new spot. When he moves lower to where her thighs meet her ass, it gets harder for her hold still.

"Troy, it hurts more there."

"I know, baby. This is your sit spot. I'll go easier on it today, but you are gonna hate when I spend time here in the future."

"Thanks for the warning." She can hear his chuckle.

She can no longer remain still. She tries to wiggle free of his grip, but he only holds her tighter. Just when she is about to try to push off the bed, the spanking stops and his fingers return to her pussy. This time, he pays a bit more attention to her needs, stroking her folds and finally sliding what feels like several fingers deep inside her.

“Oh God, that feels so good.” Before she can finish that thought, his fingers are moved onto her clit, brushing it lightly to tease her before pinching her clit... hard. “Oh Troy! I’m gonna come.”

And then his fingers are gone. “Sorry, but not yet. I’m not done with you yet.”

Hallie hears the groan and it takes her a few seconds to recognize she was the source of the forlorn sound. Troy’s chuckle should piss her off, but she’s too wound up to care.

She feels the wood on her ass as he brushes the spoon across every inch of her now warm skin. Her anxiety level is rising, but she keeps it in check.

The first flick of his wrist brings the spoon down on her right cheek. It honestly doesn’t hurt as much as his hand had since its coverage area is so much smaller. The next spank is harder. He is once again methodically moving across her bottom, varying his strength when she feels the first sting of tears in her eyes. The heat has built up enough that it’s really starting to burn, but she’s honestly thrilled that she’s made it this long without crying. Surely, he is almost done.

“Okay, the warmup is over. Are you ready?”

“What? That wasn’t the real thing?”

“Sorry kiddo, but that was a pretty standard warm up. We can stop now if you want to.”

Hallie tempted, but she’s come this far she needs to see this through. “No, sir. I’d like to stop when you want us to stop.”

He answers her with a truly terrifying swat to the center of her right buttock. Before she can even cry out, he puts a matching swat to her left cheek. She can hear her own voice

crying out, but it sounds strange even to her. His fingers tweaking her clit come next, giving her blessed time for the fire on her ass to become manageable. The pleasure is building to a crescendo until his fingers are gone and the spoon is crashing against her ass again, this time two quick hard successions to her right side, followed by two even harder in a row to her left. She is fighting to free herself from him, but he is too strong. She is vaguely aware that she could stop this any time. She even remembers the word: butterfly. The word does not leave her lips. Only her moans of pleasure can be heard as he once again ravishes her core.

On and on they go, harder swats with the damn spoon, followed by more insistent attention to her pussy. It's when he moves the spoon to those damn sit spots when Hallie knows she is in big trouble. The pain is worse, but Troy has moved his left hand from her back to under her body, pressing hard against her clit as his right hand continues to bring the hard spoon against her sensitive sit spot over and over. Pleasure and pain.

The tenderness in his voice pushes her over into her orgasm. "That's my good girl. Come for me, Hallie. Come on my fingers to show me how much you've enjoyed your funishment this morning."

The contractions move through her whole body, so intense. She is recovering when she feels him slipping out from under her, shifting her to be face down over the end of the bed as she recovers from her bliss. She vaguely hears the tearing open of the condom wrapper, but doesn't put it together until she feels Troy standing behind her, about to impale her with his cock. He tests her folds to ensure she is ready and then thrusts into her like a man possessed. Hallie is sobbing again, but this time she's not sure if it's from the pleasure or the pain as his body

thrusts deeply into her over and over again, slapping against her punished skin.

Hallie lays boneless, absorbing Troy's powerful thrusts hitting spots inside her that have never been touched. She can feel him leaning over her body as he clasps her hands lying uselessly on either side of her head in his larger hands, another intimate connection of their bodies. He is a man possessed as he claims her from behind. Hallie is vaguely aware that he must have a nice view of her red bottom. She's filled with relief and pride that she not only survived a stricter punishment, but she is about to explode into another heavenly orgasm that she is positive was enhanced by the spanking Troy had delivered.

Hallie crashes into her next orgasm, crying out Troy's name. He follows her seconds later crying out her name. Tears that had been stored up behind a dam begin to flow. The relief she feels is orgasmic on its own. Troy reads her perfectly and lifts up high enough to begin placing small kisses across her shoulders, neck and back while he remains buried inside her as they recover.

She feels his lips brush across her left ear intimately before he whispers five words that will change her life forever.

“I love you, Hallie Boudreaux.”

The sun has set by the time Troy's SUV nears Eagle's Pass. He glances to the passenger seat for the hundredth time since leaving Copper Mountain, checking to make sure she's still there and not some figment of his imagination. As much as he loves talking with Hallie and getting to know more about her,

he was relieved when she had fallen asleep an hour ago so he could admire. She looks so peaceful and innocent as she sleeps, and he feels his heart constrict with feelings so intense it scares him. He didn't know it was possible to feel this way about a woman and he is beginning to dread making it to Eagle's Pass because he doesn't want to part with her, not even for a few hours, let alone days.

They are pulling up in front of Aunt Gina's house when Hallie stirs awake. The smile on her face as she opens her eyes to see Troy gazing at her is amazing. When she realizes where they are, her smile fades. She feels the same way he does.

"Did you have a nice nap?" He tries to sound more light-hearted than he feels.

"I guess, but I hate that I wasted some of our time together sleeping."

"Are you kidding me? It wasn't a waste. I got to ogle you while you slept." He sees tears pooling in her eyes. "Hey, what's this? No tears now. You came through your skiing weekend with flying colors."

She swipes a tear. "I'm just being a baby. I wish..." Her voice trails off.

He picks up her hand and kisses her knuckles. "I know. Me too. This is just the beginning, Hallie. Everything is going to be just fine. Just you wait and see."

He is about to pull her across the center console into his lap when the front porch lights come on. Gina and Adam were waiting for her inside.

Troy exits the SUV and is pleased when Hallie stays put waiting for him to come open her door. He pulls her to stand next to the car, but instead of walking her to the door, he traps

her body against the car, staring into her eyes. “I wish I didn’t have to go back to the base tonight, but I do. I have your cell phone though and you have mine. I’m gonna call you and text you and we’ll make plans to see each other again soon, okay?”

Excitement jumps into her eyes. “Actually, if you could come inside, your Christmas gift should have been delivered yesterday after we left, and I need to give it to you now.”

“Hallie, you didn’t need to spend money on me.”

“Too late and honestly, it is a gift for me too.”

“Intriguing. We better get going in before your uncle comes out to check on you.”

Aunt Gina flings the door open as they walk up the sidewalk hand in hand. “There you two are. You must have been having fun skiing to be getting back this late.”

Troy and Hallie glance at each other conspiratorially. They had fun skiing, *yesterday*. Today, they’d requested a late checkout and even though it cost Troy an extra night’s charge, had stayed in their room snuggling, talking, and having sex until they had to pack up and leave.

“It was great, Aunt Gina. Troy is a great instructor. I learned so much.” Their eyes meet behind Gina’s back and Troy sees the mischief in Hallie’s eyes at the double innuendo of her comment.

Once in the house, Hallie hugs Uncle Adam and then heads to the desk in the corner of the kitchen where the mail is kept. “Did that envelope come I was waiting for?”

Gina smiles. “Yes, dear. It came yesterday. I put it in on your dresser for you so it wouldn’t get lost.”

Hallie's smile is like a ray of sunshine. She grabs Troy's hand and pulls him with her down the hall towards her room. "We'll be right back." She shouts over her shoulder to her aunt and uncle. Troy is honestly thrilled to have the chance to say good-bye to her in private.

Hallie rushes to the envelope and then turns, handing it to Troy. "Merry Christmas. Sorry it's late."

"We've talked about this. You didn't..."

She cuts him off. "Yeah, I know, but really. I think you're gonna love it. Please, open it first and then you'll see."

Troy turns the non-descript manila folder over in his hands and finally rips it open. When he peeks inside, he sees two tickets, the kind printed for big stadium concerts and theater events. A brief moment of dread hits when he wonders if she had gotten them tickets to see Eddie the Asshole, but he pushes it aside, knowing she would never do that.

Troy pulls out the tickets and knows immediately Hallie was right. This is the perfect gift for both of them.

"Okay, so you were right. This is an amazing gift for both of us. Thank you so much, Hallie."

She looks nervous. "We haven't talked about New Year's Eve yet, but I thought this would be the perfect way for us to spend the night together in Denver at the Foo Fighters concert. I hope you don't mind, but I was kind of hoping I could drive over and since it will be so late, well surely Uncle Adam won't mind me staying over."

"You little minx. You had this planned even before we went skiing."

"But I did good, right?"

“Oh Hallie, you did great. It’s the perfect gift. I’ve been dreading having to say good-bye tonight, but now we only have two days to wait and then we’ll see each other again. And we get to go to a great concert. I’ll make dinner reservations for us for before the concert. Maybe you

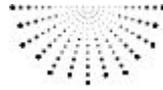
can plan on staying over a couple nights, that is if your aunt and uncle don’t mind.”

She has fallen into his arms, hugging him tight. “I’ll work on them.”

After several quiet minutes of just holding each other, Troy finally peels apart from her. He sees a vulnerability in her eyes and knows she fears the same thing he does. That these past two days were so perfect that they don’t want to let it end.

He leans in to deliver a heated good-bye kiss, before reluctantly pulling her by the hand to return to the living room. Before he knows it, he’s back in his SUV, headed back to Denver, feeling more alone than he remembers feeling in a very long time. As aggravating as it is to have to be headed into work, he welcomes the distraction that will help him keep his mind off missing Hallie for the next two days.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“I just don’t get what changed in the last seventy-two hours that has us against the ropes here.” Troy has spent the last two hours trying to sort out what’s gone wrong with the big project he and his team have been working on for over six months now. They were in the final testing phase and should be handing the code over to move into the next phase of production. Instead, they’re all standing around a conference table at one in the morning, hashing out what they know.

“I pulled our backups for the last month to see if I can pinpoint when the bug was introduced. That might help us figure out what the hell is going on.” John Tatum has been on Troy’s team for almost two years, choosing to move to Denver with Troy when they packed up the project team in DC and headed west. Not everyone on the team had been happy with the move, particularly the members he’d left behind in DC. Troy looks around the table of tired people, trying to piece together the problem.

“That’s a good idea, John. Harris, I know you’ve run through your findings with me already, but at the end of the day, what is your gut telling you?”

Tom Harris glances self-consciously around the table filled with John Tatum and three other technicians before looking

Troy in the eye. “Honestly, Troy, I hate to say it, but I think there is only one conclusion I can come to. The code has been tampered with.”

“What are you saying?”

“You know what I’m saying, Troy.”

“Sabotage? I just hate to even consider it.”

“I don’t know what else it could be. We’d passed every test and were home free. The code wasn’t on the network. It can’t be a virus or someone from the outside. It has to be...”

“Someone in this room.” Troy finishes for his friend.

The room is silent. Troy looks from person to person and is met with varying degrees of anger and surprise, yet not one person in the room refutes the claim because they all recognize the truth in the accusation. Their project is locked down so tight that only one of the six people in the room should have access to do the kind of damage they are dealing with.

Troy doesn’t need this. He should be home remembering his wonderful weekend with Hallie and making plans for their future, but instead he’s at the base, dealing with a top-secret security breach possibly caused by someone close to him.

Taking one last look across his team, his gut clenches. “There has to be another explanation. I trust every person in this room. We have all worked together and I’ve watched you all pour your heart into this project. It’s important to all of you. There has to be another explanation.”

The room finally erupts as everyone starts talking at the same time, all agreeing with Troy, relieved that they feel the same. Maybe he’s being naive, but he is usually a good judge of character. There has to be another reason.

“John, make the forensic investigation into the backups your top priority. We need to know exactly when the bug was introduced and that will help us track down what the root of the problem is and with any luck, lead us to the person behind it. You all have been here all weekend. Go home. Get some sleep and come back in the morning. I’m going to spend some time here tonight to see if I can make some headway. Meeting in my office at oh-eight-hundred. Dismissed.”

The crowd disperses and Troy heads to the secure lab to dig into the problem. It’s going to be a long night.

Two long days later, the team has made marginal progress. Harris has pinpointed the introduction of the problem to Christmas Day, which only intensified the mystery since not one of Troy’s team had worked that day. All surveillance footage into and out of the secure lab the team works in confirms not one person had set foot in the lab for the forty-eight hours around Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Troy had been relieved with the proof that his gut hadn’t been wrong about his team, but the mystery still stands and they are running out of time. They were supposed to hand the project over by the New Year and the fact that they’ll now miss that deadline is a huge blow to Troy and his whole team.

He thinks back to the disastrous phone call he’d had to make late the day before to his commanding officer back in DC, outlining the problem and explaining the delay. He’d sat through thirty minutes of uncomfortable ass-ripping and was just grateful it had been over the phone and not in person.

That’s Troy’s next problem. His boss, Peter, is using this event as an excuse to try to pressure Troy into moving the

team back to DC since nothing like this breach ever happened when they'd been working out of the more secure location in Washington. Peter had even threatened to turn the project back over to Victoria, a key team member he'd left behind in DC.

Troy hopes Peter was just blowing smoke because if Troy had been sure about moving to Colorado before he met Hallie, he is adamant now that this is where he belongs. He's barely had time to eat or sleep since seeing her, but he's made sure to text her often and they've spoke a couple quick minutes. He knows the responsible thing to do would be to cancel his date with her tonight to keep working, but there is nothing on this planet that could stop him from spending tonight with Hallie. His team had worked until four this afternoon before he called it quits, telling everyone to go home and report back the day after tomorrow. He tries not to feel guilty for wanting to spend time with Hallie and reminds himself his whole team is hitting the wall and they all need the downtime.

Troy is thrilled when he pulls into the covered parking garage of his apartment and finds Hallie just parking Gina's SUV in the spot next to his. He hadn't expected her for at least an hour. They both exit their cars quickly and rush into each other's arms.

“Oh man, you're a sight for sore eyes. Let me look at you?”

They've separated enough for him to look down into her beautiful green eyes. She looks incredible and his heart contracts that this amazing woman is looking up at him with such love in her eyes.

“Hi.” He can sense her shyness.

“Hi yourself. Damn, I've missed you. I know it's only been two days, but it feels like a week. Let's get you inside.” Troy

grabs her duffel bag from the SUV before locking up and walking to the elevator, his arm tight around her waist as if to keep her from getting away.

They make it into the elevator before Troy leans in to claim his first kiss. He tastes her cherry chapstick and has a craving to taste her other delectable tastes and wonders if they have time for a nap before they head out for dinner. The trip to his sixth-floor apartment is too short.

“Come on in. The place isn’t much, but I’ve only been here a couple months and haven’t even really unpacked. You’re the first guest I’ve had, other than my work buddies.”

Hallie is hugging him to her. “I don’t care about your apartment. I just missed you.” He hears a twinge of sadness in her voice that surprises him considering they’re just starting their time together.

“Well, you got here a whole hour earlier than I expected. You have any ideas what we might do with that extra time?” He grins.

“Oh, I can think of a couple of things. Which way to the bedroom?”

“I guess that settles that.” Troy grins down at Hallie from above, still buried deep inside her.

She can barely catch her breath. “Settles what?”

“I’d worried I had to be remembering how perfect you were wrong. There was no way you could be as beautiful and sexy as I was remembering, but damn, woman, that was

amazing. You sure you want to go out tonight? We could stay home, and I'll order pizza."

She knows he's teasing. "Very funny. What do I look like, a cheap date? I already bought the concert tickets. Now you're trying to get out of buying me a nice dinner too? I don't know about you, Troy."

"Fine. If you insist, but I don't want to hear complaints from you when I can't keep my hands off of you in public. And damn, this bed feels like heaven."

"I know. I'm worried about you. You've barely gotten any sleep the last few days. All teasing aside, I'll understand if you want to stay home to snuggle and sleep."

"Oh no you don't. It's New Year's Eve. We're going out and going to ring in the New Year together. Let me go take a shower to wake me up and then we can head out to dinner."

Troy has rolled away from her and is halfway to the bathroom when his cell phone on the nightstand rings. Hallie notices his aggravated look when he walks back to retrieve his phone. She's happy to have the chance to admire his naked body as he stands next to the bed, looking down on her with a grin.

"Hello, sir. I wasn't expecting to talk with you again today. Do you have any new information?"

Troy is listening to the call and she watches as his grin turns to a scowl. "With all due respect, that's bullshit. You know damn well this is out of our control for right now and you've made it clear we have to wait for Victoria's results before we can move forward." His scowl is turning to outright anger. "Hold on, Peter." Holding his hand over his phone, he

whispers to Hallie. “It’s my boss. I’ll take this in the bathroom. You can have the bathroom in like twenty minutes, okay?”

Hallie tries to hide her worry. “Sure. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just the issues with the project. He just wants to talk about the plan.” “Okay, let me know when I can have the bathroom to freshen up.”

He leans in to kiss her forehead and heads to the shower.

Twenty minutes later, as promised, Troy emerges ready to go to dinner. All traces of his anger are gone. “The bathroom is all yours. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. I hope you like Italian. I got us reservations at a new place that just opened a few blocks from the venue.”

Now it’s Hallie’s turn to wish they could just stay home tonight. “You sure we need to go?”

Troy reaches out to smack her on her bare ass playfully. “Oh no you don’t. No backing out now. We’re going, young lady. Get in there and get ready.”

Despite him telling her to leave, he is still hugging her close. Their eyes meet and she loves to see his grin as she replies playfully. “Yes, sir.”

Hallie is just finishing freshening up her makeup and brushing her teeth in Troy’s bathroom when she hears a phone ringing. Glancing to the counter, she sees Troy had left his phone in there after talking to his boss. She’s about to call out to him to come retrieve the call when she glances down and sees the incoming call is from a Victoria.

Even as she feels her heart lurch with insecurity, she tells herself she's being silly. Victoria could be anyone. She could be someone he works with. She could be the next-door neighbor telling him his car alarm is going off. She could be... his other lover.

Hallie isn't proud of herself when she accepts the call. She hesitantly holds his phone to her ear but doesn't say anything. Several long seconds go by before she hears a sultry voice talking. "Troy? Are you there? It's about time you finally answered your phone. I've been trying to reach you for days." Silence. Hallie's heart is racing. "Troy, honey?"

"Sorry, but this is Hallie." She hates how small her voice sounds.

There's a long pause. "Oh. I must have the wrong phone number."

"No. Troy is... he's in the other room. Can I take a message?"

"A message? Who is this again?" The woman's voice on the other end of the line sounds so confident. Hallie wishes she felt the same.

"Hallie."

Another long pause. "Well, Hallie. I had hoped to talk with Troy directly, but you can pass on a message. Tell him I heard the good news that he and his team are going to be moving back to DC next week. Be a peach and let him know I'll be anxiously awaiting his return, will you do that for me?"

Hallie's heart is beating so hard she can hear the roar of blood rushing in her ears. She actually feels faint and has to take a seat on the edge of the tub. She takes several deep breaths trying to stave off the sudden urge to throw up.

“Hallie? Can you be a dear and pass that message along?”

“But, he just moved to Colorado. He wants to be here.” She hates the quaver in her voice. She sounds like a little kid.

“Well, you obviously don’t know Troy very well then, do you? He’s very ambitious and he’s learned that he needs to be back in DC if he intends to get the promotion he is after. Not to mention, do you really think a man like Troy will ever be happy playing house in the country when he can have an exciting life here in the heart of things? Tell him I understand him wanting to stay there to wrap things up cleanly in Colorado before he heads back here, but I expect things back to normal next week. Have a nice night.” The call is dead.

Hallie’s heart is breaking. She’d expect to be treated like this by Eddie the Asshole, but not Troy. Her mind reels. How could he be planning to move back to DC and not tell her? He’d made her believe he wanted to live in Eagle’s Pass. She replays Victoria’s words over and over in her head until it starts to make sense. He is going along with Hallie tonight without saying anything so he doesn’t ruin their last night together, but then he was going to drop the bomb tomorrow after he gets one more night of her in his bed.

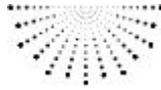
She’d thought Troy Jackson was different, but he is worse than any of the other pricks that had fucked with her in the past. An anger like Hallie has never felt before bubbles up and takes hold. How dare he tell her he loves her? He’s used her and now he’s about to just throw her away.

She has to pull it together and come up with a plan. Sure, she could walk out there and confront him, demanding answers, but that would just make it too easy on him. She suddenly remembers the crock of shit he had fed her about the importance of always telling the truth... about never keeping

secrets. What a fucking asshole. She knew this whole domestic discipline was a joke. The rules are just meant to keep the women submissive and come up with reasons for spankos like Troy to have a reason to light up their woman's ass on a regular basis, but clearly the rules don't apply to the men. No, not to the HoHs. They get to lie and keep secrets all they want.

His knock on the bathroom door startles her. She quickly swipes her tears away and steels herself to be strong. He may think she is just a young, dumb blonde he can treat like this, but she's gonna show him how wrong he is.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Troy has a headache. He's spent the last two hours trying valiantly to figure out what has upset Hallie, but nothing he has said or done is helping. He may not be the most sensitive guy in the world, but even he can tell something is bothering her. Considering she was in a fine mood when she arrived, he is absolutely at a loss as to what could be the problem. Her short, quip answers to all of his comments and questions both in the car and here at the restaurant have gone from concerning to just plain rude.

What is most upsetting is Troy hates to admit he just hasn't known Hallie long enough to know if this is a common occurrence for her behavior or not. He's wracked his brain for anything he might have said or done that could have upset her but comes up empty. Perhaps she's one of those women who has major mood swings with PMS. He spends a few minutes thinking through how he can try to get her into a specialist to see if there is something she can take to reduce her symptoms.

"I'll have one more wine, thanks, Nick."

"No, she won't, Nick. Hallie has had enough to drink for now. Thanks."

Their poor waiter has also felt the brunt of Hallie's bad mood tonight. He doesn't look ready to piss her off. Glancing

between the two of them, he finally nods at Troy and walks away.

“That’s crap, Troy. I’m not driving tonight. There’s no reason for you to not let me order another drink. Stop treating me like a baby.”

Reaching across the table to take her hand in his, he looks her in the eye. “If you don’t want to be treated like a baby, then maybe you should stop acting like one. I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you tonight, but I’ve about had enough.”

“You’ve had enough? That’s rich.”

“Hallie, honey. Please. I can tell something is bothering you. Please. Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

For a brief moment, she looks like she’s going to cry, but it’s gone in a flash, replaced with a devious smile he doesn’t care for. “Wrong? Nothing’s wrong. I’m just trying to have some fun. If you’re not going to let me have any more to drink here, then let’s just get out of here and go to the concert. Or are you going to spoil my fun there, too?”

Troy is beside himself. “If this is how you’re going to act all night, then maybe we should skip the concert and go home where we can start the fireworks.”

“Oh goodie. Sex.”

He hates her sarcastic tone.

“No. I was thinking more like a spanking. And not the funishment kind.”

That got her attention, but Troy feels like an ass. He knows that in spite of her enjoying the playful spankings they’ve experimented with so far, Hallie is not ready for a true

punishment, no matter how badly she might need it. And considering he doesn't even understand what's wrong, he knows he can't punish just for being in a bad mood.

“Thanks, but I think I'll pass.”

Nick has returned with the check. Troy throws his credit card down without even looking at the bill. The sooner they can get out of here, the better. Hallie has made herself busy digging through her purse, looking for something, but to Troy it looks like she's just trying to keep busy to avoid talking with him.

He hates that she's painted him into this corner where he feels more like her father instead of her boyfriend. He knows the right thing to do is to drive them back to his apartment and hold her hostage in his bedroom until he gets to the bottom of what's bothering her. He just feels like a heel skipping the concert that she had spent her own money on and had been such a thoughtful gift for him at the time.

Nick is obviously ready to get rid of them too because he is back in record time, and Troy stands to leave, helping Hallie with her coat. He takes her hand and leads her quickly from the restaurant. They are only a few blocks from the concert location, and they'd planned on leaving the car in the garage. When he heads in the direction of the car, Hallie pulls him to a stop.

“The concert is the other direction. You're going the wrong way.”

Turning back to her, he pulls her close. “We aren't going to the concert, Hallie. We are going to the car and then we are going back to my apartment where we are going to sit down and you are going to start at the very beginning and tell me what the hell has you so upset tonight, because honestly, if I

didn't know better, I would swear you are a whole different person than the Hallie I know."

"Me? I'm different? What about you, Troy?"

"What about me? Nothing has changed with me."

"Really? You sure about that?" She is shouting at him.

"Lower your voice. You're making a scene."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I would hate to embarrass you."

"That's it. What the fuck is going on with you?"

"Nothing. I just want to go to the concert is all."

"Well, we aren't going anywhere but home with you acting like this."

"Home. Very funny. Listen, I spent a lot of money for those tickets and I'm going to the concert. You can't stop me. If you want to throw your ticket away, I'll just take it and pawn it.

I'm sure I can sell it at the gate."

Troy is beside himself. "Let's go."

She digs her heels in. "No. I'm going to the concert."

She breaks away from him and starts walking in the opposite direction. Troy regrets letting her carry the tickets in her purse. He catches up to her easily, pulling her to another stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Other concertgoers have to detour around them as they stand in their stare-off.

"Hallie, please. Talk to me. Honey, what's going on with you?"

She was tempted, but he sees her steel herself again. "I just want to go to the concert. Please, let's just go. I don't want to

be late.”

Troy knows it's a mistake the second he allows them to continue walking towards the stadium. He should throw her over his shoulder and carry her home, but he just doesn't have enough history with her yet to do that. Mistake or not, it's New Year's Eve and they are going to go to the concert. One thing is for sure. He's not going to give up trying to get her to open up tonight.

The only thing holding Hallie together is the alcohol and sheer determination. She's having trouble holding onto her anger at Troy's betrayal and planned move back to DC. The sadness and sense of loss for something she almost had is setting in. She wants so badly to crawl up into a corner and cry, but sheer pride is the only thing keeping her from falling apart.

She has to hand it to him. He's a very good actor. Several times tonight he'd almost convinced her that he really cared about her, but she had to steel herself to remember he was just hoping for more sex before he cuts her loose.

She's on her second glass of wine since hitting the stadium. She had pulled in some favors with friends in the industry to get them really great seats and Troy doesn't know it yet, but her contacts had also sent her two backstage passes for after the concert.

As she settles into her seat to wait for the show to start, she takes stock of how it feels to be surrounded by her old lifestyle. While Eddie and The Kings are not here tonight, they have played in endless concert halls just like this and the memories of that life are fresh. It's not that she missed Eddie

and the band necessarily, but it hits her how much she had walked away from when she got in Gopher and drove away from her old life.

She was good at managing the band. In spite of being so young, she had just begun to get really good at her job and then she'd thrown it all away. It depresses her to think that she'll need to start all over again and worse, she has absolutely no clue what she is going to do to support herself if she stays with her aunt and uncle. She knows she can't live off their charity forever and the little nest egg she had saved is just that... little.

As the lights go down and the warmup band takes the stage, Hallie is relieved. It's finally too dark and loud to have to try to talk to Troy. He hadn't given up trying to get her to open up to him and he was wearing her down. As the concertgoers around her reveal in the music, Troy and Hallie stand silently miserable in the middle of what should be a fun event.

Hallie's thoughts turn to Eagle's Pass and her aunt and uncle. She'd planned on telling Troy tonight that she had made up her mind to stay in Eagle's Pass, but now what's the point? Yes, her family is there, but she's an adult. They don't need to have her complicating their life. If Troy isn't going to be in Eagle's Pass with her, maybe she should move on.

Hallie's head is pounding by the time they make it through the concert. Troy is reaching for their coats as Hallie decides to spring the VIP passes on him.

“Listen, I have backstage passes since I got the tickets through some of my contacts.”

“No way. We came to the concert, but we need to get home and talk.”

“I’m not passing up on going backstage, Troy.” Hallie breaks away from him and takes a few steps to the nearest security guard. Even Hallie is surprised how easy it was to flash the VIP badge and the next thing she knows, she’s being ushered behind the scenes by the burly security guard. She can hear Troy’s boots rushing to catch up to them and she ducks into the backstage dressing room just as Troy grabs her arm. She knows he plans on dragging her out of there, and she only hopes he won’t make a scene.

The sight that greets her turns her stomach. The smell of pot and beer mingle with sweat and sex to permeate the air with what she likes to think of as the smell of rock and roll. Half-dressed men and women mingle around the room while a lone guitar player sits in the corner strumming out a sad melody. Memories Hallie would rather forget flood her brain and she’s just about to turn and leave when she hears her name being called from across the room.

“Hallie Boudreaux! What the hell are you doing here, girlfriend?”

Hallie looks up to see a woman she’d gotten to know pretty well when she had been working on the record deal for The Kings. Stacey is with the management company and pretty much has the same band management gig for tonight’s opening act that Hallie had for The Kings. She and Stacey had gotten to know each other pretty well when their groups had both been recording in Los Angeles for a few months together and she is a sight for sore eyes.

“Stacey! Wow, I’d hoped I’d see you tonight.” Stacey hugs Hallie tight.

“I’m so glad to see you. You have a lot of people worried about you, you know. You kind of dropped off the map there and none of us knew how to get in touch with you. Eddie has called a couple of times to see if I’d heard from you.”

“Oh God, don’t tell him you saw me. I don’t want him to know where I am.”

Stacey looks confused. “Well, if you say so.”

Troy has caught up to Hallie and has stepped up close. Stacey looks up to acknowledge him with a grin. “Well, hello there. And who might you be?”

Before Troy can speak, Hallie cuts him off. “This is Troy Jackson.” She leaves it at that.

Troy adds on. “Hi, I’m Hallie’s boyfriend. So sorry to cut your visit short, but we were just heading out. It was nice to meet you.”

Hallie turns on him. “Really? I haven’t seen my friend in months, and I get two minutes with her?” Even she can register she’s slurring her words. The stress and alcohol are catching up to her. She doesn’t feel well.

Troy lowers his lips to talk into her ear. “You are out of control. I don’t know what happened, but we are going home and we’re staying there until I get to the bottom of what’s going on. Let’s go. Say goodbye to your friend.”

She makes the mistake of looking into his eyes. She hates that he still has the power to crush her like a bug. He is so perfect and for such a short time, she had dared to dream she could be with a man like Troy, but it was just a dream. The

protective dam of anger she had built up is crumbling and she can feel the tears about to come.

The raunchy sounds of the room fall away as Hallie begins to spiral down. She can hear Stacey asking if she's okay as the tears begin flowing in earnest. The memory of a life-changing phone call combined with too much alcohol for her petite frame and there, standing in the middle of the chaos, Hallie starts to sob.

She vaguely feels Troy scooping her into his arms. She hates that he feels so safe. She knows it's a mirage... a lie. She can hear Stacey asking Troy about where Hallie is living and how she can get in touch with her to check up on her later. Hallie can hear the worry in both of their voices as they talk about her. She hears Troy giving out her address in Eagle's Pass.

She doesn't remember much of their trip back to the car, but she knows Troy carried her the entire way. She expects him to be so furious that he'd be yelling at her. It would have been easier if he'd been angry. Instead, he keeps reassuring her with soft words like "It's okay, baby. I have you now." And "We're almost there. I'll take care of you."

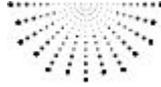
His comforting words only make her cry harder because she knows they're all lies. He's only going to take care of her until he gets what he wants and then he's going to pack up his apartment and move back to DC and play house with Victoria.

Hallie loses some time during their trip because it seems like she's barely closed her eyes and Troy is carrying her from the elevator to his apartment. He doesn't stop to turn on any lights, but carries her straight to his bathroom, the room where the fateful call had come in. The memories of Victoria's words finally have Hallie rushing for the toilet, losing every drop of

alcohol and bite of fettuccine Alfredo she's consumed since the start of this disastrous evening.

Damn Troy. He stays there with her, holding back her hair. Wiping her face with a cool washcloth. Helping undress her and carry her tenderly to his bed. The bed they'd made love in just a few short hours before. She'd expected him to pounce on her to get one last romp out of her before he leaves town, but instead, he strips them both bare and crawls into bed behind her, spooning her in his arms until she gratefully blacks out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Nothing is making any sense. Troy had held Hallie until she fell asleep, or more accurately passed out. He'd tried to get some sleep himself, considering he's been working around the clock for the past few days, but after tossing and turning for a few hours, he's decided he's too wound up to sleep. He'd thrown on a pair of boxer briefs and has parked it on his couch in the dark, running the past week through his brain over and over, looking for the missed clues to bring order back to his life.

Twenty-four hours ago he couldn't wait for this night to arrive. He had hoped to talk with Hallie about her plans to stay in Eagle's Pass and let her know that he had put things into motion with his work to be able to move there too, as soon as possible. Now here he sits wondering if he even knows who Hallie really is.

She'd been an entirely different person tonight and as much as it scared him, he has to reluctantly admit this is exactly the kind of shit that happens when you rush into things too quickly. He'd let his emotions and the extraordinary circumstances in meeting Hallie outweigh his common sense. He should have known better than to fall in love so fast. There is so much they don't know about each other yet.

If only it were that simple, but like it or not, Troy does love Hallie and he's determined to get to the bottom of what had her spooked tonight. No one ever said it would be easy, but he wants her in his life. He wants to love her. To lead her. He wonders if his father ever had to face similar problems and if so, how he dealt with leading his family through stressful times. He wishes he could call his dad for advice.

With a groan, Troy heads back to the bedroom. He knows he'll feel better just holding Hallie in his arms.

The sun is shining through the bedroom curtains when Troy stirs awake. He'd seen four on the alarm clock before finally passing out from sheer exhaustion. It only takes a few groggy seconds for the memories of their disastrous night to flood in on him. His head is pounding. He should be relieved that he'd managed to finally get some sleep, but instead of feeling rested, he feels lethargic.

Troy had rolled to his back in the night. Rolling to his side, he reaches out to pull Hallie close and finds the bed empty. In a shot, he is wide-awake, sitting up, scanning the room quickly and finding it empty. He shoots out of bed, rushing to the bathroom, hoping to find Hallie there in the shower, feeling hung-over and ashamed of her behavior the night before. Instead, he finds an empty room. A heavy dread sets in as he realizes her overnight bag is missing.

Troy rushes through the rest of the apartment but is already sure of what he is going to find. Hallie is gone.

How could he have been so wrong about them and their future? How could he have read her so wrong on their ski trip?

Troy tries her cell phone. No answer. He sends several text messages. No response.

He collapses onto the couch to take stock of his options.

The easiest thing would be to write the whole event called Hallie Boudreaux off as a terrible mistake and go back to bed. That idea doesn't even finish before it's rejected. Hallie is under his skin. There is no forgetting her.

He could let things cool down and head out to Eagle's Pass in a few days over the weekend after they'd both cooled down and could hopefully talk things through more clearly. The fact that Troy is jumping out of his skin, however, tells him there is no chance in hell he'll be able to concentrate on anything until he understands what's happening with Hallie. He is angry, of course, but he can't shake the feeling that there is something much deeper at work with her. Something that needs his understanding and patience.

So that leaves getting dressed and chasing after her, like a little puppy dog. It doesn't sit well with him that she has him acting like an impulsive teenager, but in the end, it doesn't matter. He can't rest until he figures out what's wrong and does all he can to make it better.

Troy heads into his room to throw on jeans and a sweater and is in his SUV within ten minutes, on the road to Eagle's Pass. He tries Hallie several more times with no luck and finally breaks down and calls his sister.

"Troy, you're killing me here. It's New Year's Day. Just this one day of the year, couldn't you sleep past eight in the morning?"

Troy hadn't really looked at the clock, but it doesn't matter. "Trace. Sorry, but I didn't know who else to call.

Something is really wrong with Hallie.”

He can hear his sister moving around on the other end of the phone and when she talks next, he can hear the concern in her voice. “What’s wrong with Hallie? Is she sick or something?”

“I don’t know. She was fine when she got here yesterday, but about an hour into her visit, she got really distant and acted angry. We did go to dinner and the concert, but we both had a terrible time. I tried to get her to open up and talk to me about what was bothering her, but nothing I said helped. She drank too much, and I brought her home to sleep it off, but I woke up this morning and she’s already gone. I can’t believe she fucking snuck out without saying goodbye or leaving a note.”

He can hear the panic in his own voice, and it pisses him off.

“Okay, stay calm. I’m sure it is nothing big. Hallie has had a lot of traumatic relationships in her life and we haven’t even come close to uncovering all of her triggers. I’m guessing something happened or was said that just triggered some negative memories and she’s having trouble working through the emotions. Nothing else seems to make sense. Try to think back. What were you talking about right before she acted differently?”

Troy blushes and is glad his sister can’t see him. “Honestly, things were great. She got here early and we made love. It was better than great. I went and took a shower first to get ready to go and then I let her freshen up in the bathroom and by the time she was done, she was like a changed person.”

“Troy, you didn’t spank her, did you? I don’t think she’s ready yet.”

“No, Trace. I didn’t spank her. At least not last night. We goofed around some at Copper Mountain, but nothing serious. I really thought she was doing fine with the idea of DD and honestly, she more than earned a punishment with her behavior last night, but I knew something deeper was going on that I needed to help her work through first.”

“That’s strange. Have you called Gina and Adam yet? Maybe they’ve heard from her.”

“I haven’t yet. I didn’t want to worry them and honestly, I don’t want them to think things aren’t going well between us.”

“Sorry, but from what you’ve told me, you may not have a choice, Troy. They are going to figure something is up. Listen, let me get up and dressed. I’ll try to contact Hallie and see if she’ll come in to talk things through with me. Maybe I can get her to open up, but Troy...”

“Yes, Trace.”

“I’m going to see her as a patient. You are going to have to respect her privacy. No pumping me for information, do you hear me?”

“Trace, I just want her to be happy and safe.”

“Spoken like a true HoH. I love you, Troy. Hang in there and stay positive. I’m sure there is a reasonable explanation for everything.”

Hallie has had to pull over twice to blow her nose and try to get her crying under control since leaving Denver. She’s fighting the urge to turn the SUV around and head back to Troy’s. Leaving had seemed like the thing to do when she

woke up this morning to find he was sound asleep. Better to leave before he could have a chance to lie to her again. She feels like a coward by leaving without letting him know how bad he's broken her heart, but she just doesn't have the strength. Just like when she ran away from Gene and later Eddie, it's easier to slink away than to confront the men who have hurt her in her life.

She's trying to figure out what she's going to tell Aunt Gina when she hears her phone ding with an incoming text message. Hallie has already ignored several calls and texts from Troy and now she sees it's Traci calling. Just great. He's dragging his sister into this mess. A wave of sadness hits Hallie as she realizes she's never going to be able to go back for sessions with Traci. There's no way she'll be able to talk freely about Troy with his sister. Just seeing her will bring back too many memories. She hears the ding for another voicemail message.

With each mile she gets closer to Eagle's Pass, the harder her heart is pounding. It's as if her body is revolting from her decision to leave Troy's without having settled things between them, but what's the point? Staying would only have left her wanting more of what she can never have. By the time she is pulling into her aunt's driveway, Hallie just wants to fall into her bed, pull the covers over her head and hide until it doesn't hurt anymore.

Before she's out of the SUV, the front door swings open, her uncle filling the doorway. He doesn't look happy.

She's not even halfway up the walk when he calls out to her. "Troy is worried sick about you, young lady. What possessed you to get up and drive away without telling him where you were going and then not answer your cell phone?"

She is in no mood for Uncle Adam's tone. "I thought you told me not to talk and drive. I was only doing what you and Troy lectured me about." She brushes past him into the living room and stops dead in her tracks. Aunt Gina is sitting on the couch looking like she's been crying.

That's not the part that surprises Hallie the most. Sitting next to her is Stacey.

"Stacey? What are you doing here?"

"Hey, Hallie. I drove over from Denver in a rental. We have another show tonight before the tour is moving on. I was worried about you after last night and I had some things I wanted to talk to you about that I didn't get a chance to last night before your boyfriend carted you off.

Luckily, he gave me your address."

Hallie drops her bag with a plop. "Yeah, well he's not really my boyfriend."

Aunt Gina lets out a sad cry. "Oh Hallie, what happened, honey? I thought things were going so well with Troy."

"You and me both, Aunt Gina. Apparently, Troy had other ideas."

Uncle Adam butts in. "If that young man hurt one hair on your head, I'm gonna bring him up in front of the Disciplinary Board."

The irony is thick as she swings to look at her uncle, anger at every HoH in the city of Eagle's Pass suddenly bubbling over. "Oh, never fear, Uncle Adam. He didn't hurt a hair on my head. He just broke my heart instead. I'm sure there are no rules against that in Eagle's Pass. And like it matters anyway. Troy is a man. Men have no consequences. You all get a figurative slap on the wrist and a fine. Troy doesn't even live

here anyway and... “Hallie’s heart contracts as she prepares to say the words that hurt her more than she wants to admit. “And, he never will live in Eagle’s Pass.”

Her aunt and uncle stand staring at her in shock at her outburst. Stacey, on the other hand, has jumped up and grabbed Hallie’s hands. “I’m so glad I came. I didn’t think I could talk you into coming with us and leaving that hunk of a man behind, but if he’s not really your boyfriend, we’d really like it if you would join the tour as my assistant.”

Hallie is confused. “Who is we?”

Stacey clarifies. “The management company. The Kings are falling apart without you and only after you left did they all realize how important you were to keeping everything running smoothly. They know better than to stick you with Eddie again, but they would love it if you would take a new band under your wing and help them get organized and on tour. Who knows? Maybe we can go on the road together. Wouldn’t that be great?”

Hallie’s heart is pounding at the most unexpected offer. She knows she should be grateful and on one level she is. It’s nice to know that people had noticed what a good job she’d done and it makes her feel validated. Still, the idea surprises her. She dares a glance at her aunt and can see the panic on Gina’s face at the thought of Hallie leaving Eagle’s Pass.

Hallie hasn’t even said a word when the front door slams open and Troy comes barging in. He looks so tall and powerful and for the first time since the night she met him, Hallie is actually afraid of him. Their eyes meet as he takes large strides to cross the living room to grab her by her upper arms, shaking her ever so slightly.

“Don’t you ever do that to me again, do you hear me? You scared the shit out of me when you were gone and then you wouldn’t answer your phone. I thought something bad had happened to you, Hallie. What the hell were you thinking?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Troy. I was thinking I wanted to come home, but the funny thing is, as I was driving back here, it dawned on me. This isn’t really my home. I’ve decided I’m not cut out to be a 1950’s woman. After all, I can open my own fucking doors and I’ve decided I don’t need the threat of getting my bottom paddled every time I break some arbitrary rule some man makes up so he has an excuse to beat his woman.”

Direct hit. She’s angry. So why does the pain in his eyes boomerang back and pierce her own heart?

“What are you saying, Hallie? You’ve decided you’re not going to stay in Eagle’s Pass?” She’s never heard Troy sound so vulnerable before. Her anger is slipping away, leaving her feeling exhausted. She doesn’t have any fight left in her.

“Let’s face it, Troy. This isn’t going to work. I’m never going to be happy here. Stacey’s offered me a job and I’m going to take it. I’m good at managing bands and I’m still young enough that I’m not ready to give up the travel and excitement of the music industry. What am I going to do with myself here in Eagle’s Pass, anyway? There are no jobs for me here and, well I just think this is best.”

There’s an eerie silence in the room as all eyes are on Troy and Hallie as they have this most private conversation. Hallie is sure she must be imagining the tremble she feels as Troy loosens his hold on her arms. She wants to cry out to him to put his hands back on her as he drops his arms to his side,

taking a small step that is more like a stumble, backwards. His eyes haven't left hers as he internalizes what she's said.

When he speaks, she can barely hear him. "Will going back on the road, managing a band... will that make you happy?"

Hallie thought he would be yelling at her, trying to convince her it was a crazy idea. His quiet question catches her off guard. "I don't know, honestly, but I think it's what I need to do." Her heart is pounding in her chest as she waits, hoping he will leave so she can break down and cry and then praying he never leaves because she's sure her heart will break the second he does. She has never felt more confused.

Troy looks nervously around the room, making eye contact with a concerned Uncle Adam, a crying Aunt Gina and a confused Stacey before returning his gaze to Hallie. "All I ever wanted is for you to be happy, Hallie. If this will make you happy, then I wish you the very best."

He leans in to place a last quick kiss on her forehead and is halfway to the front door before Hallie wakes up out of her trance.

"Troy!"

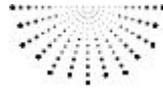
He turns, his eyes full of unshed tears. She's so tempted to call him back. To tell him it was all a big bluff, but then she remembers Victoria's words and reminds herself he needs to hurry back to Denver to pack up his apartment.

"Goodbye."

He releases a barely audible moan before turning and striding out without a backward glance. Had he turned around, he would have seen Hallie crumbling to the floor where she

stood, her aunt rushing to her side to hold her while sobs wracked her petite body.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Six weeks later - Valentine's Day

“I can’t believe you’re roping me into going out tonight, Trace. This is my first weekend in town and I have a thousand chores, not to mention the absolutely last place I want to be tonight is a damn Valentine’s Day party. I knew I should have driven separately today.”

Troy’s sister has pulled her car into the parking lot of St. Michael’s Parish instead of dropping him off at his new house, just a few blocks away from her own home on Spanking Loop. They’d been shopping in Boulder for furnishings all afternoon and Troy just wants to get home and unpack.

“Don’t be a baby, Troy. You know I have next to no social life. It’s Valentine’s Day. Can’t you at least escort me to a small get together in the basement of the church for a few minutes? I know you have no desire to mingle, but I’d actually like to meet Mr. Right at some point before I become a senior citizen. Who knows? Maybe he might be here tonight.”

His sister knows how to push his guilt buttons. “Fine. I’ll go for a little bit, but we aren’t staying late, got it? I’m not very good company these days anyway.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Traci’s grin forces him to smile.

Thank God for his sister. She's been a Godsend, helping him sort through his anger and sadness after losing Hallie at the New Year. The last six weeks have been a whirlwind for Troy, of both highs and lows.

Upon returning to Denver on the disastrous New Year's Day, he'd gone into the office to try to bury himself in work. No one had been more surprised than Troy when he and Harris had traced the root of the sabotage back to code introduced by a previous member of their team, Victoria. Before the team had even left Washington, she'd embedded a virus in the code set to activate on Christmas Day knowing it would put the entire project in jeopardy.

The very next day, Troy had flown to DC to hand over the evidence to his boss, Peter. They'd confronted Victoria together and she had confessed. It still turns Troy's stomach when he realizes she had tried to ruin the entire team's work in a misguided attempt to force Troy to move back to Washington DC. Now she faces a court-martial while his team successfully wrapped up their big project and moved on to the next.

As busy as his work has been, not an hour goes by that he doesn't think of Hallie. One of Troy's biggest regrets is he never got to tell her his plans for the future. He's not sure it would have changed her mind and make her want to stay, but he wishes he'd tried harder to understand what had gone so wrong their last night together. He'd just been so hurt by her rejection, he'd rushed out of the Newberry's house without trying harder to change her mind.

So, despite Hallie moving on, Troy had gone through with his plans to retire from the Air Force. His boss, Peter, had not been thrilled when Troy advised him that he wanted to move

to Eagle's Pass to be near his sister, but Troy had been relieved when Peter approved the plan. As of two weeks ago, Troy is now a private citizen. He will continue to head up confidential projects with his team, but this time as a highly paid private contractor. He's arranged to work out of Eagle's Pass three days a week, driving into Denver twice a week and flying to DC for meetings with Peter at least one week per quarter.

As he had hoped, he'll now be spending more time with his sister. The problem is, it's taken every ounce of his control not to pump Traci for any scrap of information on Hallie. Several times, he's picked up the phone to call Hallie, but would chicken out, not sure what he would say to her other than begging her to come home. He's still working on coming to terms with the fact that she is in a different place in her life than he is. He is ready to settle down and start a family and she is still young and deserves to see the world. He just hopes she is happy, wherever she is, because he feels gutted without her.

As they arrive in the basement of the rectory, Troy can't help but compare this party to the one he, Hallie, and Traci had attended on Christmas Eve. This party is tiny and pretty lame in comparison, but then again, only a portion of the town attends church here at St. Michael's. He glances around, hoping to see Gina and Adam and then relieved when they are not there.

They are greeted by Dr. Marcus Devon and his wife Cadence just inside the door. "Hey there Traci and Troy. Glad you guys could make it. I'd stay away from the punch bowl if I were you. Someone spiked it a good one."

Troy shakes the good doctor's hand. "Thanks for the advice, but I honestly could use a good shot right about now."

Traci pulls him farther into the room where he greets several other people that he remembers and even more he'd never met before. Troy finds himself wishing everyone had worn nametags to make it easier for him to keep everyone straight.

Luckily, he is able to pick out Father Beauchamp since he's the only one in a priestly collar. Father Henry is making the rounds, greeting the guests and is sure to stop to greet Traci and Troy, shaking Troy's hand lightly.

"Welcome to Eagle's Pass, officially. I know you have to be excited to be moving so close to your sister and she's thrilled to have you here. You know that, right?"

"I have a pretty good idea, Father, but thanks for reminding me."

"How are you settling in? Have you received your official welcome basket yet?"

"Yep. Brent dropped it by himself."

"Good. Good. And have you gotten the full tour of the town?"

"Well, yes, but I pretty much knew my way around before since I've visited Traci so often."

"Right. Right. So, I guess there's only one thing left for you to do to make it official. I'm hoping you can help me tonight as a matter of fact. We normally take care of these matters after the service on Sundays, but I have a doozy that just can't wait for Sunday. As a new, single HoH, you wouldn't mind helping me out tonight, would you?"

Troy is as confused as ever. "Father, you lost me right after you said *right*. I'm sorry, but I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

“Oh goodness. I thought your sister had explained how St. Michael’s is a tad bit different than some of the other churches you’ve attended outside of Eagle’s Pass. In keeping with the town’s unique bylaws and practices, we feel it is ordained from God that we include corporal punishment into our confession and redemption program here at the church.”

“Come again? You mean you punish TiHs by spanking them if they come to you and confess? If so, I bet your confessional business is pretty slow.”

Father Henry must have a good sense of humor as he is chucking. “Actually, you might be surprised, but of course not all confessions deserve punishments. But for serious offenses, I do strongly believe in corporal punishment to both correct future behavior, but also to relieve the heavy guilt that often comes with sinning. For married ladies and gentlemen, I will suggest a number of paddles they should receive, and they are to go home and report it to their HoH who will handle their discipline in private. For single parishioners, it’s a bit more complicated. I obviously don’t want to administer a spanking for reasons of propriety, and so our tradition is that our single TiHs are chastised by our single HoHs. We of course keep everyone’s identity confidential as to not embarrass the young lass should they encounter their spanker at some point in the future.”

Troy’s mind is trying to make sense of all he’s just heard. “I thought Eagle’s Pass has a Disciplinary Board who does something similar. Are you trying to put them out of business?”

“Oh goodness no. There is more than enough room for both of us. In fact, we often work in conjunction with each other. But tonight, for example, is not a Disciplinary Board

matter. No town rules were broken. It's a private matter and here at St. Michael's I am very happy we have the means to properly handle the situation confidentially and get our misguided young woman back on the path she belongs."

As if he needed more proof, this conversation is proving to Troy he isn't close to being over Hallie. He'd moved to Eagle's Pass because he believes in the benefit of discipline, but tonight, faced with the prospect of being able to properly spank a submissive in need of his help, he wants no part of it. The only person he wants to share such an intimacy with is Hallie.

"I don't know, Father. I'm sure there are other singles here who might jump at the chance."

Taking Troy by the arm. "Oh come, young man. I left the poor dear getting prepared. Let's not make her wait in dread longer than she already has. I'm sure she'll appreciate you helping her mend her ways with a nice hard paddling. What better way to remind yourself of why you are choosing to live in Eagle's Pass?"

Troy really doesn't want to do this, but Father is pulling him along insistently. He looks back to see Traci's smiling face and wonders if she knows what's happening. Then he remembers she is a single TiH in Eagle's Pass which means she may have been on the receiving end of Father's confessional discipline before. She flashes him a supportive smile and Troy steels himself for the job ahead.

"Okay, Father. You're catching me off guard, but I guess there is no reason I'm not able to help."

"Very good. Let me go get everything ready and I'll be back for you in five minutes. Have a drink of punch while you wait, but only one mind you. I need you to be in control."

“Never fear, Father. I wouldn’t dream of punishing a young woman unless I was in complete control.”

“Very good.”

Troy isn’t thirsty, but he heads to the punch bowl to give himself something to do in this awkward intermission. Now more than ever he wishes he hadn’t let Traci con him into coming to this lame party.

“I’m sorry. I should have warned you, but I honestly didn’t know how to bring it up. Don’t be mad at me, please?”

Troy turns to see his sister looking guilty. “Maybe you should line up to confess too and I can deliver two for the price of one tonight.”

Traci’s eyes expand, not quite sure if he was joking or not. “Relax, sis. It was a joke. Yes, you should have told me about Father Henry’s strange twist to the confessional, but honestly, how could you have known he would have a naughty woman in need of discipline tonight of all nights? It’s supposed to be a party, for goodness sake.”

Is that guilt he sees in his sister’s eyes? “Of course, Troy. Still, if you decide to keep attending St. Michael’s, you might be called into action every once in a while.”

Troy is just beginning to relax, thinking the plan had surely changed when Father Henry is gone for over ten minutes. Just as Troy is about to suggest they head out, he looks up to see the priest headed his way, a serious look at his face.

“All things are ready now, Troy. Follow me, please.”

Troy hands his empty punch cup to his sister. “I’ll be right back, Trace, and then I’d like to go home if that’s okay?”

She smiles and if he's not mistaken, it looks as if she's about to cry. "Sure thing, Troy."

Father Henry leads him down a long hallway into the depths of the church. They stop first in a room labeled church office where Father Henry walks to the far wall of the room where a small array of punishment implements hang prominently from a line of hooks. The priest has several different weight canes, straps, and paddles to choose from and Troy is relieved when he chooses one of the smaller wooden paddles. He offers it to Troy with a short explanation.

"I've chosen this paddle because while the offense was serious and our young woman's guilt is causing her great distress, it is her first punishment here at St. Michaels and I would like to observe how she handles the discipline. I'm sure you would agree that all TiH's are different and need to have their punishments tailored for their specific needs."

"Honestly, Father. I'm not feeling very comfortable for that very reason. I don't know this young woman at all so how am I able to gauge real distress?"

"I will be there with you, my son, but you need to trust your judgment. I have a feeling you're going to know exactly what our young woman needs once we get started."

Troy thinks the old man is losing it, but since he's already opened a door on the far side of the church office, Troy has no choice but to follow. He's not exactly sure what he expected, but the sight that greets him gets his blood flowing, even though a part of him hates himself even as his pulse races.

Across the room, a young woman in a long skirt is kneeling on a three-foot wide padded kneeler that has been modified for its current purpose. Her body is draped forward over the extra wide kneeler, and he is able to make out leather

restraints that lock her ankles to the far edges of the long, padded shelf supporting her tummy. The fiendish furniture displays her covered bottom perfectly for her upcoming chastisement and the restraints ensure she will not be moving until Father Henry allows it.

The final, and arguably most important, part of the scene is the long black curtain that hangs down from a long rigging in ceiling. The curtain's middle section is cut shorter where it falls across the young woman's back, effectively hiding the top half of her body from approximately three inches above her trim waist. Troy has to admire the ingenuity of the setup, because there is no way for Troy to know the identity of the spankee, or for her to see Troy. He assumes her wrists are also secured to keep her from reaching back during the punishment.

A small measure of relief helps him relax some. He hadn't really been looking forward to having to bump into random single women around town after witnessing one of the most vulnerable times in their life. Consenting to go through with a punishment like this takes courage.

Father Henry clears his throat to let the unidentified woman know she is no longer alone in the room.

“We are ready to begin your punishment, young lady, but before we do, I want to ask you one last time if you are consenting to this punishment willingly as a penance for the mistakes which you have confessed to me, and which are bringing you great guilt for the wrongs you have done to others. If you agree, please answer with a simple *proceed*.”

A good long thirty seconds goes by with the poor girl's muffled crying increasing and she hasn't even received one

paddle yet. Troy is about put a stop to this when he hears a small “proceed” masked with hiccups.

Father Henry hands the paddle to Troy. He’s relieved it is rather thin as paddles go, but it is wood and has several small cross-shaped holes, which will certainly add zing. Troy reluctantly steps forward to stand closer and to the side of the covered bottom waiting for the paddle. He holds, waiting for Father Henry’s direction.

“We will be delivering twenty-five with the paddle this evening. The first five will be over the skirt as a warmup, but the final twenty will be over the panties only, which are to be left on for propriety reasons. You may begin, young man and remember, she needs this, so do not go easy.”

Troy nods, taking a deep breath before pulling his arm back to deliver the first swat. He knows immediately he had held back too much and Father Henry calls him on it. “No need for light taps. These are to be twenty-five full-force paddles.”

“Yes, sir.”

The next swing is better for Troy, worse for the poor young woman whose sharp intake of breath confirms she’s noticed the change in heat to her bottom. Troy delivers the next three swats relatively quickly and she finishes her warmup already crying loudly.

Father Henry looks at Troy expectantly before moving to lift the skirt of the young woman, exposing petite legs ending in fashion boots. Troy feels a kick to his gut. There is no way the Father could possibly have known how hard it will be for Troy to punish a woman who immediately reminds him of his lost Hallie. Hell, she even wears pale blue boy-short panties exactly like...

Troy's heart is pounding so fast he can hear blood rushing in his ears. He watches as the Father lifts the young woman's skirt higher, exposing several inches of bare skin above her panty line. Only the skin isn't bare. Tears come to his eyes as he recognizes the unique butterfly tattoo that he's dreamed of nightly since losing Hallie.

He stands stock still, trying to understand how Hallie could possibly be strapped onto the kneeler in front of him, waiting for a paddling. Finally lifting his eyes from her tattoo, he sees Father Henry smiling kindly, tears in his own eyes. It's in that moment Troy understands Father Henry has arranged for Hallie's rightful HoH to punish her after all.

Troy moves to release her, desperate to feel her in his arms, but Father Henry shakes his head, placing his hand gently on Troy's arm to stop him. Father Henry then addresses Hallie while Troy forces himself to stand still, about to crawl out of his skin he is so anxious.

"Now, young lady, I would like you to remind us again why you are being punished today. What are you here asking for forgiveness for?"

Troy has to strain to hear her voice as it is muffled by the curtain and her embarrassment. "I screwed up the best relationship I have ever had in my entire life by not trusting Troy our last night together. I ran away from him like I had run away from every other problem I had before. I would give anything to have tried to fight for him harder."

"Now, we would not be punishing you today if that is all you had done, now would we? Why are you being punished today?"

"Because I lied to him. Instead of talking to him, I got drunk and acted like a complete crazy lady, refusing to tell him

what was really wrong and then when he chased after me, instead of fighting for us, I lied to him again and let him think that I was going to move away, when I knew even then that I would be staying in Eagle's Pass. I said horrible, hurtful things to him. I just didn't want to hold him back from moving to Washington to be with Victoria if that's where he really wanted to be."

Troy's mind is racing. How the hell did Hallie even know there was a Victoria? He then realizes that Hallie has been in Eagle's Pass this whole time that he's been going through hell imagining her halfway across the country. There is no possible way Traci would not have known about this and he can't believe his sister would have withheld this important information from him. His angry eyes meet Father Henry's who nods silently towards the back of the room. Troy turns to see his sister, Aunt Gina, and Uncle Adam all standing conspiratorially just inside the door to the room, all with tears in their eyes, a mix of guilt and hope on their face.

Troy and Hallie have been setup by their families and Father Beauchamp. He should be angry at their manipulation, but as he stands there looking at Hallie's wiggling bottom, listening to her sniffles as she awaits the remainder of her punishment, he understands why they'd done it. Hallie and Troy had moved so quickly at the start of their relationship, they had needed to both make decisions about their future independently in order to know for sure they were making the right decisions for the right reasons. The fact that Hallie had decided to stay in Eagle's Pass and has consented to a real punishment tells Troy she has come to terms with living a domestic discipline lifestyle, even without him pressuring her.

"Hello? Are you still there?"

With one last look at each occupant in the room, Troy steps back to Hallie, placing his left hand over her tattoo to comfort her while he pulls his dominant right arm back to deliver a sound paddling to her panty covered ass.

“Owie!”

He silently delivers nine more swats, slow and steady. With each one, he can hear her crying increasing until she is sobbing. He would give anything to untie her and pull her into his arms, but knows it needs to wait until they finish. He is about to start the final ten swats when he looks up to see the other four occupants of the room filing out the back door, closing it quietly behind them, leaving Hallie and Troy alone for the first time in six weeks.

This is no longer Father Henry’s punishment. The clergyman’s departure tells Troy this is now a matter between an HoH and his TiH, that is if Hallie will still have him. He knows what he needs to do.

Stepping close to Hallie, he reaches out to hook his fingers into the elastic of her waistband before slowly pulling her panties down to her knees.

“Whoa! What are you doing? I thought this was supposed to be over my panties!”

Troy grabs hold of the thick curtain next, pulling it away from Hallie’s body exposing her beautiful blonde hair dragging onto the floor as her head is bowed towards her restrained wrists. When Troy begins to kneed the pink flesh of her bottom with his warm hand, she tries to flinch away.

“Now, is that any way for a taken-in-hand to behave for her head of the household? I told you, baby. Your punishments will always be on the bare.”

A choked cry fills the room. “Troy? Oh my God, is that you?”

“Yes, honey. If it makes you feel better, we’ve been set up. I didn’t know it was you until about three minutes ago.”

“Oh please, untie me! I need to see you. I need to hold you. Oh God, Troy, I have so much to tell you.”

“Oh Hallie, me too, baby, but I’m afraid a deal is a deal. I think we need to finish the last ten before we can put this behind us and move on, don’t you?”

She doesn’t answer with words. Only a forlorn sigh.

Troy interrupts his massage to her ass with a sharp spank with his right palm. “Tell me Hallie. Why did you act the way you did that last night together? I have to know. I’ve wracked my brains trying to figure it out.”

“I thought you were moving back to Washington DC to be with Victoria.”

“Who the hell told you that?”

“Victoria! She called on your cell phone while I was in the bathroom. I answered it and she told me she was expecting you in DC that next week. I thought you’d lied to me and were planning on moving away. In fact, why are you here now, Troy? Why aren’t you in DC?”

“Why? Well for starters because Victoria is a raving lunatic who is currently in the brig awaiting her court-martial proceedings after sabotaging our team’s project in a misguided attempt to get me to move back to Washington.”

“Wait. She was lying?”

“Of course, she was lying, Hallie. I loved...no... I *love* you. I couldn’t wait to tell you I had plans to move to Eagle’s

Pass.”

“Troy, let me up. I need to see your eyes.”

“Nope. Not yet. I kind of like this. You can’t possibly get up and run out without so much as an explanation or a fucking clue what the hell was going through that pretty brain of yours. I think I’ll keep you just like this until I get the answers I need.”

“Oh God. Please. I really am sorry.”

“Me too, baby. I should have fought for you harder and not taken no for an answer.”

“We really messed this up, didn’t we?”

“Yes, we both did, but I think I know just the thing to get everything fixed up.”

Hallie can’t see his face, but if she could, she would have seen him steeling himself to complete her punishment.

Troy brings the wooden paddle down to Hallie’s bare, spankable ass right down the middle, spreading real fire across both cheeks. “Owie, Troy! Please!”

The seventeenth strike is lower, and the eighteenth connects with her tender sit spot. Hallie is trying to wiggle out of her restraints, but they hold firm. Troy delivers two more strong paddles to her beautiful ass before throwing the punishment device to the floor and rushing to release Hallie. There is no way he can deliver the final five swats when he knows he has to share some of the blame for the mess they both made of things.

Even once the restraints are removed, Hallie remains draped over the leather bench crying. Troy gently lifts her into his arms, sinking to the floor to cradle her tightly in his arms

as he comforts her. “Shhh, baby. It’s all over now. You did so good for your first punishment.”

“I’m so sorry, Troy.”

“Me too, honey. Me too. We have so much to talk about.”

“Yes, but before anything else, there is one thing I have to tell you.”

“Shhh. It can wait.”

She leans back to look up into his eyes for the first time. He can see her passion shining in her green eyes. “No, it can’t wait. I’ve waited long enough to tell you I love you, Troy.”

“Oh Christ, I love you too, Hallie. I think we need to get out of here and head home before we have something naughty to confess to Father Henry.”

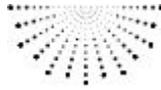
Her laughter is music to his ears. “I’m not looking forward to driving all the way back to Denver, but I guess it can’t be helped. I can’t wait to be alone with you.”

“Well, I’ve got some good news then. It should take us a total of three minutes to get home.” When her eyes widen, he continues. “I moved into Eagle’s Pass this weekend, Hallie.”

“You mean...”

“Yep. You’re stuck with me.”

EPILOGUE



“Oh Hallie, you’re the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen. I wish your mother and grandmother could be here to see you.” Gina’s voice warbles as she looks on her only niece, preparing to walk down the aisle.

Their misty eyes meet in the three-way mirror as they complete the final preparations for the ceremony. Hallie has never been as happy as she is at this very moment. She’s sure of it.

The last four months have flown by. On the one hand, she feels like she just met Troy because they still find new things about each other almost every single day. In other ways, it’s hard to remember her life before she met the man of her dreams. The memories of her time in Louisiana and on the road with Eddie and the band are distant memories. Her future is here in Eagle’s Pass with her soon-to-be husband and her aunt and uncle.

She’s lost in happy thoughts when Traci steps close to hand her the most beautiful bouquet of white gardenias and lilies-of-the-valley; an array of flowers that were her mother’s favorites. Looking into the mirror, Hallie realizes that today she’s not only gaining a husband, but she’s finally going to get a sister.

“Thank you so much, Traci—for everything. I can’t believe in less than an hour we’re going to be sisters.”

“I know. I’ve always wanted a sister. I just didn’t know she was going to burst into my life in the middle of the night and try to beat up my brother.”

The women dissolve into giggles. “It really is amazing, isn’t it?”

“I just keep remembering the look on Troy’s face when you were on his back, hitting him.”

Aunt Gina looks confused. “What are you two girls talking about?”

Traci and Hallie burst into renewed giggles. “Oh nothing, Aunt Gina.”

Uncle Adam knocks and lets himself into the cramped room in the basement of St. Michael’s Parish. They may have a small wedding party of just Traci as the maid-of-honor and Troy’s friend from work, John, as the best man, but the church is going to be bursting at the seams with witnesses to the happy occasion. Most of Eagle’s Pass is sure to show up for the service and those who don’t will still join the open reception and dance being held under a huge tent in the park across the street from Traci’s house. The same park Hallie had walked past in the snow on the way to starting the new chapter in her life here in Eagle’s Pass.

“Aren’t you ladies ready yet? It’s just about time to head upstairs.” Uncle Adam’s words may be impatient, but Hallie sees the uncharacteristic tears pooling in his eyes as he looks down at his only niece.

“Yes, Uncle Adam. I’m ready. Have you seen Troy? How does he look?”

“He looks like a nervous bridegroom, that’s how he looks. For some strange reason, he was under the misguided impression that you might be having second thoughts about going through with the ceremony this afternoon. Something about you being unsure if you wanted to marry a man who grew up in the 50s or some silliness like that. I think he’s just got a case of the nerves, that’s what I think. I tried to get him to take a shot of whiskey, but he said he needs to stay on his toes around you.”

Hallie’s face turns a nice shade of pink at the memories of why Troy is nervous. As pink as her face is, she knows her bottom is several shades darker. She’s just lucky the bustle on her dress prevents her from sitting. As angry as she’d been at her fiancé for delivering a long, hard spanking the night before their wedding, she knows she’d earned it ten times over.

The weeks leading up to their wedding had really been stressful for Hallie. Like most brides, she wanted everything to be perfect. Apparently, she turns into a temperamental pill—Troy’s words, not hers—when she gets stressed and after her mini-meltdown after the rehearsal dinner the night before, Troy decided he’d had enough. At the time, Hallie thought he was just being a Neanderthal trying to ruin her special day. Lucky for Hallie, he was man enough to spank her long enough to work through her stress and nervousness to uncover the more relaxed Hallie standing in front of the mirror today. The fact that he knew what she needed and was brave enough to deliver it against the tears and pleading of a basket-case bride proves she’s found one-in-a-million in Troy. Hallie is comforted by the warm tingle encasing her well chastised bottom. It’s as if she secretly gets to carry a bit of Troy around with her today as she waits to walk down the aisle and take him as her husband.

Ten short minutes later, Hallie pauses at the entry to the sanctuary, her arm through Uncle Adam's tuxedo covered arm, watching Traci walk down the aisle in front of her. The sprays of white flowers decorating the alter and ends of each pew look exactly as Hallie had dreamed. She takes a deep breath as the bridal march begins on the organ and the congregation rises, turning, all eyes on her.

A rare moment of true clarity surrounds Hallie as she takes the first steps forward to her future. She's so grateful to Troy for helping to get her refocused on what is really important today. It isn't the perfection of the cake or the scent of the flowers. It isn't knowing that her shoes have the right sized heel or that Troy's tuxedo is perfectly pressed. No, as she nears the alter and catches the first real glimpse of her soon-to-be-husband, Hallie's heart expands with love for the most handsome man she's ever met, waiting with a grin on his face as if he's the luckiest man on the face of the earth. This... today... it's all about their love. Their commitment to each other and their future.

As Hallie arrives at the altar to take Troy's arm, sandwiched between the two men who love her, she realizes that today she doesn't just gain a husband, but the five of them are forming a new family. Aunt Gina and Uncle Adam never got to have children of their own, but Hallie knows they love her as if she were their own. Today two small families will join forces to become one extended family. Hallie prays that soon Traci will find her own Mr. Right who will want to join their family and later, hopefully add children for the two couples.

Hallie feels Troy squeezing her hand, bringing her back from her daydreaming. He smiles at her indulgently as Father Henry welcomes the congregation.

“And who presents this woman for marriage to this man?”

Hallie hears the emotion in her uncle’s normally strong voice. “Her Aunt Gina and I.” Adam lifts her short veil and leans in to place a quick kiss on her cheek, whispering in her ear. “I’m so happy for you, Hallie. Your aunt and I love you very much.”

Emotion warbles her voice. “I love you both too, Uncle Adam. I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for Troy and me.”

Her uncle moves to take a seat in the front pew next to his wife, pulling her into his arms to comfort her as she is briefly overwhelmed with happy tears.

The rest of the ceremony flies by in a blur for Hallie. She hears the music, enjoys the candles and tries to listen to Father Henry’s message, but she’s distracted by Troy’s calming caresses on her arm linked with his. She sees the twinkle in his eyes as she recites her vows, the word *obey* prominently included. She also hears his solemn promise as he vows to love, honor, protect and cherish her till death do they part.

They finally arrive at the part of the service Hallie is most looking forward to. Turning them around to face the congregation, Father Henry announces, “I now present to you Mr. and Mrs. Troy Jackson.” The packed church applauds as Father Henry informs Troy that he may now kiss his bride.

Hallie doesn’t have even a second to wait before Troy’s mouth latches onto hers for a very risqué kiss for the middle of church. Father Beauchamp doesn’t seem the least bit bothered and allows Troy to maul his bride for a good thirty seconds until catcalls from their friends and family force them to separate enough for Troy to look down on her.

“I love you, Mrs. Jackson.”

Her heart is ready to burst. “I love you more, Mr. Jackson.”

As perfect as this day has been, by eleven p.m., Troy is more than ready to start his honeymoon. He knows he'll feel guilty later for cutting their time at the dance short, especially because he's enjoying watching Hallie dancing with a group out in the middle of the dance floor, but he can't wait to get his bride alone. They plan on spending tonight in Eagle's Pass before leaving for their honeymoon to the Caribbean the next day. He decides the next break the band takes, he's going to urge his wife to start saying their goodbyes.

His wife. He's married. He has to pinch himself when he realizes how fast things fell into place. The six weeks they'd spent apart from each other at the new year had been hell, but that time also served its purpose. Hallie and Troy had both used that time to figure out what it was that would make them happy in life and luckily, they had both decided it was each other.

Troy smiles as he remembers that not everything has been completely smooth sailing. His young bride has tested his resolve many times and his cock twitches remembering how much fun he's had guiding her, often over his knee. Considering they met with her tackling him, thinking he was the devil incarnate for *beating* Traci, the fact that Hallie is whole-heartedly embracing the domestic discipline way of life has him feeling as if he'd won the lottery that snowy night she barged into his life.

Hallie is finally tiring and he sees the relief on her face as the band announces their next break. He's just about to collect her to make their exit when he's joined by Brent.

“So, are you two ready to open your gifts?”

Troy's heart drops. He should be grateful for the overflowing table of gifts, large and small, but he had hoped they could open them when they returned from their honeymoon.

“Hi, Brent. Actually, I was just ready to snag up my bride and take her home to start our honeymoon.”

Brent's laughter draws several other HoHs over to their small group. The men all start pressuring Troy to open the presents.

“Come on, Troy. I can't wait for you guys to open your gifts.” Zachary Cunningham, his mentor, had become a good friend in the months since Troy had moved to Eagle's Pass. “Erin didn't like the gift I picked out so we got you two gifts. I somehow think Hallie is going to like the one Erin picked out more than mine.”

Troy counters. “Well, thanks, but I think starting the honeymoon is a bit more important than opening gifts, don't you guys?”

The small group chuckles, several slapping him on the back. “I think you'll be more than happy if you take the time to open your gifts tonight, my friend. You may just want to put some of them to use in the coming days of your honeymoon.”

The conspiratorial grins remind Troy that the open nature of the Eagle's Pass spanking community most likely has influenced most guest's gift choices. Watching Hallie's hips

swaying as she walks his way has him suddenly interested in unwrapping the table full of presents.

“Hello, Mr. Jackson. You need to stop standing on the sidelines and dance with me again, please.”

Hugging her close. “Hello, Mrs. Jackson. The guys here were just convincing me that it’s time to open our gifts. Are you game?”

Her eyes twinkle. “Oh, can we, Troy? I love opening gifts!” Hallie is clapping her hands excitedly as they move the short distance to the table holding the festively wrapped boxes.

Troy somehow doubts she’s going to enjoy her gifts tonight when he hears the round of barely contained chuckles from the HoHs of Eagle’s Pass.

Hallie’s face as she opens the first small box from Danelle and Carrie Ann is priceless. Nestled inside is a small leather tawse. To Troy it doesn’t look very threatening, but Hallie looks as if she’s going to drop it onto the nearby waiter’s tray to be carried away.

Carrie Ann comes forward with a second small box. “I convinced Danelle that if we were going to give you a punishment implement, the least we could do is give you this too.”

Troy unwraps a tube of the same cream Carrie Ann had been passing out on Christmas Eve. “Look Hallie, just in time. You’re almost out of the lotion you got at the Christmas Party.”

Troy can see his wife’s rosy blush as the growing crowd surrounding them to watch them open their gifts laugh jovially. Troy hugs Hallie close. “Just smile, sweetheart. It’s all in fun.

This is part of living in Eagle's Pass.”

Hallie whispers back. “Maybe, but I spent a lot of time registering. I'm not going to be happy if the only gifts we get help you stay stuck in 1950.”

He can't help but hug her close before the crowd cheers them on. The next three gifts are all punishment implements. Namely a heavy wooden brush, a sturdy Irish school strap and a set of ping pong paddles. Hallie's face turns a deeper shade of pink with each gift, but Troy is pleased that he can also see the passion in her eyes as she lifts each device, knowing that each will eventually connect with her bare bottom during intimate time spent over her husband's lap. Since most of her spankings to date have been the funishment kind, she hasn't learned to dread a spanking as Troy suspects she may in the future.

Luckily, they hit a few household gifts from their registry returning Hallie to cloud nine. Between the toaster, glass vase and crockpot, they add wrist and ankle restraints, nipple clamps and a rattan cane to their punishment stash.

They're nearing the end of the pile when they open the card indicating the next gift is from Dr. Devon and his wife Cadence. Troy doesn't even see what's under the tissue paper, but he can see by the beet red hue of Hallie's cheeks that the contents are not another set of bath towels.

“What is it, Hallie?”

“Nothing. Let's open the last gift now.”

“Don't be rude. Marcus and Cadence are still here and they're watching us open the gift.” Her whisper is urgent. “I don't care, Troy. I don't want to show anyone this gift.”

“Not even me?”

“Especially not you.”

Curiosity pushes Troy to wrestle the box from Hallie’s hand. Lifting the tissue paper, he can see why. Even he’s a little scandalized by the gift from the good doctor, having never considered this particular punishment before. If the rise of his cock is any indication, he suspects they’ll be putting this gift to use sooner rather than later.

Brent prods him to show off the gift. “Come on you two. We want to see too.”

“No fucking way, Troy. I swear to you. I’ll...”

He hugs her tight to whisper in her ear, “Oh, baby. You and that potty mouth are just begging to try out some of these gifts, aren’t you? In fact, this gift in particular might really help get that potty mouth under control.”

“Troy... no way...”

He lets her off the hook. “I was talking about using one of the bars of soap in the box. Maybe a good mouth soaping would help.”

Hallie grabs the box, opening to take another peek and is looking more distressed by the minute.

“What is it, Troy?” a voice from the crowd yells.

Marcus helps them defuse the moment. “Now, that’s none of your business you busybodies. Only Troy and Hallie need to know.”

Another voice breaks through. “You gave them your trademark medical kit, didn’t you,

Doc?”

Marcus just grins.

Troy and Hallie are the only ones who can see the large enema bag with inflatable nozzle nestled in the tissue paper next to the thick, round thermometer, two bars of soap, a jar of lube and three sizes of graduating anal training plugs. It really is a treasure chest of naughty medical paraphernalia and Troy now realizes he's going to have to be careful if he wants to keep the entire group of guests from spotting his raging hard-on straining to escape his tuxedo pants.

“Cadence and I wanted to share some of our favorite medical supplies with you two newlyweds.”

His wife smacks him playfully. “Speak for yourself, Marcus. I'm so sorry, Hallie, but I couldn't talk him out of it. He says it's kind of his trademark gift for all newlyweds in town.”

Hallie turns to hide her blazing face against his chest and Troy loves wrapping her in his arms.

Gently lifting her chin with his finger, Troy brings her gaze up to meet his. “Hallie, honey. I love you. I don't want you to be upset on our wedding night. I promise not to overwhelm you with all of this stuff right away.”

To Troy's surprise, Hallie's gaze is no longer one of embarrassment, but is now blazing with returned passion. They seriously need to leave for their honeymoon.

“Let's open our last gift and then we can go home, okay?”

Hallie manages a shy nod. Troy can see the sexually charged gifts are having the desired effects on his new bride.

Troy walks to the large waist high gift sitting on the floor next to the gift table. Brent has stepped up to meet him there, reaching out to shake Troy's hand. “This last gift is actually from several of us. We went together to get you a larger gift

we thought you two might be needing soon. No couple in Eagle's Pass should be caught without one."

Troy hears Hallie's groan, but when he reaches for her hand, he can see she's actually as curious about the contents of the gift as he is.

"Want to unwrap it together, Hallie?"

"Yes, sir."

Troy's heart swells at her response.

Ten seconds later, Hallie lets out a squeal, burying her head in his chest to hide her face. Troy can look over her blonde hair to admire the heavy wooden spanking bench and its leather covered knee and waist supports. Troy is especially pleased with the design that will splay his wife's delectable body in the most tantalizing position for both punishments and more intimate pursuits.

The crowd has grown around them as many HoHs come forward to admire the coveted punishment furniture. Troy has a moment of surreal awareness that only in a town like Eagle's Pass could a newlywed couple open this strange array of gifts and be happy about it.

Taking the opportunity of the gathered crowd, Troy makes his final announcement.

"Hallie and I would like to thank everyone so much for the generous gifts, but more importantly, for being here with us to celebrate our big day and the start of our marriage. It's been a perfect day so thank you for being part of that. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get my bride home so we can start our honeymoon. We only have a few hours before the car is picking

us up to take us to the airport and I have a few wedding presents to test out.”

“Troy, don’t you dare!” Hallie slaps him playfully.

“I don’t need the gifts tonight, sweetheart. You’re all the gift I need tonight.”

“Oh Troy.”

The sound of spoons on clinking glassware surround them and the couple obliges with the traditional kiss which turns passionate quickly.

Char steps forward holding Hallie’s beautiful bouquet of flowers. “Don’t forget to throw out your bouquet, Hallie. All of the single ladies have been anxiously awaiting their chance to catch it.”

All of the single ladies are starting to congregate in the center of the dance floor. It’s almost too late when Troy notices Traci sitting on the sidelines. “Wait a minute, Hallie. We need to get Traci out there.”

Troy crosses to his sister. She refuses to look up at him as he stands nearby so he takes a seat next to her. “So Trace. What are you doing sitting over here? They called all single ladies to the dance floor.”

His sister doesn’t look at him. “It’s okay, Troy. I think I’ll sit this one out. I never catch it anyway. I’m coming to terms that I’m not meant to find my Mr. Right. At least not in this lifetime.”

Troy gently pulls his sister’s chin to face him. Earlier she’d finally been looking happy, but now he sees his sister slipping into the melancholy mood she’s spent much of the last few weeks in. “Traci, please. Tell me what’s bothering you. I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Troy. I’m fine. You and Hallie don’t need to worry about me. You need to just focus on having fun on your honeymoon. I’m so happy for you, Troy. Really, I am.”

“I know you are, Traci, but I also know you’re lying to me. I don’t know why, but something has you down. Are you getting nervous to be presenting at the big psychologist’s convention in a few weeks?”

She doesn’t need to answer him. He knows he’s struck gold. The very mention of that convention has his sister dissolving into a panic. “Trace...”

“Troy, really. Just go. Maybe we’ll talk about it when you get back from your honeymoon. For now, it’s not important at all.”

Troy wants to stay and talk things through with his sister, but he can see the group of gathered single women is growing restless.

“Okay, Trace. We can wait to talk, but we can’t wait for you to join in the bouquet toss. Come on.” Troy grabs her hand and pulls her along behind him to the dance floor.

Hallie turns her back to the group and with a broad grin, tosses the bouquet over her head and into the middle of the crowd. Some good-natured pushing and shoving causes some confusion, but when the dust settles, his sister Traci is standing holding her new sister’s flowers, a broad grin on her face.

Hallie rushes forward to hug her. “Oh, I’m so happy you caught the bouquet, Traci. After all you’ve done for Troy and me, you deserve to find your own happiness.”

Troy joins the two most important people in his life and scoops them up into a group hug. “See, Trace. I told you, your

turn is coming soon.”

“It’s just a silly tradition, Troy. But still, I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“Let’s get going, Mrs. Jackson. I have one more gift I need to unwrap once we get home.” Troy grins as he suggestively plays with her zipper where his hand rests at her back.

“Sorry, but I think you’ve already unwrapped that gift a time or two.” Her flirtatious smile is beautiful.

“Oh Hallie, baby. You’ll always be the best gift I’ve ever received. Let’s go home.”

The End

ABOUT LIVIA GRANT

USA Today bestselling author Livia Grant lives in Chicago with her husband and furry rescue dog named Max. She is fortunate to have been able to travel extensively and as much as she loves to visit places around the globe, the Midwest and its changing seasons will always be home. Livia's readers appreciate her riveting stories filled with deep, character driven plots, often spiced with elements of BDSM.

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* * *

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* * *

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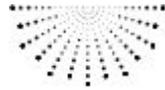
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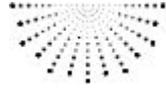


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CHAPTER ONE



NYRA

I couldn't mask my smile as I sat in the reception room of Club Valhalla. When my membership to the exclusive BDSM club expired last month, I'd thought I'd never get to sit in these luxurious chairs again. Unfortunately, even the lowest tier of membership was out of my price range if I wanted to be able to afford pesky things like food and rent.

My short stint as a member had been curtesy of my very brief relationship with Robert Conway. I still wasn't sure why I'd put up with his snobbery. He loved to show off not only his money but his control. The gift of the six-month membership had lasted five months longer than the relationship. I'd thought we were exclusive, but he'd had a different sub for every day of the week. That might work for others, but I'd ended things quickly.

The reason I was back in this wonderful place was my best friend Mel had scored two tickets to their Christmas party and, like the amazing woman she was, had offered to take me as her plus one. I'd almost declined. Being back in this place was a reminder of what I no longer had. Also, I'd never told her I'd been coming here. With my luck, she would probably figure it out. Fingers crossed, she wouldn't be too pissed.

Ok, I know you are supposed to tell your best friend everything. And I do, mostly. We go to Club Midgard together almost every week. The public BDSM club owned by the same people who owned this place was nice, but you often had to sort through the assholes to find a good play partner. We always had each other's back when we went and keeping my membership here a secret had been hard. My very legitimate

excuse for keeping it secret was that even bringing a guest to Valhalla cost money we couldn't afford, and I couldn't deal with the guilt of her knowing I was coming here without her.

The woman in question blew through the front doors with the extreme energy she did everything. The long vibrant blue coat and matching ridiculously large furry handbag were so perfectly her, it wasn't funny. How she managed to strut in five-inch-spike gold shoes was a mystery. My best friend never did anything understated. We were a textbook example of opposites being perfect for one another.

"Hey, girl." I stood and walked over to meet her.

She leaned in and gave me a cheek-to-cheek air peck. "Sorry I'm a little late. My first Uber driver didn't show up, and I had to wait. Nice outfit, by the way." She gave me an almost comical up and down look. "Maybe you could get a Christmas job in the mall in that get-up. You'd certainly have a line-up."

Shaking my head, I laughed. "Thanks, I think. Just bought it yesterday. I wanted to get in the holiday mood."

The outfit I'd chosen for the party was classic Christmas kinky. Red and white latex corset with fur edging and a short, flared skirt which would be easy to flip up or take off depending on the scene. White thigh-high stockings and patent leather Mary Janes with only a tiny kitten heel. I was willing to be uncomfortable, but not with my footwear.

Mel smiled and, in true dramatic fashion, whipped off her coat before spinning around and wiggling a very naked ass at me. "Me too. What do you think?"

Her outfit was so much fun. The form-fitting red latex pencil skirt had a Christmas ornament shaped hole which

framed her butt in a way the Doms would surely appreciate. Her bra was metallic gold with tassels dangling off the nipples. She was sure to be a hit tonight.

“Om my god Mel, only you. That looks awesome!”

“Well, it highlights my best attribute, so thanks.” She straightened, then twirled her tassels at me. “Hey, let me grab the tickets before I hand over my purse.” She dug through the furry monstrosity that hung off her arm.

“Purse, that’s not a purse. It’s more like the cookie monster in drag.”

Her laugh was big and brash, and I couldn’t help but smile. “That’s right sister,” she rubbed the bag like it was a pampered cat. “And she gets offended easily, so no comments if you please.”

She was my best friend, so it was best to humor her when she got like this, but I wasn’t going to encourage her by responding. She sighed and pulled two tickets out of the depths of her purse.

“Here you go, one ticket to heaven.”

Guilt gnawed at my stomach. She didn’t realize how true that statement was. My time in this dungeon had been some of my best, even if I’d tried not to get too attached. The people who went to Midgard weren’t bad as a general rule, they just treated BDSM and scene like it was a game. Something fun and distracting, not a way of life.

When I dreamed of my forever Dom, I knew he would want so much more than an occasional scene. I would do anything to please my Master as long as he cherished me. Not like the sweet Daddies and their Littles, but like an artist with their masterpiece. I shook my head.

Submitting in individual scenes was starting to get old. Maybe I would simply relax tonight and enjoy the atmosphere. Though if I didn't try, how would I ever find the Master of my dreams?

We approached the door that would let us into the actual club. The sounds of the club slowly getting louder. The woman at the door was someone I hadn't seen in months. I smiled at her adorable red and green schoolgirl outfit and handed her my ticket.

"Here you go Shelby. Love your outfit. Is Baldor here tonight?"

"Thanks, Nyra. Yes, Daddy and I will be having fun later once the crowd dies down."

The two of them were one of those perfect couples. In fact, he was almost too pretty for words, but his good looks never stopped his brat from causing lots of mischief. The main room was as beautiful as I remembered it. Only now, elegant holiday decorations were tastefully woven into the decor.

"So, who is that, and how do you know her?" Mel's voice was an accusation. A guilty blush ran up my body.

"We've seen each other around, but I don't really know her. Let's get a drink." The words weren't exactly a lie, but they felt bitter in my mouth.

"Okay fine, let's go. I hear they are giving away a free glass of champagne tonight, and not that cheap stuff either, but like real champagne."

Like either of us would know what 'real' champagne tasted like. As waitresses, we might serve the good stuff, but I never wasted my money on it. "I take it that real champagne is a hot button for you?"

The awe on Mel's face made me smile as I remembered the first time I'd been here. The crystal chandeliers and glass walls looked into other rooms and gave an opulent feel to the room. If I hadn't been leashed at Rob's side the first time I'd been here, I think I would have spun around gawking like a tourist.

"This place is so much nicer than Midgard. Wouldn't it be cool if we could come here every week instead?"

I sighed. If only we could. "You think that now? Wait till you see the private rooms you are going to wish you could move in."

"How is it possible you've seen the private rooms here, Nyra?"

Busted. How the hell was I going to tell her the truth and not completely ruin our evening? I stepped up to the bar, trying to stall. Unfortunately, they weren't handing out the champagne yet, but I ordered her a coke while I tried to gather my thoughts.

With uncommon patience, she stared at me, sipping her drink. Mel was going to be so pissed, and I couldn't blame her. I would be mad if I found out she had kept something this big from me.

"Oh my god, why did they let you back in here?" The nasally voice was all too familiar.

Please let me be wrong. I turned to see Madison LaRue, one of the few regulars here I'd come to despise. She was a bleached blond who I swore had gone to her plastic surgeon and asked to be made to look as fake as possible.

I would have been grateful to her since she had been the one to let me know I wasn't Robert's only sub. But when

Robert dumped her for gossiping to me, she'd gotten vicious. I tried to avoid her but knew she wouldn't go away once she had her sight set on being nasty.

“Madison, awful to see you, as always.”

Our stare down was cut short when Mel dragged me by the arm and pulled me to the end of the bar. “I don't know what the heck is going on here, but it's time for you to fess up.”

Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “Remember last year when I was dating that snob, Robert?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he bought us a membership here.”

“Seriously? And you didn't tell me.”

I rubbed my hands together, praying she would understand. “I'm sorry, Mel. I couldn't afford the guest fees to bring you, and I didn't want you to be mad at me.”

She looked up at the ceiling as if searching it for patience, then she glared at me. “You broke up with him months ago and you still came here alone. What the actual fuck?”

I grabbed her hands. Losing her as a friend wasn't an option. I'd known what I was doing was wrong. “I'm sorry. I just couldn't resist.”

“Wait a minute. The hospital that was your excuse for volunteering every Wednesday and Friday night?”

I winced. Ok I was a horrible person. I hadn't just left things out. I'd lied to her. “I was volunteering on Wednesdays.”

Her laugh gave me hope. “Hey, this is so not cool, but I totally get it. You owe me Ny.” The calculating look in her

eyes made me nervous. “In exchange for my forgiveness, I get the first pick of any hot Doms we see tonight.”

Relief flooded my body. “It’s a deal.”

I hugged her so tightly my arms shook. What had I done to get such a wonderful best friend?

“Oh, I see you’re a lesbian now. I guess you finally realized that no men want you.”

Madison had always been a nasty woman, but she usually saved the worst of her behavior for when there were no witnesses. It had been almost a year since Rob had dumped her and the grudge was getting old. The rules at Valhalla were a lot stricter than at Midgard, but so far she’d managed to skirt the line so she never got punished for her bullshit.

Mel stormed over to my nemesis, and I was caught between terror and giggling. Madison was used to my quiet, controlled responses. My friend was anything but subtle.

“You have a problem with my girl, then you have a problem with me.”

Madison’s smile was taunting. “Look, no judgment here. If you want to lick a used-up ugly pussy like hers, that is your business.”

“Wow, pussy envy is so unattractive, especially on a woman who’s more plastic than real. No Dom would be interested in getting within fifty feet of you.”

Dang, my girl, was vicious. Bolstered by her confidence, I said, “They’re too afraid of her popping when they hit her and leaving silicone all over the floor.”

Mel burst out laughing. It finally felt so good to say the things I’d held back.

“Ladies!”

Crap! I knew that voice and the controlled anger in his tone, though it had never been directed at me. Mel and I peered over Madison’s shoulder to see Loki, one of the club’s owners, and a well-known sadist. The gleam in his eyes made chills chase across my skin.

Madison smirked at us and I watched as she transformed from brutal bitch to victim in less than five seconds. She sobbed and turned towards the Master and practically flung herself into his arms. Oh, God, please tell me she isn’t his current plaything. He can’t possibly be that blind.

“Master, I was just trying to get a drink, and they started harassing me.”

It was her usual game, just a new tune. She pretended to be the perfect submissive while her black heart beat inside her chest. With a shaking hand, she theatrically wiped the tears from her cheeks. By the look on Master Loki’s face, he was buying into every crocodile tear. He hadn’t even corrected her for not using his full title of Master Loki. Like she was enough of a masochist to belong to him. I barely held back the snort of disgust, but just barely.

“I heard what they said, Madison.” His harsh glare swept between Mel and myself and I knew we were screwed.

“You ladies understand that we have zero tolerance for negative talk outside a scene.”

It was one of the best differences between Midgard and Valhalla. Here, you didn’t have to put up with assholes who thought they could bully you. If we weren’t careful, our fun night out was going to end abruptly. I stepped forward and

dropped my gaze respectfully. It wasn't his fault Madison was a master manipulator.

“Yes, Master Loki.”

“But you didn't hear what she said, and she started it!” The indignation in Mel's voice was cute, but I knew it wouldn't help.

I grabbed her arm, silently pleading for her to follow my lead. We'd drawn a small crowd. Regardless of our reasons for speaking to Madison like that, he would be forced to follow the rules. Especially at an event like this that allowed non-members to attend. To my horror, Master Derrick and Master Clay were among the witnesses to our little unintended scene.

The two brothers often worked as Dungeon Masters, both here and at Midgard. The family resemblance was undeniable, but the two couldn't have been more different. Master Clay was a sadist who seemed to find joy in corralling and breaking down a brat. But Master Derrick had been my secret crush for almost a year.

He could freeze you with a single look. When he spoke, it was like he could reach into your mind and pull out your every sin and make you beg him to punish you. Unfortunately for me, in the entire time I'd been coming here, he'd always been on duty or already engaged with another sub. So even if I'd found the nerve to approach him, the opportunity just hadn't been there.

“She's lying.” Madison's whine grated my nerves. Did men actually find a whiny baby voice appealing?

Loki's smile said he was enjoying Mel's defiance, but not for the reasons she probably hoped. “If you read the rules of

the party tonight, it doesn't matter. You have broken the rules and unless you want to leave, you must accept punishment."

He was giving us a way out which didn't involve leaving. I wouldn't enjoy his level of sadism, but he wouldn't go too far for something this small. I needed to speak up before Mel did.

"Of course, Master." I lowered my voice so that only my friend could hear. "He's one of the owners. Don't push him." I gave a small bow of my head and raised my voice to try to pretend I wasn't scared. "What will be our punishment?"

As Loki glanced around at the growing crowd, the glee in Madison's eyes was all too apparent. She lived to be the center of attention, especially when it meant getting someone else in trouble. Being on the arm of one of the owners was probably the highlight of her year.

"Master Clay and Master Derrick, I know you're not on duty tonight, but would you be willing to handle two troublemakers' punishment for negative comments?"

It was as if the world paused and the inner me started doing cartwheels. Doing a scene with Master Derreck, even if it was a punishment, would fuel my dreams for months. Would he pick me or Mel? Oh god what if he preferred brats like his brother did? I'd avoided watching his scenes out of jealousy, afraid I would compare myself to the women he was with. So I didn't really know what he preferred.

The look the brothers shared sent excitement racing up my skin. Their smiles when they looked at the two of us were filled with delight. Derrick's voice as he agreed made my nipples tighten.

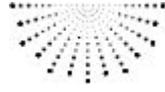
Loki nodded his thanks at the two, then looked at us. "I'll allow you to pick which of these fine Masters will take you in

hand.”

I wanted to shout Derrick’s name so loud there could be no confusion as to who I wanted, but then I remembered my promise. Oh god, what if Mel wanted Derrick? I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I deserved a medal for what I was about to say.

I looked at my friend and prayed before saying. “As promised, you get to pick first.”

CHAPTER TWO



DERRICK

There have been moments in my life where I truly believe fate plays an active hand in screwing with our lives. Sometimes it is for good, other times not. Like when every light on your journey turns red, or when a new register opens when you are in a rush. In my more fanciful moments, I wondered if Karma and Fate played cards to decide with Lady Luck how a person's day would go.

When my brother Clay had invited me to the Christmas party at Valhalla, I planned to say no. The drama that occurred at any themed party which included non-members always made them a hard pass for me. Then I saw where his gaze was focused. Mel, one of Club Midgard's resident brats, was doing a happy sort of dance while holding up two tickets.

A few months ago, the bundle of trouble had caught Clay's attention, though he had yet to make a move on her. Not that I could call him out on his inaction since I'd been fascinated by her friend Nyra for much longer. If one of the pair was going to the party, the other was going to be there as well. The timing to approach Nyra had previously never felt right, so I'd been patiently waiting for my opportunity and had hoped this party might be the perfect time to approach the beautiful woman.

Like a butterfly in spring, she brightened everything around her but never settled in one place for too long. I'd studied her scenes with other Doms with interest and not a small touch of jealousy. The men she chose and the scenes they did were as varied as they were unusual. Nyra's

submission was a beautiful thing, but she rarely appeared to find the joy in a scene that other regulars did.

Over several weeks, the pieces of the mystery had slowly fallen into place as I observed her. I thought I knew how to bridge the dichotomy between the subdued submissive and the joyful woman who allowed herself to get dragged into trouble with her boisterous friend. It was strange to be grateful for the manipulations of a shallow, attention seeking woman, but I found myself sending a silent thank you to Madison for setting Nyra and Mel up so beautifully.

I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity fate dropped into my lap. I would take advantage of every moment with Nyra. It was obvious Madison had set the girls up. Her fake submission was common gossip and lately the woman hadn't found a single Dom who would be willing to give her the time of night. It was a shame Loki had allowed the women to choose who would be their disciplinarian or I would have already staked my claim.

Nyra whispered something to her friend. Whatever the two women discussed made Melody very happy. She strutted to stand a few feet from where Clay and I stood, looking us up and down like we were prize pieces of cattle. While it was tempting to smirk at her tiny power play, I wouldn't encourage the brat the way my brother was.

I couldn't hold back the snort when she bent over and wiggled her exposed ass at my brother before announcing loudly. "I'll take him."

The smile on my brother's face was predatory, and I wanted to laugh. The two of them were either perfect for one another or they would self-destruct in a spectacular fashion.

"Perfect. On your knees."

I focused on Nyra as my brother took Mel in hand. Was that relief I saw in her eyes? Hopefully, she was as eager as I was, and not simply relieved to avoid my brother's harsh hand. Did she feel the pull between the two of us? I held her gaze and enjoyed the way her lips parted and her shoulders pushed back, displaying herself perfectly in the sexy latex Christmas outfit she'd chosen for the evening.

"Don't ever say I don't give the best presents. Enjoy your evening." Loki's voice cut through the moment. I shook my head at how Madison has attached herself to the club owner. Of course, she ignored his disinterest and got dragged away by his quick strides because of her clinging grip. I'd pity the man if I wasn't positive she would be the one to regret her choices if she didn't disengage soon.

"Come on Pet, time for you to learn what happens to disobedient subs." Clay walked Melody away on a leash, allowing me to focus back on the woman who has too often filled my thoughts.

It was time to find out if some of the guesses I'd made about this woman were correct. I beckoned her closer with a crooked finger. She quickly moved forward, dropping her eyes to the ground.

"Good girl." The way her shoulders relaxed told me so much. "You look gorgeous tonight Nyra, like a naughty gift ready to be unwrapped."

"Thank you, Master Derrick."

Her eyes sparkled with joy even as she lowered them demurely. Her skin was a warm honey color which barely showed her blush. She was an exotic beauty with wavy midnight hair and deep chocolate eyes that hinted at an Indian

heritage. I brushed back a strand that had fallen into her face and enjoyed the silky texture.

“It’s such a shame that the first scene we have together is going to be a punishment.” I gave her a little truth to ensure she would understand I wasn’t with her simply because of Loki’s request. “I’d hoped to do something more enjoyable with you tonight.”

“You wanted to scene with me tonight?” The surprise in her eyes made it clear I had been much too subtle in my interest. Most of our brief interactions had been when I was on duty as a dungeon monitor, so hadn’t been very long or involved.

“Yes. I turned down the request to be a dungeon monitor for the party.”

Her expression fell. “I’m sorry my behavior made you do something you didn’t want to.”

How could she believe I wouldn’t want to get my hands on her whatever the reason? Correcting her self-doubt would be one of my primary goals. Nyra needed to understand I was interested in her for more than a single encounter. A plan formed in my mind. If handled this correctly, this punishment would only be the beginning of a wonderful relationship.

“I promise you, Pet, I’m extremely happy Loki asked my brother and I to help. Are you disappointed by your friend’s choice? Would you have preferred Master Clay’s touch to mine?”

Her wide, shocked eyes eased what little doubt I had. “No, Sir!”

“Then I’m going to give you two options. I hope you will choose with my second offer.” Her silent patience as I paused

pleased me. “Your first option is that I can punish you as a dungeon monitor would. I’ll bend you over a spanking bench and put you on display. I’ll announce your transgressions to the room and give you twenty-five swats with a paddle.”

Nyra fidgeted with the edge of her skirt. “What is the second option?”

I stepped forward into her personal space and tipped up her chin with two fingers. The hunger I saw inside her called to something deep within me. People are drawn to BDSM for an infinite number of reasons. Finding someone who’s desires match your own within the galaxy of possibilities is something rare and should be cherished. I prayed I might have found that person, but only time would tell.

“I will punish you as if you were mine. Instead of a spanking, I’ll give you three linked punishments, each will address your actual transgressions. I don’t want to only punish you. I want to teach you something I think you desperately need to realize. If you submit with grace and beauty, then I will also give you a reward.”

Her breath quickened. She was as affected as I was. The connection between us had been considerable even at a distance, but now that we were talking, it was so intense I was hard pressed to remember this was our first real conversation. She wasn’t mine yet, but I wouldn’t walk away from her until I was sure she either didn’t feel the same or we had explored the possibilities burning in the air around us.

“What are the three punishments?”

I chuckled and ran a thumb down her jawline, then across her full lips. “That isn’t the way this will work, Pet. The decision you have to make is do you want to be mine? Do you trust that I know what you need and won’t go beyond your

limits? I'll always respect your safe words. Say 'red' and everything stops to re-evaluate."

"How do you know my limits?"

"I've reviewed the limits you submitted three times. The first time when you were granted membership to Valhalla. The second was after I watched you scene. I'll admit I was intrigued by your poise. The third was last night to make sure I would be ready. Have your limits changed?"

She shook her head before replying, "You were intrigued by me?" The disbelief in her tone told me just how little Nyra thought of herself.

Society's tendency to focus on the negative, especially in concern with women, bothered me. A person is more likely to take the time to fill out a complaint form than a survey to tell someone they did well. Years of hearing bad more than good meant a positive self-image was hard to maintain.

"Very much. I've enjoyed your scenes, fascinated by the rare moments when joy seems to shine out of your eyes." She appears to both enjoy and be embarrassed by the compliment, but to my pleasure, she doesn't try to break our gaze.

"If I choose option two, does that mean I'm yours..." she took a deep breath, "I mean just for tonight."

The temptation to tell her it would mean much longer than a single night was powerful. Rushing into things was not my style and no matter how appealing she was as she trembled under my touch, I knew promises made in haste often lead to regrets. I knew nothing about Nyra other than what I had observed around the club.

"Yes. But the possibility of more definitely exists. I'll want you to at least check in with me tomorrow. We can discuss

more than, Pet.”

Both excitement and disappointment flashed in her eyes. It was good to know she was as tempted as me to be reckless. Though I only knew the barest of facts about her life outside of the club, I was strangely eager to learn more. Once she chose and we finished her punishment.

“I’d like that. I’ll choose to be punished as yours, but can I ask a question, Sir?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you calling me Pet, Sir? I’ve never seen you do puppy or kitten play.”

Oh, this woman was a treasure. With her little statement, she revealed she’d been watching me almost as closely as I had watched her. Her agreement to be mine meant all the rules had changed.

“Wait-up, Pet!” I snapped the command out to see how quickly she would respond. I was impressed she barely hesitated before stepping out to spread her legs and placed her hands crossed above her head.

I’d known she was familiar with protocol positions. In fact, she gravitated to the Doms who practiced High Protocol. But their cool, almost dismissive use of a submissive dimmed something inside her I wanted to foster. My girl had a need for praise they saw as unnecessary. I stroked her cheek and let her see the pleasure in my gaze.

“Perfect. Such beautiful posture and quick responses. I’m so proud of you.” As I’d hoped, the praise caused joy to shine in her eyes. Unable to resist, I brushed a soft kiss across her lips. “I’m not into pet play in the traditional sense of the words. I want a woman, not a puppy or kitten. What does

appeal to me is the ownership, the training, and unconditional affection. My submissive will only feel pain when it is to enhance pleasure or to correct their behavior. Do you crave pain, Pet?"

"No, Sir." Her words were more air than sound.

"I didn't think so." I ran my hands up her sides and enjoyed the way she trembled under my touch. It was time to get her alone, so I held out my hand. She lowered her arms and took the offered touch. Without another word, I walked her slowly towards the private rooms, allowing the anticipation of what was to come to build.

We passed a room that had my brother's name on the reserved sign. From the slap of leather on flesh coming through the door, it was obvious he had wasted no time taking the brat in hand. I'd also reserved a private room, so I walked Nyra in and enjoyed her inspection.

The room was made up like a decadent bedroom, with silk and velvet accents. My play bag was in the corner, but I didn't think we would be using much of what was in it. This would be about pushing Nyra mentally, not physically.

I led her to the center of the floor, so she faced the foot of the bed. "Stay here for me, beautiful, while I get what I need."

"Yes, Sir."

When I'd packed my bag for the night, it had been with Nyra in mind but without being sure what kind of scene we would be doing. I chuckled to myself at the amount of plugs and vibrators it held, most of which would have to wait for another day. When we had spoken at the bar, a plan had formed in my mind, so I pulled out the items I would need and walked over to the bed.

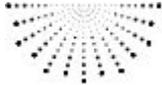
The posture collar I laid on the bedspread was a work of art that I'd commissioned from an expert leather worker. I'd never used it on a sub, but the pure white and silver buckles would be perfect against her skin. Next, I placed the nipple clamps and anal hook, being sure to stretch out the chains so she could see they would attach to the collar. Last, I placed the vibrating wand and enjoyed her tiny gasp.

“Oh, I'm going to have so much fun with you tonight, Pet.”

She looked at the bed, then at me with a nervous gaze. “Should I get undressed, Sir?”

“No, gorgeous. I want to unwrap my naughty gift before I play with it.”

CHAPTER THREE



NYRA

Was I dreaming? I sent a silent prayer to the powers that be, hoping this was real. Only in my wildest dreams had I imagined I could feel this way, but it was hard to wrap my head around. My heart was beating an excited rhythm. How could a man I'd never spoken to before understand me so well?

He walked around me slowly and my skin prickled with goosebumps. He kneeled in front of me and ran his hands up and down my legs before unbuckling my shoes with slow, deliberate motions. He tapped my ankle, and I lifted my leg so he could remove first one shoe, then the next.

His hums of pleasure as he removed each article of clothing were strangely impersonal, as if I was only a doll who he could treat any way he wanted. The soft way he touched me and moved me showed care and I found myself more turned on than I'd been in a long time. By the time I was naked, my nipples were hard, and my body ached for a more intimate touch.

Master Derrick lifted the collar off the bed with almost a revenant look on his face. The white leather was unlike anything I'd ever worn. Several inches wide and so stiff it would restrict my movement completely. It had silver buckles on either side so he could adjust the fit and silver rings on front and back that I had no doubt he would be attaching the chains of the other devices on the bed to.

He tapped my chin, and I lifted my head. The feel of the collar as it wrapped around my neck was strange. Both soft and stiff, it didn't exactly restrict my breathing, but it did make

me aware of everything. It was like by forcing my head to stay perfectly still, I became more aware of what I could see and feel.

He dropped a pillow on the ground in front of me and took my hand, gesturing for me to kneel. I'd never realized how much I used my sight when kneeling till I couldn't. When I finally settled onto the plush velvet, I felt a strange pride come over me. Master Derrick stroked my cheek.

“Such a pretty Pet. I knew you would look beautiful like this.”

Tears pooled in my eyes as his words fed my soul. How did he know so much about my hidden desires? The questionnaire I'd filled out for Valhalla hadn't contained my secret. Maybe it was silly to hide a kink when applying for a BDSM club, but my need for praise embarrassed me. It was selfish to want to be recognized for every little thing I did right.

Master Derrick had either figured it out or he was naturally perfect at making me feel special. His kind words soaked into me like rain on the sand of the desert. I was painfully aroused, and he'd barely done more than talk to me. Truthfully, not even vibrating toys would have excited me more.

Ownership. The word still echoed in my mind. I'd wanted to fall to my knees and beg for him to claim me. Had this man been pulled directly from my fantasies? I'd always believed twenty-four seven relationships were only for the softer kinks. But the way he spoke made me hopeful. Was it foolish to think someone would be willing or able to take that level of control and still be interested in their partner's wellbeing?

Was it a fantasy to believe someone could live like that? I wanted the simple life the old TV shows had pretended was

reality. To have clearly defined roles where I would care for the home and my partner and he would handle the complications of the world and set strict rules I would have to follow. Guiding, cherishing and, yes, punishing me when necessary.

“The first lesson you need to be reminded of, Pet, is that actions have consequences. Table position.” His voice broke me out of my daydreams. He’d been moving around the room and I hadn’t noticed. Not wanting to disappoint him, I placed my hands on the ground and leaned forward.

The collar made it difficult to be graceful as I maneuvered, trying to keep my back straight. With my knees parted and my breasts swaying below me, I was exposed and so turned on. From this position, every part of me was available to his touch.

“Good girl. That’s perfect.” Cool liquid flowed down my ass and I bit the inside of my cheek as he spread the lube over my sensitive entrance. “I know you aren’t the type of woman who likes lashing out at others to be cruel. But you allowed that woman to goad you into acting unkindly and now you have to pay the price.”

It gave me a weird sense of joy that Master Derrick didn’t even say Madison’s name. He was right. Though at the time, it had felt good to stand up for myself and Mel. One of the reasons she was my best friend was because I admired her fearless nature. She effortlessly pushed me outside my comfort zones while still respecting me. In a twisted way, I would never regret what I had said because it had led to some of my most secret dreams becoming a reality. But that was my secret.

“Yes, Sir.”

His fingers breached my ass, and I tried to bite back my moan. The sharp slap against my ass surprised me.

“None of that. Pets don’t hide their feelings from their owners. I want to hear every sound.”

Pleasure shot through me at the word ‘owner’ and I whimpered. “Yes, Sir.”

His fingers started their work again, and I whimpered. He was relentless, quickly adding a second finger, and the sting morphed into a burn. I moaned as the pain slipped into pleasure. I pushed back against his hand and he chuckled before pulling out of me.

“Have you ever been in predicament bondage, Nyra?”

What was he referring to? I’d been in bondage plenty of times, but none of my experiences seemed to fit the word predicament.

“I don’t think so, Sir.”

“I find it a fascinating learning experience. It forces the submissive to choose what type of pain they wish to experience. In your case, Pet, we are going to use an anal hook and nipple clamps.”

He reached under me and the cool metal of chains slid over my breasts. It was hard not being able to see what he was doing. I’d never thought I would enjoy being treated as if I were a doll, but the moisture between my legs made it very clear I did. I moaned as the nipple clamps bit into my flesh.

Pleasure and pain were such a fine line and I honestly couldn’t say where I was on the scale as he pulled the chain forward and attached them to the collar. I hissed as he shortened the length, causing my nipples to sway and pull.

Cold metal pressed against my asshole and I tried to relax. Ass play wasn’t one of my limits, but I always struggled with it. Even though I knew it was silly, it always seemed almost

forbidden. The metal bulb pushed past my entrance and I was uncomfortably full.

“So lovely.” Master Derrick ran his hand down my back, and I shivered under his touch. It was hard to picture what he was doing, but I felt a chain slide up my back and then the anal hook pulled tight. “Arch your back for me, Pet.”

I tried to obey, but the posture collar made it difficult. The motion pulled the hook in my ass almost painfully tight but eased the pressure on my nipples. It was a confusing mess of sensations and I wasn't sure if I should moan in relief or groan in pain.

“Now look up at me.” His voice held a growl excited me.

I tried to tilt my chin up, but the motion forced my back to go concave and the nipple clamps pulled painfully. Never before had someone made me punish myself, and that was what it felt like. When a Dom spanked or flogged me, it was simple. Something to be endured or enjoyed. Derrick was making me hurt myself for his pleasure, and it was amazing.

The gentle look on his face had tears gathering in my eyes. He cupped my chin and slowly forced me up into a kneeling position. Once I was settled, I tried to keep my back straight so I wasn't pulling on either the clamps or the hook. Master Derrick circled me slowly, and my arousal grew.

“You showed a lack of self-control when you lowered yourself to shouting petty insults.”

It hurt knowing he was disappointed in me. Shouting at Madison had felt good, but I'd known it wasn't the right thing to do. That wasn't the person I wanted to be.

“I'm sorry Master Derrick.”

“We both know you are better than that. So I want you to show me that you can control yourself.” His hand stroked over my hair in a soothing motion. He pulled something off the table and I saw it was a vibrating wand. I groaned, and he chuckled. He looked into my eyes and I saw clearly how much he was enjoying himself. “You aren’t allowed to come. You aren’t allowed to move but I want to hear how good I’m making you feel, Pet.”

“Yes Master... Derrick.” I’d almost forgotten to add his name, and I scolded myself for my presumption.

“I like you calling me Master. But someday I hope you will call me something else.”

The possibilities spiraled through my mind, but all rational thought shattered when the buzz of the wand hummed against my nipple clamps. I tried to stay still, but it was so hard. The vibration both numbed and increased the pain. I whimpered and moaned as he ran the device across my breasts.

My heart raced. I’d never had an orgasm from nipple play, but his masterful touch would get me there if I wasn’t careful. My core felt empty. I wanted to be filled like never before. He slid the evil wand down my body and then pressed it against the hook.

Dear God!

It was like the metal transferred the sensations right into the center of my body. Sweat dotted my skin, and I tried to distract myself from the pleasure that shouldn’t be this good.

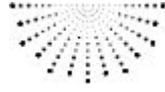
“Please, Master!” I would cry and beg if that was what it took for him to either stop or let me fall over the edge of orgasm.

“Thirty more seconds, Pet. Don’t disappoint me.”

My nails bit into my palms as he moved the wand between my legs, and I screamed as I held on to the edge of sanity. I tried thinking of anything else. I couldn't let him down. I needed to stay in control, no matter how much my body ached to let go. I panted and begged, but he didn't let up.

Just when I thought I couldn't take another second, everything stopped. My body trembled, and I knew it wouldn't take much to bring me right back to the edge. I'd done it. I met Master Derrick's gaze and the pride in his eyes was better than anything else I could have imagined.

CHAPTER FOUR



DERRICK

Nyra's responses were everything I could have hoped for and more. It wasn't only her beauty, though she looked exquisite in the posture collar, it was the way she yearned to please. Submissives with an actual need to serve were rare and often found themselves in abusive situations. How I'd gotten so lucky I'd never know, but I would be sure to cherish every moment I got with her.

Once I'd set the wand over her clit, I hadn't been sure if she could hold off. It had been a cruel test, but in a spectacular display of self-control, she'd managed not to come. I wasn't a sadist but pushing her had felt amazing. There was one more lesson for her to learn, and I was going to thoroughly enjoy this one.

I gave her a moment to settle, then released the nipple clamps. Her gasps and moans were perfect and had my cock so hard I was leaking pre-cum. With a gentle touch, I soothed her breasts, knowing they would still be hypersensitive from their rough treatment.

"That was wonderful, Pet. I'm so proud of you. Are you ready for your last lesson?"

She looked up at me with an adoration I could become addicted to. "Yes, Master."

I ran my thumb over her full bottom lip. I longed to hear her calling me Owner in that breathy voice, but that would have to wait. Everyone knew relationships involving BDSM moved at a different pace than a Vanilla one because of the trust and connection required, but even Claiming this beautiful

woman as my own the first time we scened wasn't realistic. I could wait. She was worth it.

“You used this mouth to say awful things.” I pressed my thumb between her lips. “I am going to both punish you and show you there are more appropriate things you can do with your tongue.”

She shivered and gazed at me with a raw hunger. With no other hint, she dropped her jaw and stuck out her tongue, inviting me to use her mouth. The plan had been to remove her collar and the hook before I claimed her mouth, but my control is only so strong and I needed to feel her wrapped around me.

The relief as I unbuttoned my pants was immense. My cock sprung free as if it knew what was going to happen. Nyra knelt on the cushion, her eyes wide and hungry as if she longed to lean forward and taste me.

“You're going to hold still and accept your punishment like a good girl. Right, Pet?”

“Yes, Master.”

So eager. So perfect. The reason I'd watched Nyra for months was I'd hoped she would enjoy my style of dominance. Every person found joy in different aspects of BDSM. It meant there was no one right way, but it also meant you could spend a lifetime and never find the someone who matched your kink.

A masochist wanted a sadist. Littles needed a Mommy or Daddy. People with a humiliation kink needed a master with a cruel tongue. Puppies needed handlers and Owners needed Pets. In the past, I'd had several failed relationships where the level of control I preferred was too much for my partner. It

didn't matter how much I cherished my Pets, my need to push and test their submission in the end drove them away.

Would Nyra thrive under my complete control? Could she enjoy handing over every aspect of her life to me and trust I would do everything in my power to make sure she thrived? The need to please vibrated off of her, but was it only during scenes or would she be willing to submit to me in everything? I would test her limits, push her past what she thought was possible.

This scene would be just a sample of what I wanted from her. In the end, hopefully, she would long for more. My cock twitched as I stepped forward and placed just the tip on her sweet little tongue. The trust in her gaze was intoxicating. Soon I would control everything about her right down to her very breath. Would she struggle or give in from the start?

“Beautiful.” I stroked her cheek and slid my cock over her tongue a few times. “Suck me.”

She closed her mouth, and I enjoyed the heat of her lips wrapped around me. Nyra leaned forward and tried to take more of me into her mouth. Within moments, she was bobbing her head as much as the posture collar allowed. It felt so amazing that for a moment I couldn't stop myself from enjoying her explorations. Then I remembered my plan and stepped back.

“No! Naughty girl.” I tapped her cheek in rebuke.

The look of pain and shame on her face was perfect. The slight tap on her cheek hadn't hurt her, but tears sparkled in her eyes. I wanted to gather her into my arms and comfort her, but that wasn't the plan.

“What did I do wrong, Sir?” The desperation in her voice both excited and concerned me. Under the wrong Dom’s care, she would be abused and broken with little more than harsh words. I would have to work on her self-confidence. While I wanted her to enjoy serving me, I didn’t want her to believe for one moment she wasn’t a treasure who deserved the world.

I stroked her hair to give her the physical reassurance that I wasn’t going anywhere. I kept my tone soft so she would know that while I was disappointed, I wasn’t angry. “Did I tell you to hold still?”

She bit her lip and a single tear slipped down her cheek. “Yes, Sir.”

“Does the command suck mean you get to move?”

“No, Sir. I’m sorry Sir.”

I slid my thumb up her cheek, gathering her tear onto my finger and brought it to my mouth. Her genuine desire to follow directions and please me drew out a primal urge in me.

“Do you think he can hold still for me? Or should I tie you up like a naughty girl?” Either option was appealing to me. I wanted to see which she would choose.

“I can be a good girl.”

The woman has no idea how she affected me with those simple words. What would I do if, after that night, she decided never to see me again?

“Being naughty doesn’t mean that you aren’t a good girl. I’m proud you want to try to control yourself, but I wouldn’t be mad if you needed help to obey.”

“Thank you, Master, but I can do it.” The pride in her voice was adorable.

“Open for me.”

The silky warmth of her mouth as I slid my cock inside was almost too good. This time she didn't move, although the strength of her suction made me groan. Only when the tip of me brushed the back of her throat did she ease up.

I held the back of her head and pushed slowly forward. She gagged. The sensation of her throat spasming around me was a wonderful tease. She choked and her hands fluttered, so I pulled back and let her breath.

“You have to relax for me, Pet.” Her tiny nod was all the permission I needed. Did she understand how sexy she was kneeling in front of me with tears now streaming from her eyes?

I pushed forward again and this time she swallowed around my length and I was able to push myself down her throat. Staring into her eyes with the knowledge that she had given herself over to me was a powerful feeling. It was as if our souls were connected. I controlled her completely.

Fear filled her gaze, and I knew her oxygen was running out, but I didn't move, waiting to see if she would push back against me or accept I would decide when she could breathe again. She clenched and unclenched her fists, but didn't move away.

I pulled back and loved the sexy gasps which rasped out of her throat. She might not understand it yet, but in that moment where she chose not to pull away, she'd become mine. We needed to finish this punishment so I could claim her properly.

“I think you're ready for your punishment. I'm not going to go easy on you. If you need to safeword, tap three times on my leg. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master.” There wasn’t a hint of fear in her eyes. The complete acceptance of what I could do to her was evident in the relaxed lines of her body.

We both knew the punishments I’d devised had little to do with what she had done and everything to do with exploring the connection between us. Seeing if we would be as perfect together as I had imagined.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t going to follow through. Without any other warning, I gripped her face and thrust deep inside. Her choking gasps only excited me as I lost myself in fucking her mouth as if it were her pussy.

I don’t care what anyone else says. There is nothing more intoxicating than someone willing to endure pain, discomfort, or humiliation in order to please you. That Nyra turned over her very ability to breathe showed her complete submission, and I would cherish her.

Her throat soon welcomed me without any resistance, and I lost myself in the sweet heat as I plunged in and out of her. For a brief moment, I thought she might tap out, but instead her arms stayed limp and loose at her sides. Not a single muscle in her body protested what I was doing to her. I wanted this to go on forever. To be able to capture this perfect moment and burn it into my memory. She moaned as I plunged deep and there was no stopping what followed.

My orgasm ripped through me and I threw back my head. The sound that ripped out of my throat was a roar of pleasure which echoed in the room. She swallowed down my release. It was so tempting to stay forever with her warm mouth wrapped around my length, but it was time for her reward.

I stepped back and, to my surprise, she slumped forward, almost completely limp. I caught her before she hit the ground

and scooped her up into my arms. Her eyes were glassy with a special smile subs only got when they hit subspace. Placing her down on the bed, I stroked her hair and enjoyed her little giggle.

With quick movements, I unbuckled the collar and removed the hook from her ass. I grabbed a bottle of water and a chocolate bar from the mini fridge in the corner of the room before laying down next to her. She was a treasure beyond belief.

I'd never had a sub reach subspace from a blowjob, but something about the scene had triggered her endorphins and pushed her over the edge. It was going to be so much fun discovering other ways to test her limits. For long minutes we snuggled, and I enjoyed feeding her small bites of chocolate.

When I knew she'd recovered, I gave in to the temptation to kiss her. Heat rose between us as our tongues tangled. Even without a single word, we were perfectly in sync. I didn't care what it took. There was no way I was letting my naughty gift go. We broke for air and I chuckled.

“I think you liked that.”

Her blush was adorable. “I did, Sir.”

Cupping her cheek, I loved the way she snuggled into my touch. “You were promised a reward at the end of your punishments. What would you like if it is within my power? You shall get it.”

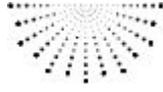
“Anything I want, Sir?” Her eyes shone with an eager hunger.

Whatever thought put that look in her eyes was something I definitely wanted to explore. “I'm a man of my word. What is your heart's desire, Pet?”

“I want to be yours for more than tonight. I know it’s greedy but I don’t want to stop being your Pet.”

My heart raced, and I rolled on top of Nyra, pinning her to the bed. “Nyra. Nothing could make me happier than to be your owner.”

EPILOGUE



NYRA

2 months later

My body ached in that special way only my owner could cause. My relationship with Master Derrick had moved quickly, but I'd never regretted one moment with him. Every day he pushed me to be my best self while somehow making sure I knew he thought I was perfect.

It was an odd mix that worked for both of us. Last week I'd moved into his house and if everything continued to plan, I would be quitting my job and maybe someday we would get married. We were Owner and Pet 24/7 and I'd never felt more at peace. It didn't matter if we were doing an intense scene or snuggling and watching the news. The dynamic worked for us.

I was currently sprawled out in one of Valhalla's recovery rooms with my best friend snuggled next to me. Mel and Clay had hit it off as well as Derrick and I had, though their dynamic was very different.

“Oh—my—god! That session topped all the rest!” Mel giggled.

“You say that every time, Mel.”

She laughed. “I mean it every time. Like seriously, every time I think it can't get better, it always does.”

“I know what you mean. It has been a whirlwind with Derrick, ever since the night of the Christmas party.”

Derrick and Clay were approaching with water and chocolate. Seriously, they were the best!

“You know what, Ny?” Mel curled into me like she was about to tell me one of the great secrets of the universe.

“What?”

“I’m so glad I shared those tickets with you.”

I burst out laughing, and she joined in.

Derrick scooped me onto his lap and held a water bottle to my lips. I took a deep drink while I enjoyed his strong arms around me. Once I was done, I looked up into his eyes and had to tell him something.

“I love you Derrick.”

His smile could have lit the room. “I love you too, Nyra.”

THE END

For more from Masters of Midgard, [click here](#)

ABOUT ANN JENSEN

I'm a snarky Jersey Woman who dreamed of one day becoming an Author. I write Romance with bigger than life characters who have to dodge every obstacle I gleefully throw in their paths. Somehow my characters also find time for steamy fun on their way to their HEAs.

I'm an avid reader, engineer, photographer, and a proud Bi woman. My life is a journey that I hope never stops in one place too long. I fill it with love and laughter whenever possible and when I can't, I pull out my clue by four and use it with deadly precision.

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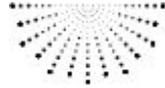
Lost in the Dark

Caught in the Dark

Undercover in the Dark

Leap into the Dark

JOLLY GREEN DADDY BY
ALLYSA HART AND
RAYANNA JAMISON



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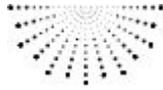
This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

We wrote this story in 2021 as a joke for Maren who named two characters in Dad Bod Doms after us because she couldn't remember the names she'd originally given them while dictating on the road. It seemed a logical choice to bring it back out for this anthology.

Maren... we love you. We can never express the depth of our gratitude for the opportunities you have given us, the wisdom you have shared with us, and the love you have shown us. Above all we are most grateful for your friendship.

Love Ray and Ally

PROLOGUE



The King and Queen were dead. Those were the whispers I heard as I made my way through the village toward the beach. I could see the emergency vehicles on the horizon, and the lack of flashing lights told me the rumors were probably true. As I walked, the sky seemed to darken with the weight of the news. My chest felt heavy. For a small island village like Venus, this was a devastating tragedy. The effects would be widespread and long lasting. I stared at my feet and the ground beneath me as I contemplated the future of the land that I loved. When I looked up again, everything had changed.

Something was off. The villagers seemed to be happy. They were singing and dancing in the streets.

There was a low rumble of murmurs carrying on the breeze, and I stopped to listen.

“All hail the queen,” they chanted. I looked up the hill toward the castle, and my jaw dropped in shock. The structure was there, in the same place it had always been, but nothing about it was the same. New and gloriously pale tan stones had been carefully stacked together to form winding staircases and tall turrets with well-kept grounds on a lush backdrop of roses and green fields. Now, the castle was darker, a gray box-like structure with towers that seemed to reach to the sky, making

me recall the fairy tales of my youth. The grounds were hidden behind moss covered stone walls, and all the normally lush greenery was a dull brown. I shook my head and looked again, my confusion growing when the image didn't change.

The gloomy castle seemed out of place amongst the cheerful village, and the cheerful village, well, that was just plain wrong. Where were all the Coast Guard boats and emergency vehicles that had been blocking the roads only a few minutes before?

I looked away from the castle that seemed to dwarf the town when I heard a scuffle in front of me. A beautiful woman with ruby red hair that fell to her waist, an hourglass figure, sea blue eyes, and a stunningly clear complexion that made her look like a porcelain doll was arguing with Grayson, the local fisherman. The two of them shouldn't have blocked the road, but I couldn't get around them. It was almost as if I had been blocked by some sort of invisible forcefield. When I tried, the woman grabbed me, held me in the air, her tiny hand holding me entirely captive as if I had been bound by rope. Somehow, her petite arms hoisted me into the air above her head. I couldn't make sense of what was happening.

“You!” she screamed, pointing at me. “Who am I?”

Startled and confused, I looked down at her, and then at Grayson.

The look on his face was a mix of anger and confusion, but I was only able to make eye contact for a second before my full attention was pulled toward her.

“Queen Delta is the most beautiful woman in the land. Maybe in the entire world. Her red hair sparkles like the rubies in her crown, her skin glistens like the morning dew, and her blue eyes shine like the sea on a summer day.” The words fell

from my lips like I had recited them every day for a year, yet they felt foreign. I had no memory of the stunning woman in front of me, yet I was helpless. I wanted nothing more than to fall to my knees and worship her.

I couldn't comprehend what Grayson was saying to me, my sole purpose in life at that moment was to bathe in the presence of my queen. I was about to say so, when he knocked me from her grasp and charged her. I stood for a moment not knowing what to do, but the queen waved me off and I could not disobey.

Keeping my eyes trained on her, I bowed as I walked backwards, thanking her profusely for the honor of her time. She wasn't paying me any attention, fully engaged in her argument with Grayson.

As I reached my cottage, I stood outside the entrance to my garden, watching the scene unfold from afar. Jealousy washed through me at the idea that he was deemed worthy to stay near her and I was not, but I had been dismissed and there was nothing I could do about it. I stood watching the scene unfold when, out of nowhere a bolt of lightning shot down from the sky, hitting Grayson square in the chest. Another arc shot towards me, and then my world went black.

My body ached. It was the first thing I became aware of as I groggily came to. What the hell was the number of the truck that hit me? Except I knew I hadn't been hit by anything. The memory of the entire encounter was fresh in my mind, including the lightning that had flashed across the sky, hitting first Grayson, then my house, and then me. I remembered it all, including the part where I saw a giant octopus-like creature

with bluish skin, eight arms, and large slimy tentacles, wearing the Queen's crown precariously perched atop its misshapen blob of a head. Where that image fit into the picture, I wasn't entirely sure. The whole day had been strange.

A sudden pain hit me then, flooding my body with heat and the oddest sensation. I both felt and heard the rip that tore through me. I looked down at myself in shock. What I was looking for, I had no idea. To confirm that I was all in one piece, or maybe to determine whether or not I needed to go to the hospital. If not for broken bones and internal injuries, then maybe for a concussion or mental illness because nothing about this day or these memories made sense.

But when I saw myself, it made even less sense. My clothes were ripped, the shreds now hanging off my body as my muscles bulged under the tattered fabric. My legs were like tree trunks, so large I couldn't see my own feet beneath the massive rectus femoris bulge that blocked my view. And my skin... no longer a tanned golden brown from hours spent tending my garden in the sunshine, now it was an all-over odd shade of dull green. The color of cooked green beans.

"What the hell!" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet. That was when I looked down. The road beneath me was not road at all. Where was all the hard, hot asphalt I'd just been walking on? It was gone, replaced by light fluffy clouds that misted up, twining in ethereal wisps around my ankles as I walked. Everywhere I looked, all I saw were white clouds and blue sky.

And me.

Giant green me.

Nothing else was here. Except, oddly enough, my house, plucked from the streets of Venus. And my garden. They were

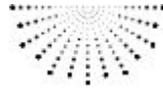
both there. Slightly bigger than I remembered and nestled amongst the clouds.

Frowning, I walked to the edge of the cloud I now stood on, crossing it in a single stride with my enormously long legs, and peered over the side.

“Hello?” I called out. “Hello?”

Nobody answered me. I was alone. Alone in the sky, giant and green.

CHAPTER ONE



Three and a half years later...

“Maren!” Vicki, my elderly and evil stepmother screeched from inside the house. With my headphones in, I could have pretended not to hear her, but I knew from experience that she would not stop screaming for me until I answered. God forbid, it took too long because then I would have to hear about it all week, and for years to come. Standing from the spot where I knelt in my garden between the zucchini and tomatoes, I stretched my back and took a few deep breaths of the fresh clean air before going back into the stuffy cottage.

I hated everything about the small village where I live, and I would have left it happily if it weren't for three small things—my promise to my father, my best friend Arianna, and my garden.

The promise to my father involved not leaving Vicki alone, even if she was one of the meanest, laziest bitches I'd ever met. I'd never gotten along with her and if I had known my father was going to die young, leaving me stuck like this—with her—I never would have made that promise.

I stopped in the kitchen and washed my hands in the sink before retrieving a glass of iced tea for my stepmother, because I knew that was what she was going to ask for as soon as I went to her room. She'd never dare get up and get it on her own.

"Maren!" she bellowed again, and I cringed. Her shrill voice bounced off the walls of our small cottage.

"Coming, Mother," I responded loud enough for her to hear but not loud enough to be accused of yelling. She didn't allow yelling in the house. I laughed to myself at the irony of that rule. All she ever did was yell.

"Where have you been? I've been calling and calling. I'm dying of thirst and you just saunter in here taking your time. How dare you?"

"I apologize. I have to take some vegetables up to the castle and I can't keep the princess waiting. I'll be back as soon as I can," I lied. Arianna didn't need anything from my garden, but I used it as an excuse all the time to get away from the crazy bitch. As my bestie, Arianna was happy to oblige and even took my meager vegetable supply as part of the ruse.

"You're going to the castle looking like that?" Vicki squinted at me with narrow eyes, her lips curled into a snarl. "You're disgusting. What will the princess think?" Ariana was now technically the Queen since the death of her parents, but nobody ever called her that, including herself.

"The princess will be happy that her delivery wasn't delayed due to my vanity," I deadpanned. Once again, the irony was not lost on me, as Vicki had let herself go after my father died and sat on her bed covering most of the surface with her large, roly body stuffed into an oversized mumu, but of course, I was the disgusting one.

“How long will you be gone? What will I do for a meal?”

“There are prepared sandwiches in the refrigerator, all you have to do is get yourself one.”

“No, that won’t do. You’ll bring me one before you leave.” She waved her hand at me, shooing me away. I gritted my teeth and went to get her some food before grabbing my basket of carrots, potatoes, and squash to take to the castle.

Arianna frowned as she pulled me inside the castle, her eyebrows furrowing together as she squinted at me.

“What’s wrong? You always look sad and upset.”

“That’s because I am always sad and upset,” I responded seriously, shrugging off her concern as I set my basket down on the table in the foyer. I didn’t want to talk about Vicki. It was an impossible situation and talking about it only made the feelings of hopelessness worse.

“It’s Vicki, isn’t it?” she questioned, not dropping it.

“It’s always Vicki,” I responded with a sigh. “But I don’t want to talk about that. I come here to get away from all that. It’s my one short reprieve from the doldrum servitude that is my life. Tell me about you and Grayson. What’s up with you two?” I smiled and smirked. “Get into any trouble this week? Want to tell me about it over banana bread?” The question was a rhetorical one, and the answer was always yes. Arianna was always managing to get into trouble somehow. I was convinced that her favorite spot in the world was face down over her Ogre Daddy’s lap.

Arianna's love story with Grayson was a literal fairy tale that I could listen to again and again, and it only got better with time. Grayson was a real life hero, a protective Daddy Dom who was always saving Arianna from her own shenanigans, and a top-notch baker to boot.

"Of course I did. You're going to love this story," Ari answered, dragging me into the kitchen. "And you know Grayson, he knew you were coming so he just pulled a fresh loaf of banana bread out of the oven not ten minutes ago."

We got into the kitchen and sure enough, there was a still warm loaf of Grayson's famous banana bread with extra chocolate chips resting on a plate in the middle of the small table. Beside it was a fresh pitcher of milk, two plates, two cups, a dish of fresh butter, and some napkins. Grayson himself was nowhere to be found. He usually made himself scarce during my visits so Ari and I could have our girl time.

Ari cut off two thick slices of banana bread and plated them while I poured the milk. When our snack was ready, I took a bite and moaned. I came here for the girl time, but his banana bread was icing on the cake.

I ate the first slice in record time and cut another before leaning forward conspiratorially. "Okay, spill. Give me the scoop. What did you do this time, and more importantly, what did he do to you when he found out?"

With a shy smile, Ari opened her mouth to answer and then quickly closed it, squinting at me before opening it again.

"You need a Daddy," she declared. "That's going to be my mission from now on: to find you a Daddy of your own."

I choked on the bite of banana bread I had taken.

“Oh yeah,” I snorted. “Ari, be serious. How am I going to do that? There aren’t any good men my age around here. And even if there were, what would I do with a Daddy? Invite him to come live in my tiny cottage with my crazy stepmother, and help me wait on her hand and cankles for the rest of my life?” I felt a tiny stab of guilt for saying that, but dammit, she was meaner than just about anyone else I knew.

“Don’t be silly. A Daddy would protect you from her. He would never let her treat you the way she does.”

“Oh yeah?” I scoffed again. “And how would he stop her?”

“Spank her?” Ari shrugged with an evil smile. “Or maybe kill her. I don’t know. I can’t think of everything.”

“Spank or kill her?!” I exclaimed incredulously, cry-laughing at the ludicrousness of Arianna’s ‘solution’ to my stepmother problem. “He better not spank her. Why does she get all the fun? And as for killing her, what good would a Daddy do me if he was in prison for murder?”

“Well, obviously he would have to make it look like an accident.” She shrugged. “Or he could just get a pardon from the king and queen. I could make it happen; you know.” She leaned towards me, shielding her mouth behind her hand as she mock-whispered, “I’ve got connections.”

Actual tears were leaking from my eyes at this point and my stomach hurt from laughing.

“You’re ridiculous,” I wheezed at her. “But thank you for the offer to pardon my nonexistent imaginary future Daddy for the crime of murder. I appreciate it more than you know.”

“You’re so very welcome,” Ari said, standing to grant me an exaggerated curtsy.

I shook my head. “Thank you for making me laugh, too. I needed that today. But now, let’s get serious. C’mon, tell me about the adventures of Arianna and Grayson. I’m running out of time and I need a funny story to get me through the week.”

Arianna shook her head. “Maren, I am serious. I’m going to find you a Daddy. It’s my new mission in life.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. “You need a hobby,” I teased.

“I just told you, I have one!”

“I mean a different hobby!” I laughed again. “And good luck with that. Again, there aren’t any good men around here, and Daddies don’t grow on trees.”

The expression on Arianna’s face was odd, one I had never seen before and couldn’t place. Her brows knitted in concentration, and her lips pursed into a frown. Her eyes even glazed a little as she stared both at me and through me, gazing into some distant corner of my soul with the hint of a smirk on her face.

I knew that smirk. It was her, ‘I’m going to get in so much trouble, bwa-ha-ha-ha’ look.

Suddenly, she jumped up, grabbed my hand and all but pulled me off my chair as she ran with me from the room, from the castle entirely, and all the way across the manicured grounds.

“What the hell,” I sputtered, completely confused. “Ari! What are you doing? Where are we going?”

When she finally answered me, we had stopped outside a small cozy looking garden shack on the outskirts of the castle grounds. I had never noticed it before. It looked like something straight out of a fairy tale with its cobblestone roof

and vines of ivy growing up the sides. There was a bright yellow door with no doorknob, and windows covered with French shutters that had seen better days.

“What is this place?” I mused aloud, unable to keep the wonder and awe from my voice.

“A remnant of the past,” Ari answered with a hard lilt in her voice that I didn’t recognize. “It’s Grayson’s gardening shed now, but once upon a time, it was the Sea Witch’s secret lair. She kept her magic books and various spells here, some of them at least. I never saw it until she was gone. I think she may have had it bewitched with some sort of invisibility spell or something.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say.

I had, of course, heard of the evil Sea Witch and her spells, one of which had brainwashed an entire village. I had even been one of the brainwashed ones, but I had no memory of it. I had not known Arianna back then and had only known of Grayson because once a week my stepmother sent me to purchase fish from him. Just like then, I still didn’t get out much.

“So, why are we here?” my voice dropped to a low whisper. I knew that Arianna had discovered her own magical abilities, but it wasn’t something we talked about much, unless it had to do with whatever she had most recently gotten in trouble for. Her magic often got her into trouble. She wasn’t actually that good at it. To be honest, I didn’t think she wanted to be. She had too much fun, letting how bad she was get her into trouble.

“I have to show you something!” Arianna pulled me into the cottage, closing the door behind her. “But it’s a secret and you can’t tell anyone, okay? Not a soul! Promise?”

My red flag radar was going off like crazy, but I figured the worst that could happen was Ari would get her butt busted and I would have a good laugh. I felt like a school child, getting to have the sort of crazy secret shenanigans I had never gotten to have when I was younger. “Okay, okay I promise! What is it?”

Ari ran to a workbench, and opened a narrow drawer, retrieving a small wooden box. I heard her mutter a few words, and then she waved her hand over the box before turning to me, with her arms outstretched in offering.

“Here, open it.” She shoved it into my hands, practically squealing with excitement.

My heart pounding with anticipation, I slowly lifted the lid. “Whoa!” I gasped as a beam of green light appeared. “What is it?”

“It’s a seed. I want you to take it home and plant it.”

“What kind of seed?” It was literally glowing. It didn’t look like any seed I had ever seen.

“Oh, that’s *so* not important,” Ari answered mysteriously, brushing me off.

I leveled her with a death glare. “I’m not planting some mysterious glowing seed unless you tell me what it is.”

Ari looked hesitant and uncertain, as if she was choosing her words carefully. When she was finally ready to speak, I didn’t know what to expect. It certainly wasn’t what came out of her mouth.

“It’s a love seed. I told you. My plan is to find you a Daddy, even if I have to conjure him up myself.”

I stared at her. She couldn't be serious. It was a joke, right? It had to be. "Get real," I scoffed.

Arianna burst out laughing. "It's not a love seed, but that isn't the worst idea. I might work on that next."

I thrust the box toward her. "Whatever it is, you plant it. I want nothing to do with this."

She stepped back, holding her hands up in front of her.

"I can't plant it. You're the one with the gift of the green thumb. It has to be you for the spell to work."

My suspicions were not relieved. "If you want me to plant it, you have to at least tell me what it is."

Ari smiled and leaned in to whisper, even though we were alone and in no danger of being heard. "An enchanted seed. It should grow faster, larger crops in record time. The bigger your crops, the more excuses you will have to get out of the house and away from the evil stepmother. The two of you will never be able to eat it all. You'll have too much to even give away. You'll probably have to open a stand or something, and you'll be able to get out of the house way more than a few hours a week."

I smiled at her genius. "That does seem pretty great, if it works. But enchanted seeds? Are you sure it's a good idea? Your magic..." I trailed off, trying to choose my words carefully. "It doesn't always work out the way you intend," I finished diplomatically. "Have you tried this before? How do we know it's not dangerous?"

"Oh my god, relax. It's a vegetable, not a land mine." She rolled her eyes. "The truth is, I don't know how it will work; that's why for now, it's just one crop. But, if this works,

Maren, it will change so many things for you. Your life could get so much better. I promise.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “I promise to plant it, now tell me what it’s supposed to grow.”

“Green beans,” she announced proudly.

“Green. Beans?” I repeated slowly. I loved every vegetable under the sun, every single one, except green beans.

“Relax, you don’t have to eat them, just grow them.”

I curled my lip in disgust. “Couldn’t you have picked something less vile?”

“You think people come by every day just giving me seeds? It’s what I had. Plus, I understand they’re good for you. Next time, you can bring me seeds for the crops you want to grow.”

I frowned. Her reasoning made sense. Sort of. There were still some holes. “If it’s all so wonderful and good and life changing, then why can’t anyone know?”

Ari nibbled her lip, shifting from foot to foot. “Grayson has been less than excited about the extremity of some of my new spells and has kind of forbidden me from practicing anymore until I master the more basic ones.”

I laughed loudly. “Now it all makes sense!”

Ari nodded. “Good. Now put it in your bag and let’s go back to the castle before he notices we’re missing.”

“Got it.” I tucked the box in my purse and patted it. “Your secret is safe with me... unless Grayson comes around asking questions, then all bets are off because that man is scary.”

“Pft.” Ari waved her hand as we exited the cottage and ran back to the castle. “He’s a big teddy bear.”

“Who’s a big teddy bear?” Grayson, her very large, very muscled, husband-to-be asked, surprising us as we rounded the corner near the front of the castle. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Where have you ladies been?”

“Well, you of course,” Ari said, answering his first question and ignoring his second.

Grayson smirked. “Teddy bear, huh? Care to explain to Maren why you are avoiding sitting down this afternoon?”

“Nope. I don’t. Sorry, Ogre Daddy, we have things to do. Bye!”

Ari grabbed my hand and dragged me away. All I could do was wave innocently at him and follow her lead.

Later that afternoon, back home, I snuck into my garden through the back gate so as not to call any attention to myself. Looking around, I tried to find a safe place to plant the seed Ari had given me. I didn’t want to wait and risk anything happening to it.

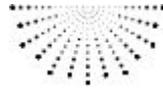
Ari’s statement about me being blessed with a green thumb was true. My garden was full to bursting with plants leaving little space for anything new. Locating a tiny spot close to the house, I grabbed a trowel and dug into the soil about three inches before pulling out the box. I opened it and the light from the seed shone like a tiny lighthouse. Quickly, I dumped the seed into the hole and covered it with dirt before it could... I don’t know... radioactively turn me into something.

I mean, I love Ari, but her magic...

The faintest of glows still shone through the dirt, but no one would see it unless they came into the garden and I didn't let anyone in my garden. After giving my new seed a little bit of water, I snuck into the house. The loud freight-train-like snore rattling through the house was a welcomed sound. My stepmother was already asleep which meant it would be a peaceful night.

I took a quick shower and got into bed, thinking about the seed I had just planted. Despite all the crap I had given Ari, I found myself more excited than nervous. I was hopeful that everything she said was true because I was fed up with life as it was and I was ready for a change.

CHAPTER TWO



I woke to loud creaking and cracking sounds as the ground shook violently beneath my bed. An earthquake?

Vicki screamed from the other room, but I was frozen with fear. Clutching the side of my bed, I scooted to the edge. Just as I was sitting up, a long, thick, green vine burst up through the floor, splintering the wooden floorboards, and continuing straight up and through the roof.

What in the ever-loving fuck was happening?

“This is a nightmare, Maren,” I soothed myself. It had to be a dream. “It’s not real. Just lay down and close your eyes. You’ll wake up soon, and everything will be okay.”

As I laid back down, Vicki continued to scream and I wrapped my pillow around my ears to block out the noise. The vine grew and thickened as more vines sprouted, winding around furniture and clinging to the walls. As I watched, it spread through the entire room before crashing through the closed window, sending glass flying everywhere.

“The seed, you’re having some crazy nightmare because of that damn seed,” I told myself. “First thing in the morning, you’ll dig it up and march it straight back to the castle.”

Glass shattered, wood splintered, and bricks cracked all around me and there was nothing I could do but lie there. It felt like hours until the whole ordeal suddenly stopped and an eerie silence filled the space. I lay still, willing my pounding heart to slow and focusing on taking deep and even breaths. Closing my eyes, I listened for anything that I could focus on, but all of the typical nighttime sounds I used to lull myself to sleep were missing.

I sat up slowly, pulling the pillow from my head as I looked over the edge of the bed. Except for the area around the massive vine that had impaled the house, the floor looked solid and intact.

“Stop being a pussy and get up,” I told myself as my legs refused to move. I pumped myself up enough to get my feet on the floor so I could stand. “There, see. We totally got this.” I took a step and the entire room swayed slightly. “Nope, we don’t got this.”

I jumped back onto the bed and promptly pulled the covers over my head, waiting a full minute before realizing how silly I was being and commencing round two of my self-pep-talk.

“This is a dream; people don’t get hurt in dreams. People get to be brave badasses in dreams!” I reminded myself as I peeked out from under my blanket.

After another minute, I repeated the action of standing and forbid myself from getting back into bed, no matter what happened. “I am badass dream-Maren,” I repeated over and over as I slowly made my way to my closed bedroom door and opened it.

The hall looked a lot like my bedroom, with vines crawling the walls like extra bracers holding everything up and stable despite the faint creaking and swaying under my feet. I saw

Vicki's door and knew I should open it and check on her, but I was forcing this nightmare to be a dream and in dreams you didn't have to deal with the shitty people in your life.

I ventured carefully down the hall, running my hands over the vines and noticing for the first time that they were covered in dangling pods amidst all of the big green leaves.

“Green beans,” I groaned. “I swear, Arianna, as soon as I wake up, I'm going to dig up the stupid demon bean and hand it straight to Grayson. I hope he spansks you silly for this crazy idea!”

“Maren!” Vicki called out again, but her voice sounded like it was a lot further away than it should have been. I wanted to ignore it, block it out and pretend like it wasn't there, because if she was there, then that meant one of two things: this was a nightmare, or it was fucking real. If it was a nightmare, things were only going to get worse, and if it was real, then things just got a whole lot scarier.

“It can't be real.” I laughed, unsure why I was continuing to lie to myself. Why couldn't it be real? My best friend was a princess with magical powers that single-handedly saved our town from the spell of an evil sea witch. In comparison, this was practically normal and totally possible. *No no no. It's not real.*

Taking a few steps back down the hall, I made my way to Vicki's room and slowly opened the door. Her room was gone, well not gone, but broken into what appeared to be four pieces tangled and held in place with thick vines. As I looked over the edge of the broken floorboards, all I could see were vines. There was no way to get from one piece of the room to the other without climbing.

“Maren!” she yelled again, and I had to hold back a laugh when I finally found her.

“Oh, this is definitely a dream,” I whispered as I looked over her predicament. She was wrapped almost fully in the vines and dangling over her bed. Nothing this amazing could be real.

“Maren, what have you done?” she shrieked. “This is your fault, isn’t it? You and that damn garden. You’ve really fucked up this time. Get me down from here this instant!”

I thought for a moment, if this was a dream, then there were no repercussions, and I could say and do whatever I wanted. I smiled and for the first time in over two decades, I stood up for myself.

“You know, Mother,” I said, using the honorific she’d forced on me since childhood, “from the looks of things, you need my help and screaming your poisonous words at me seems really stupid. I’m going to try to figure out what’s happening. You wait here, but I would stay still if I were you. Too much wiggling, and you might fall.”

I closed the door, delighted with her indignant screams of protest and went into explorer mode with a renewed excitement in my step. Being badass dream-Maren was really freakin’ fun.

The rest of the house seemed pretty intact and I couldn’t help but thank karma for doing her due diligence with this dream. If only something like this would happen in real life.

I sighed and went to the front door. As I opened it, I saw a white fog covering the ground and nothing else. I mean nothing save for sky, vines, and the foggy ground cover. It was

beautiful and terrifying all at the same time. It was also eerily silent.

Tentatively, I put my foot outside the threshold of the door and tried to feel the ground, but I couldn't find anything solid. Sitting down, I reached as far as I could with my feet, still nothing.

“Well, what now?” I spoke into the silence.

Karma answered back when, with a jarring jerk and before I could catch on to anything, I was free-falling through the clouds. I didn't even have time to scream before I found myself tangled in vines and hanging upside down. “Not exactly the answer I was hoping for,” I gritted out, trying to pull myself into an upright position and detangle my leg.

The entire vine shook again and this time my descent was not halted by vines, but by contact with solid ground. Hard. Solid. Ground. Pain shot through my body like an electrical shock and I couldn't hold back the scream of agony.

“Dreams aren't supposed to hurt!” I yelled as tears flooded my eyes.

“Who are you?” asked a deep and foreboding voice. From out of nowhere, I was seized, hauled up from the ground in what could only be described as two giant hands around the middle of my body.

“Put me down.” My sight was blurred with tears, so I struggled and kicked but cried out in pain as my leg protested the movement.

“Who are you? Where did you come from?” the voice yelled, and the hands shook me like a rag doll. That's when I passed out.

I hadn't seen another human for years. I had honestly figured I'd never see one again. I'd even gotten used to my odd solitary existence in the sky. What else could I do? I had my house and my garden, and enough seeds to keep me fed for several years at least, and enough food to get new seeds from, even if I was down to only green beans. It was food. But I had missed people. Having considered myself a loner who needed very little human interaction to survive and be happy, loneliness had been a new emotion for me, but I'd learned to cope; I had no choice.

When the odd plant grew up beside my sky land bringing me a new food source, and more seeds, I had never imagined it would also bring me a person. A very pretty, very small, female person. What was I supposed to do with her?

"Wake up!" I gave her another little shake, but it didn't seem to help. Overwhelmed with the idea that I'd hurt her, I rushed her into my house and laid her on a soft pillow atop my oversized couch.

Her body was limp, but I could see her chest rise and fall with her breaths. Not knowing what to do next, I sat silently and surveyed her for a moment. She was tiny, but one of the most beautiful little creatures I'd ever seen. Her long blonde hair sprawled around her head and her plump, yet petite little body was perfect in every way. Her features were delicate and youthful, unlike my own. As a matter of fact, she was the complete opposite of me in every way possible. She was light; I was dark. She was tiny; I was huge. She was soft, and I was hard-muscled. The dichotomy was endless.

Oh yeah, and I'm green. So... there's that.

Covering her body with a blanket, I went to get some water and a chair before returning to her side. Her breathing was steady, and she looked as peaceful as could be. I didn't want to wake her, yet my curiosity got the best of me. I lifted her hand gently and laid it on top of mine. The entirety of it fit perfectly on my palm.

Seeing her delicate hand against my giant one brought back all of those memories of human interaction. Anger and frustration filled every ounce of my being, and I forced myself away from the girl before I let it overcome me and was unable to control myself. Pushing the chair away from the couch, I paced until I was calm enough to think clearly again.

“Owww,” the girl moaned quietly as she shifted.

“Shhh, lie still,” I ordered, a little more forcefully than I should have. Her eyes shot open and she sprang up into a sitting position before crying out in pain and falling back again. “Dammit, I said, lie still. I don't know where your injuries are and if you can't follow directions, I will tie you down until I can figure it out.”

She whimpered and covered her face as she spoke into her hands. I couldn't make out the muffled noises, so I gently nudged her hands aside. Her eyes were squeezed shut and she was chanting.

“It's only a dream. It's only a dream.”

I had to laugh, only because I had told myself the same thing over and over again when I'd been cursed and then cast into the clouds. Unfortunately, it was more of a nightmare than a dream, and one I still hadn't awakened from.

“I wish that were true, but it's not.” I chuckled. “Dreams don't hurt.”

“It has to be a dream. Dream Maren is a badass, but real Maren is too scared to deal with any of this.”

I felt bad that she was afraid, but I had so many questions. “Where did you come from?”

“Venus,” she stuttered.

My heart pounded in my chest. My breath caught in my throat, and my ginormous knees turned instantly rubbery. I was from Venus, but that made no sense. “How? You fell from the sky. Where did that stalk come from?” I knew I was asking questions too fast for her to answer, but I couldn’t help myself. I was trying to make sense of it all!

“I don’t know! All I did was plant the seed and go to bed.” Maren whined, then muttered, “I should have known better. Green beans are evil and this just proves it. Arianna is really going to hear it. I’m telling Grayson what she did as soon as I get down from here and I hope he whoops her ass every day for a month.”

Grayson? I sat dumbfounded at the mention of a name I hadn’t heard in forever, a person I hadn’t *thought* of in ages. Grayson, and his fight with Queen Delta was the literal reason for my giant body and solitary sky-life existence. And this girl, this waif-like pale girl who seemed to have fallen down from the sky above me, claimed to not only know him, but to be from the same village as me. *Could it be?*

“Grayson.” I repeated the name out loud, louder, and meaner sounding than I intended.

The girl wept and covered her face with her hands again. “Please let me go,” she begged.

I shook my head. There was nowhere for her to go and aside from that, I was enjoying having a real live human being

to talk to even if she was shaking like a leaf, obviously terrified of me and making no sense. “You’re in no shape to go anywhere. You blacked out and I’m concerned there are more injuries.”

“I’m fine,” she argued stubbornly as she tried to sit up again. I laid my palm on her chest forcing her to stay in place.

“I have already warned you what would happen if you didn’t listen. It would be my pleasure to make good on that threat,” I growled and she visibly swallowed.

I heard her mutter something about Daddy seeds and Daddies growing on vines, not trees, and a bunch of other gibberish I couldn’t make out. I furrowed my brow, frowning as I tried to follow her train of thought, but it made no sense. My concern that she really did have a head injury grew exponentially.

“You’re not making any sense,” I told her, a little less growly this time.

“I’m sorry.”

“Try to get up again and you certainly will be. Now, tell me everything.”

Maren took a deep breath and regaled me with a story that seemed as though it could only have come out of a fairytale book, yet I knew better. I knew every word was true and I stayed silent and listened, while a hope that I had long ago dismissed as unlikely, came bubbling to life in my chest once more.

“And then she gave me a seed and said I should plant it and, well, I kinda like the thought of having more freedom and I like to plant things, so it didn’t seem like much of a hardship.”

I nodded. “That makes sense.”

Sort of.

Of course, I’m a man whose life experiences include being turned into a very green giant. So, while most of what she was saying required a heavy dose of blind faith to believe, my ability to suspend my disbelief had some serious feet on it.

She was looking at me, trying surreptitiously to take in the full size and bulk of me. I’ll admit it. I took some suspension of disbelief too, but being a lean, green, muscle machine now, I was fairly confident she’d get over the shock of me fairly quickly.

“I think I’m going to go home now,” she said instead and stood up.

“You fell out of the sky,” I reminded her dryly. “Your house is up there,” I said, pointing into the clouds above us. “And your village is down there.” I pointed at the clouds beneath my feet. “Where are you going to go exactly, and how do you plan to get there?”

“Do you not see the giant vine?” she asked sarcastically, pulling herself into a sitting position. She tried to stand, but I stopped her. I was truthfully worried about her health, but also, I just didn’t want her to leave.

“Stay put,” I said forcefully, pushing her down onto the pillow again with one finger. “I’m not going to tell you again. I will help you figure out how you got here and how to get home, but not until I know that you are not hurt or in shock.”

“You’re kind of bossy and domineering, you know that?” the girl said, glaring at me with narrowed eyes and pinched lips.

“I’ve been told that a time or two,” I conceded. “I imagine I haven’t changed much, aside from being huge and green and taking up residence in the clouds.”

“So... you haven’t always been huge and green? Or lived up here? In the clouds? Or wherever we are?”

“Not hardly,” I scoffed. “I reckon it’s been two years, maybe three.”

“Can you tell me how you got here?”

“I will, eventually. Right now, I don’t even know your name.” I stuck my giant hand out and waited for her to take it. “I’m Todd.”

“Maren.” She stuck her tiny hand into my large one, and I shook it, careful to not crush her.

“Maren,” I repeated, letting it roll over my tongue. Maybe it was the fact that she was the first human I had seen in god knew how long, or maybe it was the fact that she was just so damn cute, but I honestly thought it was the prettiest name I had ever heard. “Well, Maren, as I said before, I’ll help you get home if I can, just as soon as I am sure you are well and strong enough to make the journey.”

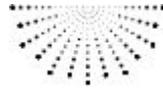
“Journey! Pft! All I have to do is climb down the vine. You are rather a dramatic sort, aren’t you?”

“And you are rather a sassy sort. Okay, so all you have to do is climb down the vine? Let me ask you this. How far is it? How long will it take? How far up are we? If you fall, will you die?”

She frowned at my questions, opening and closing her mouth as she searched for answers she didn’t have.

“That’s what I thought. Now humor me. I’m going to go into the kitchen and make us some breakfast, and you are going to stay put. I hope you like green beans.”

CHAPTER THREE



Green beans for breakfast? Obviously, everyone had been wrong for hundreds of years, and hell was really in the sky, surrounded by bossy green giants and green beans, not under the ground, with flames and horned red guys.

“Um, excuse me,” I called nicely from behind him as he made his way into the kitchen. “I don’t mean to be a bother, but I don’t really care for green beans. Could I get something else?”

The giant, Todd, turned on his heel and regarded me with an odd expression, one eyebrow raised.

“Look around, little dreamer, it’s green beans or nothing. And nothing is not an option.”

He left me there sputtering and confused about his answer. Were green beans really all he had to eat? If so, I really was in hell.

He had told me not to move, and he seemed pretty serious about it, so I sat up on the massive pillow that was roughly the size of my bed back home, pulled my knees up to my chest and looked around. Everything here was ginormous. I honestly wasn’t sure I could get off the giant couch if I wanted to; not without falling and breaking a bone. The house was small, and not that different from most of the cottages in the village of

Venus, except for the size. The cottage itself was a near replica of my own, and very cozy and homey.

Todd was back in record time, holding a bowl that was larger than my face, and a spoon that didn't look like it would fit in my mouth. The glass of water he carried was also gigantic.

I shot him an incredulous look. He shrugged. "It's all I have. And you have to eat."

"Not green beans," I argued.

"It's all I have. I mashed it up and added some water and salt."

"Mashed up? Like baby food?"

He raised one eyebrow and smirked. "If the shoe fits..."

I glared at him. "I am not eating green beans, mashed up or otherwise. I'd rather starve or even die."

The giant had the audacity to laugh at me for a split second before his expression turned grave. "If you're going to be childish and refuse to eat the only food available, I'm going to treat you like a child. You talked about your friend getting a spanking; how would you like to get one too?"

He whacked the giant spoon against his giant thigh and for the first time, I noticed that it was made of wood. I gulped and scooted back on the pillow, flattening myself against the wall. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me. It's been a few years, but I'm sure I can still manage to spank a naughty brat to tears easily enough."

The easy way the threats rolled off his giant tongue both terrified and intrigued me. Was he a Daddy Dom like Grayson? He certainly sounded like one. But get real, what

were the odds of both Arianna and I finding ourselves with giant green daddies? Sure, Grayson was no longer giant or green, but he had been once upon a time. I had heard the stories. I blushed as I remembered them, and my gaze travelled to Todd's crotch. It wasn't hard to do—it was basically at eye level.

He caught me looking and smirked. “You wouldn't even have to get on your knees, little dreamer.”

I gasped and blushed, peeling my eyes away from the bulge in his torn trousers, and up to his face. I had to crane my neck to meet his gaze. His eyes were twinkling with mischief.

“That was highly inappropriate!” I exclaimed, even as I tried not to picture the image his words had created.

“Maybe. But you started it. Probably just another tactic to avoid your breakfast if I had to guess.”

He pulled up a chair and sat in front of the couch with the bowl balanced on his knee, and the spoon clutched in his hand.

He lifted it and waved it in the air between us. “A wooden spoon has always been my favorite implement. So, what's it going to be, do I use it to feed you breakfast, or do I use it to redden that pretty little bottom of yours? Your choice.”

The smart thing to do would have been to open my mouth and let him shovel the wretched mashed green bean concoction into it, but smart wasn't something I was often accused of being.

“My bottom isn't pretty or little. You're just giant and... green.”

“Okay, little dreamer. I get the message. Loud and clear. You've made your choice.”

He put the bowl down on an end table beside the couch, and before I knew it, his giant hands had me, from just under my breasts to the tops of my waist. He lifted and I went flying, up into the air, only to come flying back down again, landing face down across his lap with a thud that nearly knocked the wind out of me.

I struggled in vain to get up, but I was so far off the ground I was effectively suspended in mid-air. “Unhand me you... you... jolly green oaf!” I used my fists to pummel his kneecaps. He didn’t even flinch.

“That’s Jolly Green Daddy to you,” he said with a chuckle.

“Like hell am I calling you Daddy!” I shrieked, struggling under his strong hold.

“That’s okay, little dreamer. You don’t have to call me Daddy. I know you’re thinking it.”

Damn him, I was totally thinking it.

Damn him, and Arianna and Grayson too, for putting these ridiculous fantasies in my head with their stories of magic spells, and castle storming, and therapy spankings, and giant green ogre dick.

Okay, so Arianna was the only one telling the giant green ogre dick stories, obviously, but the thoughts were still there.

Especially now. Trapped across the Giant’s lap, knowing that his cock was underneath me, giant and swollen, and probably green. Like his skin. The color of green beans. The vegetable I hated more than anything. The reason I was trapped face down under his hand, about to get spanked like a child. My train of thought brought me back to my very precarious reality.

“Unhand me, you oaf!” I shouted again.

“Not a chance, darlin’. You were given every opportunity to eat the breakfast you were offered like a good little girl, but you chose to do other things.”

“I hate green beans!” I shouted.

“It’s all I have left,” he snapped back. “I’m almost completely out of seeds, with no way to ever get more and no other food source, and I’m still trying to share what I have with you so you can get your strength up and get home!”

He sounded like he was mad at me for wanting to go home, and that frustrated me. I didn’t know his story, but he had listened to mine with an open mind, and I knew it sounded crazy.

“Fine then! Spank me and force feed me green beans and send me on my way like you can’t wait to do. Just get it over with, already!”

I heard his sputter of surprise, followed by his low growl. “Fine, then.”

No other words were spoken, and the room fell completely silent, until the silence was broken by a loud crack of the spoon against my nightshirt-covered behind, followed by my cry of pain.

“Oooooowww! Oh my god, that hurts like hell!” I shouted, throwing my hands back behind me in an attempt to shield myself from any further swats.

“It’s a spanking. By definition, it’s supposed to hurt,” Todd informed me, nonplussed, moving my hands out of the way and pinning them to the middle of my back.

“Noooo,” I wailed. “Stop. Please Stop. I’ll eat the stupid green beans. I’ll plug my nose; I’ll swallow them whole.”

“And you can do that,” Todd conceded. “After you take your spanking.”

Before I could protest any further, the stupid giant spoon bounced across my ass for a second time. The bowl of the spoon covered the entirety of my lower bottom cheek, which wasn't exactly small.

It took my breath away and before I could catch it, he spanked me again, and then again, in a hard and fast rhythm alternating from one cheek to the other.

“You will eat the food you are given,” he commanded as the spoon peppered my ass with what felt like round welts. “Starving yourself is not an option. I am very sorry I don't have anything else to offer you, but you must eat. Refusing to eat is childish behavior and it will result in childish consequences. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes,” I sniffled. His no nonsense lecture was getting to me in a way I hadn't expected. My whole life I had been constantly corrected, demeaned, belittled, and spoken down to, but I had never been treated like this. I had never been calmly but lovingly corrected and disciplined. I had never been scolded without being put down. Despite the pain, I liked it, and it was doing funny things to my insides, as well as my nether regions.

“You will eat your green bean mash like a good girl?” he questioned. “Every single bite?”

“Y-yes, I promise.” I would have promised to eat snails at that point. Anything to get him to stop spanking me. I just wanted to cuddle in his arms and be hugged and told I was a good girl. I would eat anything to have that, just for a minute.

“If you don’t, you’ll be right back over my knee again, and I’ll bare your bottom next time.”

“No, you don’t need to!” I wailed. “I’ll eat them, I promise.” Maybe later when I no longer hurt, I’d laugh at how ridiculously compliant I sounded. I had always wondered how Grayson managed to command obedience from Arianna with just the threat of a spanking. It had never sounded that bad to me. Now I knew better.

“Okay, little one, so long as you promise.” Todd dropped the spoon and just like that, the spanking was over, much more quickly than it had begun.

I laid frozen over his knees, afraid to move. What if I got up, and it was just over? No hugs, no cuddles, no words of praise that I so desperately needed to hear... just green beans. Flavorless mushy green beans. That would be worse than the spanking itself.

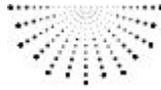
After a minute, a large hand covered my bottom, rubbing gentle circles across the tender skin through my nightgown. It felt weird, but good, and I couldn’t help but moan.

He stopped then, and large hands lifted me into bulky muscular arms as he cuddled me against his chest. “Good girl, Maren,” he whispered.

I melted against him.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” I whispered. I couldn’t help myself. It just felt right.

CHAPTER FOUR



I held her in my arms like one would hold a baby for a long time, until her tears stopped falling and her stomach growled.

“Okay, little one,” I said, setting her finally on her feet. “It’s time to eat your breakfast. And because of your shenanigans, you’re going to have to eat it cold.”

“Yuck.” She wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips in disgust. “Can’t you nuke it?”

I laughed. “Look around, do you see any electricity here? We have no modern-day conveniences up here in the clouds. I heated those over the fire for you and the fire is out. I repeat; you’ll have to eat it cold. That is what we call a natural consequence.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she whispered, looking down at her feet. I followed her gaze and marveled at the sight of her teeny feet next to my ginormous ones.

Her head came right up to my waistline, making my earlier summation exactly correct. I gulped and wiped my forehead where I was suddenly warm.

“Ready to eat?” I asked.

She started to scamper back to the couch and up onto the pillow where she had been sitting before, but I caught the back

of her nightshirt and stopped her in her tracks. “Not so fast. I’ll sit on the couch. Naughty little girls with sore bottoms eat their breakfast on hard wooden chairs.”

Her pouty expression made me laugh as I lifted her onto the giant-sized chair, plopping her bottom down on top of the hard wooden seat.

“That’s not nice,” she pouted.

“Neither was your behavior,” I retorted. The truth was her punishment was over, and I was being a bit unnecessarily cruel and sadistic, but watching her squirm and pout was taking my mind off other *hard* things.

Sighing, I picked up the bowl from the end table, and the spoon from where it had landed on the couch. I picked it up and turned it over in my hand. I should probably get a new one from the kitchen, feeding her with it after I spanked her hardly seemed sanitary, but it had only ever touched the thin cotton fabric of her nightgown, and I figured in the time it took me to get up and get a new one, she might lose her sweet compliant attitude. If she got sassy with me again, I was likely to lose any semblance of self-control that I was hanging onto by a thread, and fill her mouth with a different kind of green treat.

Just the thought had my dick twitching inside my pants and my mouth dry with desire. I had to get my thoughts out of the gutter and out of her pants... and mouth, and anywhere else it didn’t belong. For fuck’s sake, I had just met her an hour ago.

Focusing my teenager-like libido, I sighed, dipped the spoon into the bowl of green mash, and held it out in front of me.

“Open for Daddy.” My tone was soft, but my words were stern, and my voice came out in its usual growl.

Maren answered with a full body shudder before obeying with obvious reluctance. Obediently, her lips closed over the spoon, even as she held her nose closed and tried not to gag.

I waited for her to swallow and open her mouth before getting the second bite ready. “Good girl,” I whispered. “Just a few more.” The upside to having a giant-sized spoon was one bite being the equivalent of three or four, thus reducing the amount of green bean related torture I had to impose on her in order to guarantee she got a healthy dose of vitamins and nutrients.

Tears poked at the corner of her eyes as she forced herself to swallow the second bite. I felt awful, but there was nothing I could do. After years of living up in the clouds, I was lucky to have any food source left at all.

“C’mon, little dreamer, last one,” I coaxed, holding the final bite in front of her.

She nodded, opened her mouth and choked it down, gagging and crying the entire time.

Finally, it was finished. I took the bowl and spoon and walked them to the kitchen to be rinsed later, then made my way back to her.

“There now,” I said, wiping her tear-streaked cheeks. “Was that really worth all that fuss? Maybe next time you can be a good girl and eat your breakfast while it is still warm.”

To my surprise, Maren guffawed loudly and shook her head. “There is no way in hell I would voluntarily eat that shit without having the fight spanked out of me first.”

I chuckled at her honesty. “Noted. And if that’s what it takes, then that can be arranged. Let me know if you change your mind. I imagine that with three meals in a day, sitting might get very uncomfortable.”

I expected her to groan, whine, or try to finagle her way out of the arrangement, or to attempt to talk me down to two meals a day at least.

Instead, she bit her lower lip and looked up at me from behind very sexy lashes. “When I was a little girl, if I had to eat green beans, I always got to have dessert,” she said shyly, her voice and expression full of innuendo, as she looked first at my face, and then down again, allowing her gaze to run over my thick chest, down my abs, and finally settle just below the waistband of my pants.

There was no mistaking her meaning. She wanted me for dessert.

Without a word, growling from somewhere deep in my gut, I picked her up and hoisted her over my shoulder like a bag of flour, and stomped off to the bedroom.

I had done my best to be a gentle giant, mind my manners, and ignore my growing needs, but with an invitation like that, all bets were off.

The spanking made me horny. And despite the green tint of his skin, Todd was sexy as hell, all ripped muscles and washboard abs. And the bulge in his pants was equal parts gloriously huge and terrifyingly intimidating. His arm was as thick as my waist, and my head came to his waistline. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that there was no possible way I

could take his thick cock without being ripped in half. And yet, I couldn't help it, I wanted to try. When he hauled me over his shoulder and stomped off to the bedroom, my mouth went dry and my hands turned damp. My pussy? Well, that was sopping.

He unceremoniously dumped me onto it, and I scrambled to my knees to look up at him as he shook his head at me.

“So, it's dessert you want, is it? Little girl, you have no idea what you are asking.”

Unconsciously, I licked my lips, and my breathing grew shallow. I knew I could never take him inside me, virgin that I was, but holy hell, I wanted to try. If sex with penetration wasn't possible, I would settle for anything else. Oral. His fingers. Anything. But I longed for his touch. It was more than longing, actually. My body ached for it.

He was staring at me questioningly, waiting for what, I didn't know, but I knew I had to say something. Anything. Whatever would get him to give me what I so desperately craved more than my next breath.

“Yes, sir,” I whispered thickly. “I would like dessert.”

He cocked his head and rested his thick fingers on the waistband of his shorts. “You can't tear your eyes away from my cock. Do you want to see what Daddy's packing under these shorts? Is that what you want?”

Wordlessly, I nodded, and then watched as he slowly slid his shorts down, inch by inch revealing a delicious treasure trail, sexy-as-hell Adonis muscles, and finally, his long, thick cock.

It was huge. Just seeing it took my breath away. I had seen exactly zero penises in my life, but even if I saw one every

single day for the rest of my life, I knew that none would ever come close to being as large as Todd's.

It had to be as long as my forearm, and equally as thick. It was as hard as I was wet, and fully erect as it pointed in my direction. The tip was inches away from my nose. I leaned over for a better look. It was veiny, and not unexpectedly green, like the rest of him. And was it just me, or was it oddly reminiscent of a green bean, with its thick middle, and slightly narrower tip? Was it leaning ever so slightly to one side? I had heard all my life that penises could do that, hang to one side or another, but I had never seen it.

As I inspected him, with comparisons running through my head at high speed, I was struck by the absurdity of the situation. And to my horror and shame, I burst into gales of unabashed laughter as I looked at it.

Unamused, Todd slowly pulling his shorts back up. He picked me up and lifted me far enough in the air that we were eye to eye. "You know, when somebody shows you the most intimate parts of themselves, physical or otherwise, you're not supposed to laugh."

I immediately sobered. "I know. I'm sorry. I just... I wasn't expecting..."

"For it to be big and green?"

"No... I mean... yes, I was expecting that. I just... I wasn't expecting it to remind me so much of a green bean." As soon as I said it out loud, I instantly regretted it. "I'm sorry," I backpedaled. "I'm sure it's just me. I might be a little bit delirious. It's just been such a weird morning. I'm sorry," I apologized again.

To my surprise and relief, Todd no longer looked upset. Instead, he looked amused. His eyes twinkled with mirth, and the corners of his mouth turned up into an adorable smirk.

“Just call me the Jolly Green Giant,” he quipped. “On a mission to get naughty girls everywhere to eat their green beans. And if they don’t want to eat their vegetables, they can always eat the one in my pants.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and I lost it, erupting in hysterical laughter once more. I was so thankful he had a sense of humor and absurdity.

“I take it you’ve lost your appetite for dessert,” he murmured, his words a low growl.

My body stilled, and I took stock of my still throbbing pussy and the red-hot arousal coursing through my veins.

“Oh no, sir,” I answered honestly, biting my lower lip. “I’m still very hungry for dessert.”

To prove my point, I grabbed his waistband, and this time I was the one who slowly guided the soft cotton over his wide hips and thick thighs. It was me who brought his bulging erection into plain view. I didn’t look away, and I didn’t laugh. Instead, I leaned forward, parted my lips, and took the tip of him into my mouth. Gently, gingerly, and full of intention. I licked it slowly from tip to base, taking him from my mouth in order to do so, so I didn’t choke on his length. I had never done this before, but his moan of unadulterated pleasure was all the encouragement I needed to keep going. Rising to my knees, I cupped his balls, one in each hand, and slowly dragged my tongue in circles around the base of his penis, massaging him with my hands as I did so. The groan my ministrations elicited was guttural, feral, and full of need.

Before I could do anything further, he grabbed me around the waist and dropped me flat into my back in the middle of

the oversized bed.

“Did I do something wrong?” I questioned, immediately worried about my lack of experience. “Was it not good?”

Todd waved a giant green finger in my face as he shook his head. “No, little dreamer. It was very good. Almost too good. It has been a very long time and Daddy didn’t want to come too soon. I need to make sure you get pleasure too.”

“Oh.” Looking up at him, I swallowed hard. “Okay, Daddy.”

He stopped wagging his finger but continued holding it up in the air. “My dick may be... larger than average, but my finger is the size of an average dick, little one. Maybe we can go easy for today, and I can fuck you with my finger. Is that okay? Does Daddy have your permission to touch your sweet little pussy with my larger than average finger? Can I play with your soft folds, massage your hard little clit, and stick my fingers deep inside you? Can you pretend this finger is Daddy’s hard cock?”

“Oooh, yes, Daddy,” I moaned, writhing from side to side, anxious and greedy for his touch. I held my breath as he leaned down and slowly lifted my worn nightie, pulling it over my head, exposing my sopping wet panties and naked breasts. My nipples were hard and aching like the rest of me.

I had always been self-conscious of my body, more than a little aware that my breasts were more than the handfuls men lusted after, my ass thicker than Beyonce’s, but not nearly as toned, my stomach squishy and soft, and my body what people would nicely refer to as plump. It was one of the many reasons I had stayed a virgin as long as I had. The few times I had an opportunity to get this far with a man, I had frozen, unable to get past the fear of his reaction to my naked body. Funny,

when your partner was big and green with as many insecurities over his own body, those fears weren't quite so loud. And when he looked at me, with his sexy smile and hungry eyes, they weren't there at all. Under his gaze, my spine straightened, pushing my breasts out and flattening my stomach a little bit. I was still nervous, but I also felt sexy, knowing that he wanted me exactly as I am. That I was responsible for his hard erect cock, and the glaze of lust in his eyes.

Impatient for the things he was promising, I parted my thighs and lifted my hips and bottom off the bed, willing him to remove my wet panties and touch me. My request was silent, but my jolly green daddy got the message and was quick to oblige.

His calloused hands teased my hips as he guided the thin scrap of fabric over my hips, down my legs, and off of my body. I was now fully naked with no barrier between us, and still he didn't move. I couldn't wait. Need was building in my body, red hot, and urgent.

“Please, Daddy,” I whispered softly.

“Please what?”

“Please... touch me. Touch my pussy. Fuck me with your fingers. Please.”

Moving as slowly as molasses in winter, he leaned over me, his finger still outstretched in front of him. With our eyes locked, he moved toward my wet hot mound. When he finally rewarded me with the gentlest flick of his large finger between my soft folds, it wasn't enough. I urgently needed more. A needy whimper escaped my lips and I thrust my hips forward to meet him, shamelessly and wordlessly begging for more.

He smiled and covered my hard nub with the pad of his thumb. “Look at how wet you are... daddy’s dirty little girl... so wet and ready.” He flicked my clit and my entire body convulsed. My back arched, my legs stiffened, and the touch seemed to vibrate throughout my body teasing every nerve. Finally, just when I was about to scream from frustration and pent-up desire, he stuck his thick finger inside me, filling me. He stretched and teased, and tortured me with the single thick digit, all the while using his free fingers to caress my folds and tease my clit.

I pulled my legs wide apart to give him better access and was rewarded when he thrust deeper inside me. The pain was sharp, but fleeting, leaving only pleasure in its wake.

“Do you like that, little girl? Is it big enough? Can you take it?”

“Mmm, yes, Daddy,” I moaned. “Harder. Faster. More.”

I wasn’t even sure what it was I wanted or what I was begging for, but he seemed to know. His fingers thrust in and out of my pussy, hard, fast, and punishing, and just when I thought I was going to come, a second finger pushed against the tight entrance of my back hole.

“Oh!” I yelped in surprise.

Todd shook his head, covering my mouth with his free hand. “Take it, baby girl. Take daddy in both your holes. Let him fill you totally and completely, claiming you as his.”

The possessive command delivered in a dark growl while he continued to pound my pussy and while his pinky finger firmly breached my bottom hole, sent me flying over the edge, full speed ahead, racing to the peak of orgasm.

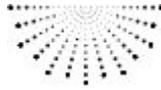
“Yes, Daddy! I’m yours! Claim me!” I cried. I was frantic as my veins filled with rushing waves of red-hot desire that felt like lava heating me from the inside out. I arched my back until I was barely touching the bed and grabbed his shoulders. My nails clawed into his back as I clung to him as if my life depended on it. And still he teased, fucked and poked, giving my body every bit of his attention until I couldn’t take it anymore and cried out, pushing away from him, every nerve in my body singing. I loved his touch, and the way he stroked and strummed and teased, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I sobbed out the throes of my release into his hard shoulder.

“God, oh, Daddy,” I sobbed.

He lifted me like a baby, cradling me in his arms. “Such a good girl. You took it all, didn’t you? Took it all and begged for more. Daddy enjoyed his dessert very much. But guess what, doll? Daddy wants to fuck your mouth. It’s your turn to suck down Daddy’s thick cream.”

Suddenly there was nothing more appealing, nothing I wanted more than his thick green cock inside my mouth. I wanted to make him moan and cry and beg and scream, just as he had done to me. I wiggled out of his arms, sat on the bed on my knees, leaning forward in front of him, and opened my mouth, waiting. “I’m ready for my dessert, Daddy.”

CHAPTER FIVE



Two days later, I woke up in his bed, my stomach growling, my ass on fire, my pussy aching from our constant cycle of *spanking, food, sexy time, nap, repeat* to a mind-blowing revelation. I was head over heels in love with a jolly green giant.

Beside me, Todd yawned, stretched, and pulled me close to him. “Good morning, little dreamer. Are you ready for your pre-breakfast spanking?”

I really wasn’t. True to his word, Todd had kept his promise and spanked me before every single meal. Green beans, green beans, and more green beans. And just like he predicted, sitting through a meal had become almost unbearable.

I groaned and turned to him. “I’ll eat breakfast,” I promised, “but I don’t want another spanking.”

He raised his bushy eyebrows and kissed the top of my head. “I’m sure you don’t, little one, but the way you still gag and cry through every bite, I’m not sure you can be trusted to behave with a mouth full of green beans if I don’t spank you first.”

“I caannn,” I whimpered, knowing he had a point and was right to be unconvinced. Still, I would do just about anything

to not get another spanking right now. “What if you distracted me instead?”

Todd grinned and his eyes twinkled with mischief. “Distract you while you eat? I’m usually the one feeding you, so how do you propose I manage that feat?”

Seeing where his dirty mind was going, I rolled my eyes and bopped him on the shoulder. He didn’t even flinch. “Not like that!” I exclaimed.

“Then how? And how do I know this isn’t just a delay tactic to buy yourself a little more time before you go over my knee again?”

“It’s not, I promise.” I crossed my hands over my heart like a child making a very serious oath. “What if you distract me with a story?”

“A story?”

“Yeah, you know a tale of dangerous peril, and thrilling circumstances, and a hero who ultimately manages to save himself?” I asked hopefully. “You never told me how you ended up living in the clouds, giant and green.”

“So I haven’t,” he conceded. “Although that story doesn’t really end the way you describe.”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. I still want to know.” I stuck out my chin and looked him straight in the eye. “I deserve to know.”

“So, you do,” he agreed with a sigh. “All right then, come on.” He stood up, pulling himself to his full height and lifted me out of the bed, hoisting me over his shoulder like he always did.

“A story it is. No shenanigans, though. You’ll eat every bite and if I have to turn you over my knee to make it happen, I will.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I sighed. We made our way to the kitchen where he plopped me down on a hard chair to watch him cook. He had gotten into the habit of spanking me first and then heating the food, an accommodation I appreciated. Green beans were bad enough, but cold green beans were the worst.

I waited while he heated the pot, watching him from behind. When he was standing, at his full height, and I was sitting on a giant chair that dwarfed me, it was hard to imagine that we were able to have sex. It didn’t seem possible, but we had been managing. All day, every day.

It didn’t take him long to heat the pot of already cooked beans to warm them, and then to mash them up with salt, and walk toward me with that bowl of goopy green vileness.

He grabbed a second chair and pulled it up in front of me. “You want me to feed you, or do you think you can manage it yourself this time?”

“If I feed myself, are you going to find other ways to distract me?” I asked hopefully, the promised story all but forgotten.

“I can do that,” Todd agreed. “Spread your legs.”

When I did so, he reached beneath my nightgown and slid my panties off, tucking them into the pocket of his shorts.

Knowing I was naked beneath my nightie, with my legs spread wide, inviting him, made my pussy pulse with need.

“Take a bite, little dreamer,” he coaxed, sliding his hand up my thighs to rest right below my mound. I shivered with anticipation. Was it gross anticipation of the nasty taste of

green beans, or delicious anticipation of his fingers and the things they would do to me while I choked down my breakfast? Maybe both? I wasn't sure.

It was obvious he didn't plan to start playing until I started eating so I loaded up a big spoonful of the nasty green mash and took a forced bite. As soon as my lips closed over the spoon, Todd began to speak.

"Once upon a time, not very far away..." he began. As he spoke, he stroked my pussy lips, his fingers sliding between the slick folds.

"There was a very wet little girl..."

"That's not the story!"

"Oh right, sorry." His eyes twinkled when he winked at me and his thick middle finger slipped inside me, making me gasp before he spoke again.

"Once upon a time, I lived in the village of Venus. It was a simple life, but I was happy. I kept a huge garden and sold my fresh fruits and vegetables to the villagers, making just enough to live a simple but comfortable life."

I nodded. It described the way most had lived in Venus before the evil Sea Witch had brainwashed the entire town and stolen years of our lives.

Todd paused his story, and his ministrations, to nod toward my bowl of green goop and remind me to take another bite.

Again, as soon as I obeyed, I was rewarded. His fingers were forcefully buried inside my tight canal, as he thrust in and out of me, rocking my body on the oversized chair.

I could hardly concentrate on what he said next. "It started off like a normal day, and then suddenly, out of nowhere, there

was a terrible storm. I remember it was over almost as soon as it started... and then the king and queen were dead.”

“Oh... oh no...” I moaned as his fingers pumped in and out of me. I knew the words he was saying were important, but the reason for their importance seemed just outside of my grasp at the moment. Todd rubbed his thumb over my clit, massaging it lightly, sending shockwaves through my body.

“Green beans, little dreamer,” he murmured.

Fuck the green beans. I grabbed the bowl off the table to appease him and balanced it on the edge of my thigh, with one hand precariously holding it in place. I did not take a bite. I could not possibly take a bite of anything or do anything that required more of me than moaning and panting.

“And that’s it...” he continued, his voice sounding far away and contemplative. “That’s when everything changed. When I heard the news about the king and queen, I was walking down the main road of the village, and I could see emergency vehicles at the lake near the castle. I looked down at the road for a second, and when I looked up, they were gone, and everything had changed. The castle looked dark and gloomy and the villagers were happy, despite the sad news.”

This was important. I knew it was important. I forced myself to look at Todd through glazed eyes. Todd had a dazed expression on his face, and his eyes were glued to my pussy, focused on what he was doing.

“And then she just appeared out of nowhere. And when I saw her, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen and I was struck with the desire to worship her. I could not speak ill of her. I could not disobey her. I could do nothing but praise her.” He stopped then, his fingers still inside me, and shuddered.

“Grayson was there. I knew him, everyone did, but not well or anything. He wasn’t... I’m not sure what he saw, I don’t remember what he said, but I know he didn’t see the same thing I did.”

When he got to the part in the story where he mentioned Grayson, he looked up and our eyes met, but he never stopped fucking me with his fingers. I held my breath and listened to a story I knew well, about a brainwashed villager, who I now knew was him, Grayson, and the evil sea witch’s curse. When the strike of lightning ricocheted off Grayson and sent Todd flying into the sky, to become big and green and never heard from again, I jumped up, knocking over the long-forgotten bowl of green bean mash, and tripping over Todd who was kneeling in front of me.

“We have to go!” I yelled. “We have to go now!”

“Go?” Todd stood and wiped his fingers that had just been inside of me, gazing at me with confusion, as I jumped around the giant cottage, bubbling with excitement. “Go where?”

“Back to Venus! Right now!”

He looked crestfallen as he watched me. “Okay. I guess you’re ready. I’m not really worried about a concussion anymore or anything. But here...” He stalked into the kitchen, grabbed a handful of uncooked green beans from a strainer in the sink, and shoved them in the pocket of my nightgown. “Just in case. We don’t know how long the trip will be. I wouldn’t want you to get hungry or pass out.”

I grabbed the handful of green beans and threw them at him, watching with satisfaction as they hit his massive chest and bounced in all directions. “No! You’re not listening!” I shrieked. “We have to go to Venus. We. As in both of us. Right now!”

He stared at me, his expression full of doubt. “I fit here. By some miracle, my house grew with me and ended up here in the clouds. I won’t fit there.”

I shook my head. “Never mind all that. It’s not important.” My brain was jumping all over the place, contemplating possibilities I couldn’t put into words. I couldn’t explain to him what I was thinking, what I was hoping. I just needed him to trust me. I hoped I wasn’t wrong.

“Maren...” He trailed off looking defeated. He wasn’t going to follow me. I could see it in his sad eyes.

I stared at him, looking for words to convince him, without getting his hopes up. None came.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said. “Never forget me.”

Thinking quickly, I ran over to the giant vine that had brought me here. I knew I was bringing Todd to Venus with me one way or another. I had tried the easy way; now it was time for the hard way. “Come give me a hug, Daddy,” I begged. “Kiss me one more time. I never want to forget the way your lips feel on mine.”

With a sad smile, he obliged, wrapping giant arms around me and pulling me tight against him. I melted against him, breathing deeply and savoring every minute, every feeling, even his scent, just in case my plan didn’t work.

When he released me, he kissed first my lips and then my forehead, lingering with each soft kiss. Finally, we parted, and I took a deep strengthening breath. It was time to put my plan into action.

“I’ll miss you,” I told him. I waited only a beat and then gasped loudly. “Wait! I forgot something!”

“What did you forget? You didn’t bring anything,” he stuttered in confusion.

Without answering, I ran back toward the house, grabbed a pile of green beans off the floor, and shoved them back into my pocket for the sole sake of making my lie more of a ruse. Then I ran back outside and plowed into his back with all the force I could muster, sending him flying into the hole in the clouds created by the giant beanstalk.

“Marrrrrrreeeeennnn,” he shouted as his free fall began. His voice sounded tiny and far away. “I love youuuuuuu.”

“I love you, too,” I shouted after him, knowing he wouldn’t hear me. Leaning over the hole in the clouds that his body had widened when he fell, I gripped the beanstalk and wrapped my legs around it like it was a fire pole. I would climb down if I had to, but I was hoping for more of a slide. Faster, and I might be able to do it with my eyes closed.

“Please let this work,” I prayed as I pushed myself off the cloud and slid, somewhat slowly and awkwardly down the stalk.

Sliding worked, somewhat, but every few minutes I would encounter a leaf, and I would have to push out my body, and sort of shimmy past it, so that I could slide another ten feet or so. I lost track of how many times I did this. Far too many. My arms were tired and sore from gripping the stalk so tightly and my back ached.

I looked down, hoping to see the village beneath me, but all I saw were leaves and clouds. I had a long way to go. With a sigh, I remembered my abandoned breakfast and pulled a green bean from my pocket, plugging my nose with one hand as I crunched down on it. It tasted better raw than it did cooked, but really it just made me think of Todd.

What if my plan hadn't worked, and I never saw him again? Worse yet, what if I had killed him? Fuck. I couldn't wait to find out. With a whispered prayer, I unwrapped my legs from the vine and pushed my body off, starting my own free fall.

The air around me pushed hard and fast into my lungs as I fell, making it hard to breathe. The wind was both holding and pushing me. My body was spread eagle into a back flop and I couldn't move if I wanted to. I tried to yell out, like Todd had, but I couldn't do that either. I could only fall.

And, so, I fell. I fell hard and fast and hopelessly, dreaming of a future with my jolly green daddy back in Venus. On the ground. Regular size. Able to eat food other than green beans.

My mind wandered to my stepmother, and I wondered what had become of her, but even hurling through the sky, thoughts of her made my stomach twist and left a sour taste in my mouth. Pushing her out of my mind, I remembered my conversation with Arianna that day at the castle and giggled. She had done as she promised, she had found me a daddy. He was, of course, jolly and green, and inexplicably fond of green beans, but no one was perfect, and I didn't need Todd to be either. I just needed him to be alive and in one piece.

I filled my head with thoughts of happily ever after, and pretended I was floating in the lake near the castle with Todd beside me.

Suddenly everything changed. The air was light around me, and I was no longer pinned flat. I was falling faster and faster, hurling toward earth. *Please, please let Todd be there.*

With one final prayer, I opened my mouth to yell, and found that I could do that now. "I love you, Todd," I shouted. "Big, green, green bean dick and all!"

The last word barely left my lips before I landed with a thud, on something hard, yet flexible.

“Oof,” the ground muttered beneath me.

Opening my eyes, I scrambled to my feet. Tears sprang to my eyes when I saw it wasn't a *something* I had landed on; it was a *someone*. And not just any someone. A big green someone. Todd, tangled in a huge mess of green bean vines that appeared to have broken his fall. And he was alive. Big, green, dead giants did not oof in pain when someone landed on them. The green beans, and that stupid seed that brought them here, had saved him.

“I guess those stupid beans were finally good for something after all,” I muttered as I worked to untangle the both of us.

When I had freed myself, I fell to my knees beside him and began to inspect his body for injuries. “Todd! Daddy!” I cried through happy, relieved tears. “Are you all right? Are you hurt? Can you talk? Can you sit up? Can you open your eyes? Oh Daddy, please be okay!” I sat back on my heels and stared at him, waiting with bated breath for a response, any response. I was about to start making blind and ridiculous promises about being good forever and eating green beans without complaining for the rest of my life when he did all three things at once. His eyes popped open, he sat up, and before I could even react, large hands grabbed my waist and pulled me face down over his lap, pinning me in place.

“You couldn't just calm down and explain what you wanted, and ask me to go with you?” he growled, smacking the whole of my ass with one giant hand. “You had to wake up and choose violence?”

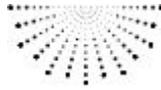
I giggled, even as he smacked me again, leaving a trail of searing pain across my bottom. He was fine.

“Well, yeah,” I sassed. “I couldn’t take any chances that you would say no. I needed you here with me. At home, in Venus, where we both belong.”

“I’m still eight feet tall and green,” he muttered, letting me up and pulling me into his lap to face him. “Did you forget about that?”

Nope, I hadn’t. And to be honest, I wasn’t even that concerned.

CHAPTER SIX



The romantic in me wanted to wrap Maren in my arms, storm off into the distance, and live happily ever after without a care in the world, and the realist in me could not see my way past the big and green part of the equation.

“I didn’t forget anything. You’re big and green, up in the sky, but down here in Venus, the spell that turned you into a giant has already been broken. And if it hasn’t, and I’m wrong, I know someone who can break it. I think. I hope. Maybe.” She scrunched her nose as she babbled a bunch of stuff that made barely any sense at all, but that was okay. I was getting used to that.

“Okay, little dreamer,” I whispered, humoring her. I looked around the village I knew and loved and tried not to get misty eyed. “Where to? What’s the plan?”

Maren thrust her fist into the air with gusto. “Onward!” she shouted. “To the castle!”

“To the castle it is!” I mimicked her battle cry with one of my own, minus the fist thrusting so I wouldn’t drop her.

Even with my long legs and strides, it was a long walk to the castle. We walked and walked and as we walked, it seemed to get farther away. It seemed like my strides got smaller, and the town seemed to be growing larger in front of my eyes.

Trepidation knotted in my stomach. Was Venus turning giant? Had I somehow brought the curse with me? Maren grew heavy in my arms, and I stopped dead in my tracks as I stared at the road in front of me. When we had started our journey, both of my feet had covered the width of the thin dirt path with no room to spare. Now there were several inches on each side of my feet.

“What. Is. Happening?” I whispered.

“What’s wrong?” Maren shifted to look at me, and I almost dropped her. She was getting bigger. Carrying her no longer felt like carrying a baby and was now more like carrying a grown child. She was getting bigger, and so was everything else around us.

In my selfish quest to find love with my little dreamer, I had cursed an entire town to the same fate as myself. “This won’t work,” I whispered frantically. “I love you, Maren, but this was a bad plan. A really bad plan. We have to go back, or at least I do. I have to go back now before the spell gets stronger and Venus becomes a giant town. Maybe if I run, I can save you and the rest of the villagers from this fate.”

Maren looked at me like I had grown a second head. She cocked her head to one side, and then the other, staring at me with confusion and amusement etched into her features. She looked at me, and then the road beneath us and the town around us. And then, she threw her head back and laughed. Big, hearty, joyous guffaws of laughter.

“Todd!” she shouted. “You silly oaf! The town isn’t getting bigger, and neither am I. You’re shrinking! It’s happening just like I thought! Down here, the spell has already been broken. We don’t even need to find Arianna, really, but I still want to. Let’s still go to the castle. I want to tell her everything. She

will never believe this. Or maybe she will. Trust me when I say, stranger things have happened.”

She rambled on and on and I listened in stunned awe, trying to process the magnitude of her claims. I blinked slowly as the truth settled. “I’m shrinking?” I repeated slowly, phrasing it like a question. “Am I still green?”

“For now,” Maren confirmed. “But your skin might be getting lighter, I can’t really tell. Anyway, you’re getting smaller by the minute. Put me down before you throw out your back.”

Still in shock, I obliged, and when her feet hit the ground, the top of her head came to just below my pecs. Before it had been waist level.

“So cool!” Maren squealed beside me, grabbing my hand. She took off running toward the castle, and I followed suit, taking in every detail of the scenery on the way. It had been too long since I had seen something other than clouds.

Despite my still somewhat long legs, Maren was faster than me, sprinting all the way to the castle, with me behind her, shrinking with every step.

We reached the castle entrance in record time, and Maren pounded on the thick wooden door with a closed fist.

Within seconds, a breathless young lady appeared with flushed cheeks, messy hair, and tears in her eyes. She reached behind her and gingerly rubbed her bottom before looking up at us. When she saw Maren, she gasped.

“Maren?” she cried, throwing her arms around her and squeezing her tight, while I lagged behind, awkward and green, but happy. “I thought I was never going to see you again!”

The hug ended abruptly, and Arianna gripped Maren by the shoulders, holding her at arm's length. "You're about thirty minutes too late," she said with a good-natured scowl. "You were nowhere to be found, and your house was gone, and I had to tell Grayson about the seed. Oh hello, who's this?" Arianna shifted gears as soon as she noticed me standing behind them.

Maren squealed, ripping herself away from Arianna and hugging me tightly as she smiled at her friend. "I'm sorry you got in trouble, even if you did deserve it. Would it make it up to you if I told you I found a giant green daddy of my very own?"

Arianna looked at me and then back at Maren. "Are you okay? Why are you in your nightgown? Did you hit your head? 'Cause whoever this is, he is very handsome, but he is neither giant, nor green."

I held out my arm for inspection and was pleased to find that Arianna was right. I was no longer green, and Maren's head now came up to my chin.

"It's a new development," Maren explained with a shrug, pushing past Arianna to enter the castle. "Is that banana bread I smell? Oh Lord. I hope there's plenty. I am literally starving right now. And I will eat anything, literally anything, as long as it isn't green beans. I'm never eating green beans again in my life. Never ever."

Arianna just watched her friend chatter on with a bemused expression and led us into the kitchen.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw Grayson, as the memory of that fateful day flashed through my mind. Grayson had always been a good guy, and I was glad to see he was okay. And I was okay. We were both okay.

“Daddy!” Arianna yelled gleefully as we entered the kitchen. “You spanked me too soon. Look! Maren is here, and she brought someone with her! I think he might be her daddy!”

I couldn’t help but snicker at her enthusiastic announcement, but I was nervous to be here, and see Grayson, and well, all of it. But it was a good kind of nervous.

He turned away from the stove and his smile faltered as Arianna introduced us. “Sorry,” he said as he shook my hand. “You look really familiar.”

“Does he?” Maren asked innocently. “I thought he might. Plate up some banana bread and have a seat. I’ve got one heck of a story to tell you guys.”

Grayson smirked at her bossiness, but he did as was asked, and ten minutes later we were sitting in front of a plate of crumbs. Maren was finishing up her tale, and Grayson and Arianna were aghast, hanging onto her every word.

I licked the last bit of crumbs off my fingers and waited for her to finish.

“And that’s how we ended up here,” Maren finally said. “Is there any more banana bread, by chance? Or like, anything that isn’t green beans? It doesn’t matter what. I won’t be picky.”

Grayson opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, Arianna slammed her open hand down in the center of the table.

“Hot damn!” she exclaimed loudly. “I guess you were wrong, Maren! Turns out Daddies really do grow on trees!”

Not having a clue what Arianna meant, I twisted my now normal sized body to look at Maren, who was giggling behind her hand.

“Well, it was more of a vine really, and he didn’t really grow on it, but you’re right,” Maren said, looking sideways at me. “I planted a magic seed, grew a giant beanstalk and ended up with a Daddy. So, by that logic, yes, Daddies do in fact, grow on trees.” Shaking my head at their logic, I reached under the table and grabbed her hand, folding her fingers through mine. In response, she leaned in to rest her head on my shoulder.

“I guess they do,” I whispered.

The End

For more Fantastical Daddy Doms, [click here](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ray and Ally live on different sides of the continent with husbands that look eerily similar. They each have 2 children, 2 dogs, and a bald-headed, bearded husband who drives them crazy.

When they aren't writing, they are generally video-chatting with each other, and terrorizing Facebook, often doing both at once.

They share a mutual love for sushi, Lindor truffles, and books that make them laugh, and that is where the similarities end.

Since they are basically one person, Ray and Ally have a joint newsletter, a group they run together where they get up to all sorts of shenanigans, and a joint Facebook page where they share their love of kinky books and dirty rom-coms by sharing links, sales, giveaways and new releases from their favorite authors.

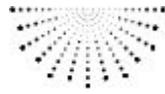
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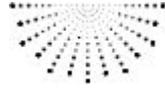
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

For my Family

CHAPTER ONE



SUMMONS

The summons arrived on the thirteenth day of February, a Thursday, pushed through Maud's mail slot for her to find when she got home from work. The envelope was of heavy paper, cream-colored, and it bore Maud's name in a calligrapher's hand, like the inside envelope of a formal invitation to a wedding. Indeed, Maud found inside the envelope a rectangle of cream-colored cardstock which had an ornate, engraved message that she supposed as she began to read it must be such an invitation.

She did not have to read far, though, before she understood that what she had received represented something quite different from a wedding invitation, although the resonance with that time-honored and cherished tradition clearly played a role in the extreme heat of the blood that rushed to Maud's face as she read.

The disciplinary tribunal of the Secret Society of Saint Valentine requires your presence at its hearing of the fourteenth instant, at seven o'clock post meridiem in the society's headquarters, Forty-Five Hunt Road, Highfield, Connecticut, for the purpose of awarding your sexual submission and erotic obedience to the gentleman whose friends have referred your case to us. Having evaluated your erotic profile and observed your conduct, the tribunal has

elected to docket you for a disciplinary hearing and a mastering ceremony. You will dress yourself in the clothes our staff will give you upon your arrival, and submit yourself to preparation, punishment, training, and sexual use by the gentleman to whom we have decided to award mastery of your body.

Any attempt to evade this summons, or to discuss it with anyone, including the gentleman whose property you will be, will result in dire consequences. We urge you simply to accept your new life of submission and your new role as the erotic possession of the gentleman we judge able to master you as thoroughly as we judge you need to be mastered.

Maud did not think for a moment that the thing might be a joke, or a hoax. She did, however, decide that it must be a game — and one that seemed to her in very poor taste. David had tried to get her to play sex games before, but Maud always said, “Don’t be silly, David.”

Now, apparently, he had gone to great expense to see whether he could interest her in what Maud had come to think of as his *little quirk*. Yes, David had gotten exasperated on the morning of New Year’s. After she had gotten so drunk at the fancy New Year’s Eve party to which he had taken her, she knew he had a right to his frustration. He had really let her have it, verbally: he had said that his ideas about *taking the lead* in their relationship and about *guiding* Maud held more importance for him than she seemed able to realize.

He had even said he had begun to think that his love for her might not be enough to get them through to the future. But Maud could tell — *thought* she could tell, she admitted now — that he didn’t really mean it. She thought she could tell David was just looking for excuses to put off proposing to her.

Maud Fredericks had met David Carroll in October. They had already begun in November impetuously to talk about a shared future. At thirty-one, David said he had had enough of bachelorhood; Maud, twenty-three, couldn't really say why she found older men so much more attractive than men her own age, but she couldn't deny it either. The idea of this dark-brown-haired, blue-eyed software entrepreneur, with his high cheekbones and his crew-strengthened shoulders, choosing *her* with whom to settle down made her nearly swoon whenever she thought about.

They had had sex only a week after meeting, at his palatial apartment in Boston. Maud still blushed to remember the way she had seemed to melt in his arms, when he unzipped her dress as he kissed her next to the table where they had just eaten the spectacular dinner he had made. So confused had she been by her arousal that she had excused herself and gone to undress in his bedroom, so that when he came in he found her naked and waiting: ready for the traditional missionary-position sex they then had, as Maud tried desperately not to show David the embarrassing way her body seemed to cry out for so much more.

The next morning, Maud had invited him to her family's Thanksgiving dinner, pretending — not lying, really, though perhaps implying falsely, which wasn't the same thing at all — that her family didn't consider bringing a boyfriend to Thanksgiving a big deal. It was a big deal, though, as appeared very quickly at dinner, and David had called her on it, that night in her childhood bedroom.

That had been the first time he had suggested one of his games.

“You didn’t tell me,” David said softly but with a steely edge in his voice, “that your mother thinks we’re engaged.”

Maud’s heart started to pound in her chest. “She doesn’t! I mean, I didn’t tell her anything like that.”

“That makes it worse, Maud.” The furrow in his brow grew deeper. “That means that she assumed it because you invited me for Thanksgiving dinner, which in turn means that you failed to tell me that your family’s Thanksgiving is a great deal more important than you said. Do you remember when I specifically asked if your parents knew that we had just started dating?”

“Yes?” Maud said. “But, David, it’s not a big deal, is it? I mean, you really seemed to have a great time, and you like them, right?”

David sighed. “No, it’s not a big deal. Yes, I like your parents very much, and I hope they like me.”

“Oh, they did!” Maud said, glad that the little storm seemed to be passing off.

“But I think I need to make something clear. I consider it my right and responsibility to bring some discipline into your life, so that you don’t think you can keep this kind of information from me. I think I need to spank you. After that, we’ll have sex before I go the guest room. I’ll take you from behind so that you feel more submissive.”

Maud felt her face turn as red as a tomato. She found that she had begun to chew on a stray chestnut lock that had come loose from her French braid. For an instant, she hadn’t realized that the idea was only a sort of game David thought might spice things up between them. In that eyeblink of time she had pictured it: the two images superimposed one on the other —

Maud held firmly over David's lap as he sat on the side of the bed of her girlhood, her blue dress' skirt raised and her grey briefs pulled down around her knees, the firm little cheeks of her bottom growing red under his hand; Maud on her hands and knees on the bed, that same backside offered to him as he knelt behind her, reaching forward to caress her little breasts and down to claim her between her thighs, as he got her ready for the pleasure he would take inside her there.

By that time they had had sex twice more — all three times in the usual way. Maud, having had two serious boyfriends before David, hadn't experienced anything but the usual way, but she was proud to say that when a man offered to use his fingers, afterward, she came quickly and — if she didn't — she faked an orgasm for him. Yes, she usually came when she felt like the man had been selfish in one way or another, while he had sex with her: had pushed her knees back, or said something filthy like, "Such a nice, tight pussy," as David had the second time.

That didn't by any stretch of the imagination mean, however, that she wanted to play silly sex games. Maud had no interest in anything other than the usual way of having sex. It was difficult these days to avoid the presence in the media of images that tried to make it seem normal to play silly sex games, of course, but she had grown up in a household where you learned right from wrong, and you learned that just because you saw something on TV or in a movie — or even read it in a book — that didn't mean it was right.

So when the image of what it would look like, to play David's sex game, flashed through her mind she shuddered and said, "Don't be silly."

He had looked into her eyes calmly, with an air of assessment, as if trying to determine her precise state of mind. For a few moments Maud felt like David could see things in her that she didn't even know about herself. The feeling didn't make her happy, and she pursed her lips as she looked back at him, wondering if this bizarre notion of spanking and the other thing he had said indicated there were something wrong with him.

“Alright,” he said finally. “I'll see you in the morning. We can talk about this later.” He stood up and regarded her from above, where she still sat on the side of the little bed covered with the pink comforter.

“Wait,” Maud said. “Don't you want... I mean, you know...” She smiled and patted the bed. No sex games for her, thank you, but suddenly she very much wanted... well, she wanted David, and there was nothing wrong with that as even her parents acknowledged. To have sex in her childhood bed, which she had never before done with a boyfriend, would be fun, right?

David's mouth twisted into a wry, lopsided smile. “I don't think so, Maud. I want you at least to think about how you didn't tell me something I really needed to know.”

With that, he had left her room. They *hadn't* talked about it, because Maud changed the subject every time David brought it up. David, with whom Maud had by Christmas fallen desperately in love, more desperately than she had ever loved anyone before, endeared himself to her all the more with his extraordinary patience. Every time she steered the conversation away from her parents and Thanksgiving — the dinner and the strange sex-game proposal in her room

afterward — she saw that wry smile flash across his face, and he let it drop.

Until the New Year's Eve party, when Maud had refused to stop drinking champagne although David had repeatedly and with increasing urgency and anger asked her to think about their plans for the hotel room afterward. Instead of making love in the enormous jacuzzi tub in the beautiful suite, he had held her hair back from her face while she threw up into the toilet.

When she awoke, with the memory of David's kindness and patience warming her heart, she found him sitting on the side of the bed with a grave look on his face. "Maud," he said in the same soft but steel-edged tone he had used in her room on Thanksgiving, "I know you don't want to hear this, but I need to try again. It's very important to me that I be the one to take the lead in our relationship, especially when you're making foolish choices."

"I know, I know," Maud said, feeling sorry but also feeling a little panicked that she might have to have another of these conversations. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have drunk so much. Any chance we can take that tub now?" She tried to smile winsomely.

David shook his head. "No, it's nearly eleven. We have to pack up and get going. But before that, I need to make it clear to you that you're going to have to let me guide you, and discipline you, or I think we might not make it."

"Might not..." Maud tried very hard to pretend she didn't know what he meant. Really, she didn't, at least as far as the *leading* and the *guiding* and above all the *disciplining* went.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm saying, Maud," David said calmly and a little sadly. "I've tried to let you think

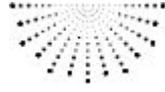
about if for the past few weeks, without any pressure, but what happened last night makes me think I should have forced the issue earlier. In any case, I want you to get up out of bed and come over here and lay yourself over my lap. I'm going to spank you. Then I'm going to fuck you from behind just like I should have done on Thanksgiving. We'll pack and go, after that, but when we get back to my apartment, you're going to give me a blowjob, and then we're going to have anal sex. I'll be gentle, because I know it will be your first time, but I feel strongly that I need to do what I can to help you understand my expectations."

Maud's whole body had seemed to go burning hot and then ice cold while David delivered this speech. Her mouth hung open as she gazed at him across the rumpled bed. He regarded her with his kind eyes set in a determined face. She tried to speak, but for a moment no sound emerged from her throat. The stillness of the beautiful hotel room seemed perfect — oppressive in its perfection, actually, as if the furniture itself waited for Maud to make up her mind how to respond.

Again, as on Thanksgiving, she pictured it: over his lap, then on hands and knees; then, much worse, on her knees before him, trying to give him pleasure with an inexperienced mouth; and, at last, the... the other thing.

She felt her face, which had seemed to her to wear an unaccountably open expression for the last few moments, as if part of her didn't understand what David meant, or didn't grasp how stupid it was, grow hard in its lines. She set her jaw in her best *I know right from wrong* fashion. She said, "Don't be silly," and she got up and walked to the bathroom to take a shower, closing the door firmly behind her, and locking it despite an absolute conviction that David would never intrude unless invited, no matter what bizarre things he said about sex.

CHAPTER TWO



EVASION

What was she supposed to do about this new version of the silly sex game? David could spend his money any way he wanted, of course. If he wanted to create an engraved invitation, or summons, or whatever, and hire a calligrapher to put Maud's name on the envelope... well, fine. Whatever. But frankly this one seemed to have taken the thing a little too far. She needed to confront him and make sure this was the end of it. Despite the strange quirky things he seemed to be into in the relationship department, she never felt anything but safe and secure with him, and she definitely didn't want to break up with him, but he needed to take *no* for an answer when it came to this stuff.

She couldn't deny that she had a tiny bit of curiosity about what might actually be located at 45 Hunt Road, Highfield, CT — was this all a way to propose on Valentine's Day, maybe? Enough was enough, however. If he wanted to propose, he would have to do it without bringing in these ideas about "discipline."

The fact that he had, with apparent regret, told her that they would have to celebrate Valentine's Day a day late on the 15th seemed to Maud now evidence that David had some sort of romantic plan. He had told her he would have to be at a conference in Stamford on Valentine's Day, a Friday, but

would make it up to her on Saturday with a fancy dinner. She had told him that was fine, because of course it was: David had the knack of making her feel loved even if every detail didn't come out exactly right.

This... summons, however, just didn't work for her. Maybe she could persuade him to keep the romantic bits and jettison the sex-game stuff. Maud felt no pang of guilt about that, she supposed, because the summons seemed so over the top. "The gentleman whose friends have referred your case to us" — what did that even mean? And, apparently, the *us* took it upon themselves to "award" Maud to David? How? Why?

Maud made a resolution before she picked up the phone. Either David would let go of this nonsense, or she would break up with him.

"Sure," he said at the other end of the phone when she told him she was coming over. "I'm packing right now, though, and I need to leave for Stamford in an hour to make it to the opening reception. What's up?"

His voice sounded so calm and blasé that Maud could hardly believe this David shared a skin with the David who had come up with the bizarre summons — or the instructions, twice given and never obeyed, to put herself over his knee for a spanking. But, she reflected, he had spoken calmly then, too: Maud herself just hadn't had the slightest chance of keeping her cool.

"It's about this... thing you put through my mail-slot..." she began, but suddenly a burst of static on the line drowned out David's reply.

It sounded like he said, "What?" or maybe "What thing?" and then something like "I wasn't even near your place today," but the interference reached a volume so loud that Maud

couldn't tell. Then she thought he said, "Really bad connection, sweetheart. Just come on over, okay?"

Then he hung up.

Feeling strangely uneasy, as if the bad connection on the phone had represented some sort of omen, Maud descended the steps of the brownstone where she had a second-floor apartment to the parking area in back where her little red VW bug awaited. The sight of the car reassured her as it always did: its sheer cuteness seemed to call out to something in Maud's character that loved to be thought of as *cute*.

But as she walked to the car door, she noticed that a tall man in a trenchcoat was leaning against a telephone pole only a few yards away. Then she noticed that he was looking steadily at her through the twilight. He had fashionably, if severely, cut salt-and-pepper hair and a well-trimmed beard, and his dark eyes seemed amused but not very pleased. He wore a dark-blue suit over a shirt so white it gleamed, but no tie.

"Miss Fredericks," the man said in a pleasant baritone, "you're making a mistake."

Maud's hand froze as it reached for the handle of the VW's door. "Do I know you?" she said in a very weak voice. She found herself trying to decide whether this encounter was the strangest thing that had ever happened to her, as if somehow to rank its disquieting effect among other disturbing occurrences might damp down the anxiety that rose inside her now. *The summons... the static on the phone... the man leaning against the telephone pole...* All together, yes, probably the strangest thing ever, but that must mean that it couldn't get any stranger, right?

“You do now,” the man said simply. “Don’t go to David’s apartment. Obey the summons you received, and I promise you that you will find great happiness. Indeed, I promise you that even if you disobey me, you will find the same great happiness. You will find it, however, in a less pleasant way.”

Maud’s stomach lurched with fear and a welter of other emotions she could hardly have named. She finished reaching for the door handle and yanked the car door open, practically leaped inside. Then realizing that she hadn’t had her keys out, she started to fumble desperately for them in her purse, sure that the man in the blue suit would now approach and try to remove her forcibly from the car. But when she gave one panicked look up from the purse and out the window of the car, she saw that he seemed to have gone. Shocked, Maud swiveled her head back and forth, trying to figure out to where he had moved, but she found no trace of him at all.

When the police car’s lights went on behind her, three blocks from her apartment, Maud could hardly believe it. At least she regarded having her registration on top in the glove compartment as a nearly religious duty, so she was ready with it, and her license, when the officer, a red-headed man of forty or so, wearing the severely disapproving look they must teach at the police academy, leaned down to speak with her.

“Do you know why I pulled you over, miss?” he asked.

Maud had no idea at all. “No, officer,” she said, trying to sound as innocent as she could.

“I didn’t think so,” the policeman said with an even deeper frown, if that were possible. “I’m going to have to ask you to

follow me to the station. It's just around the corner."

"What?" Maud asked. "I... why?"

"Miss, I don't think you want to be arrested for failing to comply with my instructions."

"No... n-no, of course not, officer, but... can you just... what's this about?" Maud's heart, having calmed its thudding pace after the encounter with the man in the suit, now seemed to race as if she were running for her life. *Policemen*. She had never gotten over her childhood fear of them.

"You'll find out at the station. We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Miss..." He looked down at her license by the light of his flashlight, the sun nearly having set by then. "... Fredricks."

Maud realized that her breath had started to come in pants. "The easy way, please, officer," she squeaked.

"Alright," he said, letting his frown turn up into a smile that relieved, and pleased, Maud more than she thought it had any right to do. "Just follow me. I'll pull out, and by you, and then I'll take a right turn." He handed her back her license and registration. "I'm Officer Miller. I'll see you at the station."

"Okay, officer," Maud replied meekly.

The little police station to which Officer Miller led her in his cruiser had a parking lot around the back. One "visitor" space was open, to Maud's relief, and she took it. She worried that David might get anxious, but his apartment was only ten minutes away, and hopefully this thing with the police wouldn't take long to clear up. Officer Miller got out of his cruiser and waited for her to cross the parking lot to him. Then, wordlessly, he led her to the glass door and opened it for

her. As she passed inside, he said, “We’ll just go into that first door on the right.”

Maud felt a surge of relief that he wouldn’t be taking her to stand in front of one of those big desks with the sergeant sitting behind it, or into a big open office where criminals might sit handcuffed to their chairs. She loved cop shows despite her fear of real policemen, but she had no desire to experience that stuff for herself.

“Go ahead and sit down at the table, Maud,” Officer Miller said, taking off his peaked cap with its police insignia and laying it down on one of the several chairs along the wall. As she obeyed, Maud noted with unease the big mirror that anyone who watched TV knew let the people on the other side see what was happening and the metal staple in the table for securing suspects in cuffs and chains and things.

To Maud’s surprise, though, Officer Miller neither sat across from her nor told her that she must wait for someone else to arrive. Instead he said, “Maud, it’s a shame you have to experience real discipline for the first time here in a police station, but you’ve had a lot of chances to follow some very simple instructions, and yet you haven’t managed to conduct yourself properly. So I’m going to have to ask you to get up and bend yourself down over the table, and then I’m going to paddle you. Twenty good hard swats on your naughty backside, to teach you to behave yourself.”

What? was of course the word that sprang to Maud’s mind, but she couldn’t say it because she couldn’t say anything at all. Her mouth hung open, and again her heart raced as again her breath came in little gasps. Her chin quivered a little, as if trying to decide whether to attempt a “w” or simply to tremble in fear.

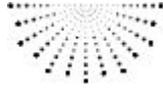
Officer Miller, who Maud now noticed stood more than six feet tall and had burly forearms, one of which sprouted thick, fiery hair as he began to roll up his sleeve, looked back at her. She saw his eyes glance over towards the wall, and involuntarily Maud's own eyes followed his gaze to find a feature of the examination room she had not noticed: an old-fashioned wooden spanking paddle, with irregularly spaced air-holes to allow for greater velocity, hung on the wall.

Maud gave a little cry of alarm, and shrank back into the red plastic of the chair. For a moment she felt a strange sort of admiration at Officer Miller's having told her to sit down before he delivered the news of why he had brought her there: Maud might well have fainted otherwise at the sight of the paddle. A thought from somewhere deep inside her mind — a place she wanted to pretend did not exist — pushed its way to the surface: *These men know how to punish naughty girls.*

Then, at last, as if shocked into speech by the sight and the terrible thought it had occasioned, Maud managed to say, "What kind of police station *is* this?"

"The kind you need, Maud Fredericks. The kind where a young woman who can't follow instructions goes to start learning the way things are going to be for her, from this point on." Officer Miller's face seemed disappointed now, as if he knew Maud were more intelligent than to ask such a question. "Now do as I've said. You'll have to raise your skirt for me, but I won't make you take down your panties for the paddle. Frankly, I think you deserve to have your bare backside tanned, but I don't think that will be long in coming, at this rate."

CHAPTER THREE



CONSEQUENCES

Maud could hardly locate a rational thought inside her head. The one that seemed to keep floating to the top of her roiled wits said that she probably couldn't get out of having her bottom paddled by this fake policeman. Or maybe he was a real policeman, but he worked for whomever David had hired to... to play this stupid sex game. In any case, "Officer" Miller was big and strong, and the idea that now Maud simply had no way to avoid doing as he said, and learning a painful lesson in obedience seemed to dominate her mind so thoroughly that every other thought ran away from it in terror.

David's stupid game. Only when you hired a man in a suit to lean against a telephone pole, and then you hired a man to impersonate a police officer, or a real police officer to detain your girlfriend on no charge at all, because you wanted to have sex with her in some kinky way, it couldn't still be a game. David had most definitely gone way too far, now.

"Tell David... tell him that it's..." Maud stammered, trying to regain her composure as she looked at "Officer" Miller and feeling her cheeks burn with the shame of the very suggestion that she might get up from the chair and bend over the table.

He folded his arms, the right one now bare to the elbow, across his chest and looked back at her with a nearly expressionless face. “You’re going to call him, Maud, after I’ve paddled you, and tell him that you remembered you had an errand to run and you’ll see him Saturday. Then you’re going to go home and get a good night’s sleep, and tomorrow you’ll go to work. After work you’ll drive down to Highfield, and you’ll keep your appointment with the tribunal.”

“B—but...,” suddenly Maud felt a good deal less sure that she knew what was going on than she had a moment before.

“Did you not read the summons, Maud?” the police officer said. “How you’re not to discuss your disciplinary session with anyone? The summons makes perfectly clear that the society has instructed you to appear *on behalf of* the man who will take you in hand, to whom you will belong after tomorrow.”

“What?” Maud said. Yes, the bizarre invitation-thing had said that, but that clearly made part of David’s game.

Officer Miller shook his head, as if at a disappointing student, and said, patiently, “The society will give you to David tomorrow night as a surprise, ready for punishment and for pleasure — his pleasure, that is, unless he chooses to reward you with pleasure of your own. We have watched you for the last few weeks and observed that your well-being will be best served by precisely what David has offered you now on more than one occasion.”

“How do you *know* that?” Maud demanded, feeling her face go blazing hot. Her hands had clenched into angry fists. “That *asshole*! How could he?”

“Watch your language, Maud,” Officer Miller said calmly. “You just earned five more swats for disrespect. David has a

friend whom you haven't met, who has been a mentor to him. David mentioned to this friend in January that he had concerns about your relationship: that he thought he could tell that you would find happiness submitting to him, and letting him guide you and take care of you, but that he didn't think he could get you to see that for yourself. He told his friend that he loved you, but that he was going to break up with you."

Maud felt the blood drain from her face. Her brow creased as she tried to keep from crying. She looked down at her hands, which now clenched and unclenched.

Officer Miller continued, "David's friend convinced him to wait. He told David that he thought you could be brought to see how much you need to be taken in hand by an intelligent, dominant man like David."

Taken in hand. That phrase again. Every time this "officer" said it, it made Maud's heart do a funny little leap that she told herself must be pure fright at the chauvinism of the idea.

Maud almost said *bullshit*, then, to show the strength of her rejection of all of it, but she stopped herself, sure that she would earn more paddling. Instead she said, "It's not true," but her voice came out in a whine rather than the declaratory tone she thought she had meant.

"Frankly, Maud," the man replied smoothly, "at this point it doesn't matter whether it's true. David's friend referred your case to the disciplinary tribunal of the Society of Saint Valentine. We observed you, and we found compelling evidence that David was correct. Tomorrow night, you will be taken in hand by the man who loves you, and you will learn to please him as he deserves, after he punishes you for the disobedience and disrespect you have shown him."

Maud's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“Enough delaying, young lady,” Officer Miller said. “It’s time for your paddling. After you’ve had it, I think you’ll understand how important it is to make the call I spoke of and then, tomorrow, to keep your appointment. If you don’t start obeying our instructions, as you will soon obey your new master’s, you’ll get your punishment on your bare behind next time. You’ll learn very swiftly just how sorry a man like me can make a naughty girl, unless you start improving your conduct.”

Master. Obey your new master. Maud shuddered. She watched Officer Miller walk slowly and deliberately to the wall and take the paddle from its hook. He turned back to her, holding the horrible thing in his right hand, and tapped it on his left palm, three times, looking into Maud’s eyes all the while. Then, with his left index finger, he pointed to the table.

“P–please...” Maud choked, starting to cry in fear. “Please don’t. I’ll... I’ll be good. I’ll o–obey.”

“We both know that’s not true yet, Maud. You know how badly you need this lesson as well as I do. If I didn’t paddle you now, you’d never show up tomorrow, because you would think we weren’t serious about ensuring that you start a new, happy life as a strong, successful man’s submissive girl. Now get yourself into position for your punishment, or I’ll have to put you there.”

Maud, crying harder, put her hands over her face. Her mind refused to take it in, refused to consider the man’s words or think them through at all. Moving as quickly as she could, as if trying to flee both Officer Miller and her own confusing response to his declarations, she jumped up and ran for the door, shouting, “Help! Please, someone! Help!”

The door knob wouldn't turn: somehow it had gotten locked from the outside. Behind her, Officer Miller said, "Yell all you want, Maud. As you've guessed, although I happen to be a real police officer, this isn't a real police station. Behind the two-way mirror are only more members of the society. This is your last chance to avoid me carrying you to the table and holding you down and then giving you ten more swats for my trouble. It's time for you to get used to the idea that you're going to be held accountable for your behavior in the old-fashioned way you need. That begins with learning to get into position, to show the man who is taking the trouble to correct you that you understand your need for discipline and acknowledge his right and his responsibility to provide that discipline." His voice suddenly became much sterner, though it remained devoid of apparent anger. "Get over the table and raise your skirt, Maud. I'm going to paddle you now."

Her knees very weak, Maud turned around to see him still standing in the same place, still holding the paddle, still pointing to the table. She saw in his eyes that he knew how much more difficult he had just made it for her to obey him. If bending over the table would mean that she had acknowledged this *thing*... whatever it was... this stupid sex game or this bizarre ritual or this *taken in hand* business — that she admitted she *needed* it — well, "Officer" Miller could forget that.

His face took on a severe, almost grim look. "Clearly you're not ready for that, Maud," he said in a disappointed tone. "I promise you, though, that you *will* be." Then he put the paddle on the table and stepped towards her.

Maud cowered against the door, and then she kicked and hit and yelled, but Officer Miller simply took hold of her around her waist, turned her around, and hauled her to the

table. Once he had her there, he pushed her over it, the standard fake wood hard against Maud's cheek and the wooden paddle right in front of her eyes, lying ready there. Though she tried to move them away, make it more difficult for him somehow, he gathered her hands in his big left hand and held them behind her back.

Then he yanked up her grey work skirt. "The society has a bylaw," he said matter-of-factly, "that only a girl's master may uncover her nakedness. In the case of a girl like you who hasn't yet been awarded, unfortunately, that means that I can't give you what you truly deserve, Maud, which is some really severe bare-bottom discipline. You don't have a master to give me permission. Thankfully, I can promise you that it won't be long before your panties come down."

Then she watched him take the paddle from the table. Then she heard the soft whistling of the air through the holes in the paddle's face. Then Maud's first punishment had begun: upon her bottom-cheeks, covered in her boy-short gray cotton briefs, hard swats landed in quick succession, as Officer Miller counted, "One... two... three... four..."

At first Maud thought that it didn't hurt as much as she had thought it would. By the time he had reached "five," though, her backside blazed with pain, and she started to cry out, and then to kick.

"Don't do that, Maud," Officer Miller said. "Keep your rearend still for me. If you kick again, I'll add another ten."

Now the threat really did mean something to Maud, and she did hold still, though inside her panties she felt her bottom begin to clench uncontrollably and the thought of what that looked like to the man punishing her added shame to the terrible pain. By fifteen, she was sobbing into the table, her

tears pooling beneath her face, giving little yelps at each swat but otherwise not moving.

“I’ll let your wrists go, Maud, if you think you can hold still for the rest of your punishment,” Officer Miller said, in what seemed to Maud a slightly less disapproving tone. She felt, to her shame, a little thrill of happiness go through her, as if to please the man who paddled her were suddenly all she wanted.

She nodded against the table, too abashed to speak, and he did take his left hand from her wrists.

“Take hold of the other side of the table,” he said even more gently. “It will help. These last few are going to hurt a lot.”

“Oh, God,” Maud sobbed, reaching her hands out and doing as he said. The last five swats made her cry out very loud, and she couldn’t help trying to move her bottom even though she gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles turned white to keep from putting her hands back behind in a desperate attempt to ward off the paddle. Officer Miller just brought his left hand down to hold her hips still, and counted, “Twenty-two... twenty-three...,” as he kept delivering swat after swat.

Finally the twenty-fifth came, and he said, “You may go ahead and rub your bottom, Maud.”

Even though it seemed terribly shameful to do such a thing at all, let alone in front of Officer Miller, she couldn’t help putting her hands back and holding her punished cheeks, cherishing them in her fingers through the cotton of her panties as she continued to weep with the pain, though the rubbing did help. She didn’t like the feeling, but she found she

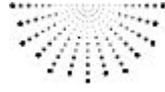
felt grateful to Officer Miller for allowing her to touch her own bottom.

Then, to her surprise, she found that another feeling had begun, and that she was thinking not of Officer Miller but of David, and of his silly sex games. Before she knew it, her sobs had begun to sound much more ambiguous, as she relieved her pain with her hands upon her cotton-pantied backside.

Maud's face blazed hot and she snatched her hands away. Had "Officer" Miller known the effect it would have on her?

"You may get up, Maud," he said. She couldn't look at his face, now, but she thought she heard some amusement in his tone, and that deepened her blush even further. "Go ahead and call David, now, and then you may leave. I'll see you tomorrow in Highfield. Remember that if you don't obey, you've got a lot more punishment coming. Let the state of your bottom be your reminder to be a good girl. Take a good look at it in the mirror tonight before you go to bed, and I think you'll understand how important it is that you show up for your appointment."

CHAPTER FOUR



PREPARATION

David watched Maud's red Bug pull up at the grand entrance to the enormous chateau from the second story window of the bedroom where Will had told him to wait until they — whoever *they* were — came to get him. David still didn't understand why Will would go to the trouble of creating a fake conference to lure him down to Connecticut, but Will had always been the kind of guy who pulled mysterious shit like that, and David had always loved never really knowing what his friend had up his sleeve.

Ever since Will had taken the younger man under his wing when he was a college senior and David was a freshman, there had been surprises like snap trips to Vegas and Paris, blind dates with hot girls, and bottles of Dom Perignon “just because.” This, though. This didn't just take the cake: it hit the cake with a nuclear missile.

Or so it seemed, though David had no way to tell for sure because he still had no idea what *this* was. Twenty hours before, he had found, in the hotel lobby, instead of a reception for software developers, Will Garland in his usual natty suit, hands spread in a *sue me* gesture. Since then David had enjoyed the hospitality of this mansion on the Connecticut shore instead of enduring hours of mind-numbing boredom.

“Trust me,” Will had said, when leaving David at the door of this bedroom done in a French Second Empire style that matched the architecture. “In the morning you’ll start to understand.”

The man at the gatehouse had greeted Will as “Mr. Garland,” as had someone who could only be a butler, but they had seen no one else. Who lived here? How did Will know them? Why the Hell was David going along with this?

Well, the last question was easy to answer: Will had never steered him wrong. The older man’s tastes might run to slightly racier extremes than David’s own, but on several memorable occasions Will had introduced David to certain pleasures he probably wouldn’t have had the audacity to try on his own.

That was why, David had reflected as he fell asleep Thursday night, the advice to be patient with Maud had seemed so strange. Indeed, that piece of advice was running the risk of being the first bum steer Will had ever given him. After the strange call with the interference and then the second call saying Maud wasn’t coming over after all and she would see him Saturday, he had resolved that he would take her out for a nice dinner on Saturday as he had planned, but he wouldn’t bring up her submitting to him the way he had thought he might, and then he would stop by her apartment on Sunday and put a regretful end to the thing.

He had given it more than a month since he had confessed to Will that he thought he and Maud weren’t going to make it, despite how over-the-moon David had been in November.

“You don’t blame me, though, right?” Will had asked over their weekly lunch, the Friday after New Year’s.

“Why would I blame you?” David asked, taking a sip of water.

“You know, because I got you into D/s.”

“Dude,” David replied, laughing, “you didn’t get me into D/s.”

“Come on,” Will said, in a tone of mock-offense. “Don’t tell me you would ever have spanked a girl if I hadn’t made you spank Monica.”

“You didn’t *make* me.” David said, feeling a bit of anger rise at the thought. “You suggested it, and I decided to try it, and it worked.”

“Okay, okay,” Will said, raising his hands above his sandwich in a conciliatory gesture. “But am I right in thinking that you’re going to break up with Maud because she’s not into it? That you told her she needed a spanking, and some good, hard, come-for-me-you-little-bitch fucking, and she wasn’t having any?”

David kept his silence, but he knew his eyes betrayed the accuracy of the guess.

“Don’t,” Will said simply. “Give it a month. Give it until Valentine’s Day at least. I have a feeling Maud will come around. I think you two are good together.”

Now here Maud came in her VW. David began to get the feeling that the whole thing was one amazing set up. *For what, though?* Twenty hours in this bedroom, luxurious as it was and as extensive as was the selection on the bookshelf — featuring some rather spectacular erotica — and on the TV — every imaginable channel including some adult ones David had never heard of — had strained his tolerance of Will’s mysteriousness. That strain vanished the instant he caught

sight of Maud's car driving up the long tree-lined avenue towards the house. In place of skepticism, though, his curiosity became almost maddening.

Suddenly, without warning, the TV turned itself on. David looked back from the window to see that the screen showed a view at ground level of Maud's car, as someone who seemed to be a parking attendant walked out to meet it, while the butler stood ready a few yards away. Maud got out with a puzzled — or frightened? — look on her face. The attendant got in and drove the VW away.

The butler must have been wearing a mic, because the sound came very clearly. "Welcome, Miss Fredericks," he said.

Maud turned from watching her car driven around the back of the house to look at the butler. "Is this..."

"The Society of Saint Valentine, yes," the butler said. *The what?* David thought. *What the Hell is going on?* "Follow me, please."

The view on the screen changed as Maud passed in through the big door. Wordlessly, the butler led her through the foyer to a door that lay beyond the grand staircase he and Will had come up. The butler opened the door, and suddenly the view changed again, to a camera inside the room that lay on the other side, showing the look on Maud's face as she saw what awaited her. She took a step back, but now the butler had taken up a station behind her, and he propelled Maud firmly into the room. He stepped back and closed the door. The click of a lock sounded.

Maud said, "Oh, no." Her eyes had gone wide, and she had begun to breathe very quickly.

Then the camera panned, and David saw what had alarmed the girl he loved.

The room was a sumptuous bathroom, tiled in marble. Another girl, a beautiful, busty brunette, sat reclining naked in what looked like a cross between a dentist's chair and a gynecologist's exam table. Her legs were spread wide in the knee stirrups, and a third girl, a redhead, dressed only in a pair of pink panties, sat on a stool between the brunette's legs, waxing her pussy.

It took David a moment to realize that the girl in the chair had been strapped to it, and that she also had a sort of gag in her mouth, which appeared on closer inspection to be a pair of lacy panties. Her eyes went wide, apparently at the sight of Maud.

The girl doing the waxing said, without turning around, "Hello, Maud. I'll just finish up Mandy's pussy and then it will be your turn. Go ahead and get undressed for me like a good girl, please."

David Ross took an analytic approach to life. His mind, ever since he could remember, had had the power to observe its own working, and this observer-function, as David thought of it, clicked along whether he willed it or not like an old-fashioned movie-camera, always ready to offer its notes and comments so that much of life felt to him like he was in a movie that, at the same time, he was watching.

Now, the feeling of watching himself watching Maud grew vertiginous for a moment as David's mental observer rendered one urgent judgment: not surprise — a fact that, paradoxically, surprised him — but affirmation. *Yes. That's what my girl needs — what I couldn't give her.*

Something else clicked into place at that point: the reason he had really from the moment Will told him that he should be patient with Maud rejected the advice and delayed breaking up with her partly to make sure that he could do it gently and partly to humor Will. Only a fool thinks he's always right, he knew — though David tended to be right more often, it seemed to him, than most people. Now he knew that indeed his opinion had held the essential truth about Maud: David didn't have the power to show her how badly she needed to submit to him.

After all, David Ross couldn't force Maud to come to some chateau in Connecticut on Valentine's Day. He couldn't have her boyfriend waiting upstairs, watching on a video monitor as Maud turned around desperately and tried the locked door behind her. He couldn't force the issue that appeared so clearly in Maud's face as, still trying the doorknob she turned to look at the girls behind her: her hope of escaping the preparation she could see she must receive, between her thighs, for the things that she, like David, could only assume awaited her tonight, there in her eyes right alongside her craving for those same things.

Before this moment, David would have assumed that no one could do that, but apparently he had yet again underestimated Will Garland.

The girl in the pink panties continued waxing Mandy as if Maud were not trying to flee, until at last Maud gave up on the door and turned back around as if to see whether this lovely bathroom had another exit. With Maud, David noticed an enormous claw-footed tub in the corner from which he saw steam rising, and a mirror that ran the length of one wall, and — next to the mirrored wall at a right angle from it — a rack

upon which hung a marvelous panoply of the sort of lingerie Maud never wore.

At that point, whether because Mandy's pussy and bottom-crack were now entirely smooth and bare — which David could see they were — or because the girl on the stool could sense that Maud's reactions had reached some proper stage for it, she said, casually and still without turning, “Mandy here had to have her clothes taken off for her. I'd ask her to tell you what happened then, but unfortunately she made too much noise, and the attendant had to put her panties in her mouth, as you can see. Do you want to have to taste your panties, Maud? Whenever a girl gets a panty-gag here, we make sure that the part that's wet goes right on her tongue, to teach her that she must learn not to refuse her master's commands, no matter how shameful.”

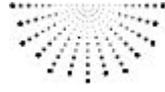
Maud shook her head wildly, her back against the door and her hands clenched in front of her chest. She had apparently taken off her winter coat for the drive to Connecticut, and then not thought to fetch it from the car when she got out here at the chateau: she wore her usual work outfit, which David always found incredibly cute and even hot, in a sort of fucking-the-secretary way: a gray knee-length skirt and a white silk blouse, with a string of pearls. On her legs, David knew, she wore pantyhose over the modest gray boy-short panties he rather liked though, if she had obeyed him on either of the occasions he had offered to dominated her, he would in short order have required her also often to wear the sort of lacy thong he really preferred. On the rack by the mirror in this bathroom, he saw with a little thrill that went straight to his cock, hung several of those thongs.

“Mandy's lacy panties were soaking,” continued the girl on the stool calmly and inexorably. “Come see, Maud.” Then, to

David's delight, she began gently to rub the pussy she had just bared. "There you go, Mandy," she murmured. "See how nice it feels to be bare down here, the way your master likes?"

Little whimpers came from Mandy, around the panty-gag, and she closed her eyes as if she couldn't bear to look at Maud on the other side of the room. For her part, Maud had taken what seemed a nearly involuntary step forward, and her eyes did seem fixed on what the red-headed, pink-pantied girl did with her fingers, cooing gently all the while to the girl for whose preparation she clearly had responsibility.

CHAPTER FIVE



TRIBUNAL

The door of David's bedroom opened, and Will walked in. He wore, to David's surprise, a black robe, belted at the waist, like a dressing gown but somehow of a more official cut. He also wore a Cheshire-Cat grin.

"Sorry to make you wait, man," he said. "Society business, you know."

"Society?" David asked.

The grin widened. "Welcome to the Secret Society of Saint Valentine," Will said. "The strangest, most awesome non-governmental organization you never heard of before." He glanced at the video monitor, and David followed his eyes to see that Maud, with her lower lip between her teeth, had come even closer to the little tableau of the now-moaning Mandy and the redheaded girl in the pink panties, the strange chair and the stool.

"Do you want Alice to teach Maud to eat pussy?" Will asked abruptly. "They'd probably have to whip her first, but I'm telling you, the first time you see your girlfriend kiss another girl's cunt because you said she had to, it's like..." He made an explosion gesture in front of his midriff.

David cleared his throat. The image of Maud on her knees, with the marks of a whip upon her creamy, perfect bottom,

made to do the shameful thing between the thighs of a girl she had never seen, made to smell another girl's arousal and use her mouth to please a pussy, had gotten him terribly hard. But Will had a tendency to move things ahead less deliberately than David's analytic mind liked.

"Hold on, Will," he said. "First things first, please. Let's talk about whether I need to call the police."

Will laughed. "Alright," he said. "Just so you know, the video feed is being recorded, so you'll be able to watch everything later, if you have to miss something because of your boring tendency to figure stuff out. And you'll want to watch it all with Maud on her knees in front of you, of course, once you get home tomorrow."

David shook his head to try to clear it of yet another image so arousing it threatened to make a mockery of his analytic ability. The movie camera clicked on, but the images on it seemed so outlandish that he found it hard to make the slightest sense of them. He glanced again at the screen. To his astonishment, Maud had started to unbutton her blouse, her eyes troubled but still fixed on the two other girls. The pink-pantied girl — Alice, Will had called her — said, "That's enough, Mandy. We've got to get you dressed and into the chamber of discipline. The white lace set on the end of the rack is for you." She started to unfasten the velcro straps that bound Mandy to the chair.

At the words *chamber of discipline*, a shudder had seemed to go through Maud. Her eyes went to the rack: behind the white lace bra-and-panty set hung a black one that David could see immediately would look stunning on her.

He shook his head again, and returned his attention to Will. "So tell me why whatever this is isn't kidnapping and, as

seems likely to be about to occur in one way or another, assault.”

Will’s face became as serious as it ever could, which wasn’t all that serious because his eyebrows always seemed on the verge of going waggishly upward. “Have you heard Maud ask to go?”

“What about the girl in the chair?” David demanded.

“When Alice takes Mandy’s panties out of her mouth, I promise she won’t scream or yell. Mandy Parker will go into her disciplinary hearing like the good girl she wants to be for her master. Just like Maud came here like a good girl despite getting a paddling last night from Officer Liam Miller of the Boston Police and this good society.”

“What?” David’s mind went back to the strange way Maud had said she would come over and then changed her mind.

“Why don’t we watch that now?” Will said. He picked up a remote from the table under the wall-mounted monitor. “What Liam said to Maud will probably help you understand. Also, there’s this.” From the pocket of his robe, he produced a card that looked like a wedding invitation.

David read, and watched, in silence. The video Will called up with a few button-presses seemed an edit of shots from Officer Miller’s body-camera and the cameras in the supposed police station. When he saw the paddle for the first time, David had to clear his throat and fold his arms over his chest, but otherwise he managed to keep his gaze stony through all the amazing shots of Maud’s beautiful bottom, in the gray boy-shorts, writhing under the stern correction meted out by the police officer.

The video ended. David turned to Will, anger rising in his chest. “I need to say that I’m not thrilled that you, and your friends, took it upon yourself to do that.”

“Of course not,” Will said, actually looking grave for the very first time in David’s experience. “It’s never fun for a dominant to see someone else punish his girl — unless of course he’s specifically arranged it, in which case, let me tell you, it’s awesome.” The solemn expression departed for a moment, replaced by an impish grin, which in turn vanished as he clearly saw David’s failure to be amused. “But I know you’re too honest to deny that you were going to break up with her.”

“That’s not an excuse!” David said, losing his calm just a little bit.

“I know, I know,” Will said, pushing his hands against an invisible table in a *settle down* motion. “Bros before hos kind of thing. Paddling the girl you broke up with is probably even worse than dating the girl you broke up with, and this was even before you’d broken up with her.”

David nodded, his jaw still set with anger.

“I do want to make sure you heard what Liam said about not uncovering her nakedness. With the exception of the preparation you just saw, which Maud is now getting just like Mandy did and is always done by another girl, that’s a hard and fast rule here. The next time Maud gets naked it will be because you took her panties off, whether to punish her or to fuck her. One thing we recommend, especially at the beginning, is that you be in charge of your girl’s underwear. You’ll probably even want to instruct her to call you for permission to use the toilet.”

“Jesus,” David said. He found it a little difficult to believe how hard that idea got him. He had a little experience of dominating a submissive girlfriend — Monica, who Will had rightly suggested would enjoy getting spanked — but it appeared that this secret society went well beyond hairbrushes and occasional anal sex.

“Look,” Will continued, clearly knowing he had a checkmate on his next move. “You and I both know that you couldn’t have made this happen. We both know that if I had asked you if you wanted the society’s tribunal to take up Maud’s case you would have said *no* even though you would have wanted to say *yes*. This is the way it works here — the way it’s worked for more than a hundred years. Girls like Maud need taking in hand, and guys like you and me can do it. But the way the world is set up these days doesn’t make it easy. That’s where the tribunal comes in.”

He pushed a button the remote, and the monitor came back to life, showing Maud stepping naked out of the tub, helped by Alice. To his amazement, David saw that between her legs she had already been shaved with the clippers he now noticed on a nearby counter. Her sweet little pout of a pussy peeped out already, saucily and pinkly between the paler outer lips that now had only a short light brown stubble remaining upon them. The look on her face seemed that of someone in a trance.

Before he could even react, Will had changed the scene on the monitor, and David now saw what must be the chamber of discipline. Mandy knelt on a sort of little prie-dieu in the center of a room that resembled a judicial chamber: green carpet and green baize upon the long table at which three distinguished-looking middle-aged men dressed in robes like Will’s presided.

On the walls hung paintings that seemed to be scenes from mythology: David thought he could make out, though, that the gods seemed to be enjoying themselves with their nymphs rather more wickedly than was usual in such art. An armless, high-backed chair of dark, carved wood stood prominently against the wall to the side of the table.

Behind Mandy stood another, younger, man, also dressed in one of the robes. The look upon his face seemed slightly less assured than the expressions worn by the men who clearly made up the tribunal.

“That’s her master,” Will said, pointing to the younger man. “Oh, that reminds me. Look in the closet — you should get into your robe and your shorts. Don’t worry — I promise you won’t miss anything. They’re just getting started. “

In the walk-in closet David found his own robe, and hanging inside it, a rather mystifying pair of knee-length, tight-fitting cotton shorts. The mystery lay in the way they seemed open at the front, so that his cock and balls would hang free. “Will?” he called. “About the shorts?”

He heard Will laugh. “Yup. No underwear. You’ll see on the video in a few moments how effective they are.”

Feeling a little self-conscious, but also already suspecting in what way the shorts would prove *effective*, David took off his jeans, t-shirt, and boxers, and donned the garb he had already begun to think of as the ceremonial robes of the society into which it seemed he had been recruited. When he emerged, with the robe belted and the shorts underneath starting to make him feel, well, quite dominant, he saw on the monitor that the camera had focused in on Mandy’s pretty face, which, wreathed in dark, wavy tresses done into a loose chignon, bore upon it a marvelous, ambiguous expression.

David recognized the expression from Maud's face, when he fucked her: hoping for dominance, yearning to submit, but terrified of what it would mean to admit that need to herself.

The patient, but stern voice came from off camera. "... refused to allow your master —"

"He's not my m-master," Mandy protested half-heartedly, but her furrowed brow seemed to say otherwise.

"Silence!" said another male voice. "Mr. Gresham, may I invite you to show your girl her master?"

The angle changed, to show the man who stood behind Mandy stepping forward, around her, to stand between Mandy and the table. He started to unbelt his robe.

"I believe," said the first voice, which David could now see belonged to the man who sat at the center of the table, "that you can reason out where you must now look, Mandy."

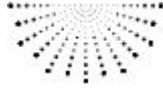
Mr. Gresham, fit and blond, had his robe open, and, yes, David could see exactly how effective the shorts were: the cock sprang up and the scrotum hung there right in front of Mandy's face, and she did know where she had to keep her eyes. The black cotton of the shorts made it terribly plain how her master's dominance would be exercised.

"You have been a bad girl, Mandy Parker, but from now on your master Mr. Gresham will ensure that you know his rights and your duties. No longer will you refuse your anus to him, when he wishes to enjoy you back there, and to train you to please him with that sweet bottom of yours. Look at the hard cock in front of you, and understand that you must serve it from now on. You will take it in your mouth, and in your cunt, and in your anus, when your master wishes to put it there, and you will thank him for honoring your body that way."

Short little puffs of breath came from Mandy's nostrils, as if she kept her mouth closed as not to have the cock pushed inside it.

"Mr. Gresham," the man who David felt sure must be the chairman of the tribunal said, "would you care to punish Mandy now, or would you like to enjoy her mouth and save the punishment for later?"

CHAPTER SIX



JUSTICE

“When I open the door,” Alice told Maud, “you’ll walk in, with your eyes downcast, and take your place on the kneeling desk in the center of the room.”

Maud stood in the same place from which she had watched Mandy depart half an hour before, to a fate Maud could hardly guess at despite knowing that terrible shame must play the most important role in it. She trembled, looking at the heavy door of dark oak that looked all too appropriate for the entrance to a *tribunal*.

To wear nothing but a black lace thong and a matching bra; to know that under the thong Alice had just painfully waxed away her chestnut curls: those things would mortify Maud all by themselves. The idea that she must now appear before some sort of court, and receive some kind of judgment... the idea that the tribunal would *award* her to David... and the thought of what might follow — it all made Maud want to sink through the floor.

Even worse that she couldn’t now deny to herself — though she would most certainly continue to deny to other people, especially David — that her own body had become a traitor. Sitting on her paddled bottom all day at work and driving down here to this strange mansion she had tried to

keep her mind on the need simply to get through whatever this was. But the thought of whatever it was, and the thought of David being there, made her tingle all over, beginning with the lingering smart of her bottom-cheeks and moving from there to the places next to it that she struggled not to touch all day.

She would get through this, she told herself grimly. She would play David's friend's sex game, because she loved David, and then she would reclaim him. Once she proved her love for him, Maud felt certain, he wouldn't need to talk about spanking her, would he? She did want to be his good girl, after all — and what was wrong with that?

But then it had all gone so very strange, and wrong, so very quickly: the butler, the parking attendant, the grand foyer... and then, so suddenly, this bathroom and the door locking behind Maud and the sight of Mandy with her panties in her mouth. At the same time, her mind had rejected the scene and her body had simply melted at the sight of it.

She had undressed because she couldn't bear another punishment like the one from Officer Miller and Alice said that if Maud didn't obey that was exactly what would happen. She had obeyed, because she didn't want to have to have her panties, yes, terribly damp now, in her mouth the way Mandy did, didn't want to have to be strapped down to the chair the way Mandy was.

Naked in that chair once Mandy had gone through the door, under the clippers, Maud whimpered at the sight of Alice in her cute pink panties, harvesting the wiry locks between Maud's pale thighs. Then, in the tub, Alice had taken shameful liberties with the washcloth between those thighs. Maud gasped, but she did not resist, because she knew she could not bear another paddling.

She put on the lingerie, because Alice said if she didn't the attendants would come. That they would carry her naked into the tribunal and bind her in place, and whip her savagely. Maud never, ever wore lacy underwear, because she had been raised to think that you must never let anyone see your panties, and why would you wear lacy lingerie except because you wanted a man to see it?

But Officer Miller had seen her panties, and paddled her so hard on their seat. He had taught her a lesson, he said. But what lesson?

The answer came to her, looking at the door to the tribunal: from now on, David would decide about her panties. Unless Maud wanted a daily spanking, she would wear panties that David liked, and he would remove them whenever he wanted, and then he would have sex with her however he liked — even the shameful ways he had said he would: even her mouth. Even the other place, where it would hurt and make her feel so dirty, to be that kind of girl — the kind whose boyfriend made her open to him that shameful way. The thought made her mind recoil even as it made her knees tremble.

A bell sounded up above the door — the same bell that had sounded for Mandy, half an hour ago. Alice opened the enormous door, and a blast of cooler air — not cold, but bracing after the warmth of the steamy bathroom — swirled around Maud. She felt her nipples stiffen at the sensation, and as she stepped forward automatically into the room, so that she might not be whipped, they tingled in the lacy bra just as she caught sight of David.

He wore a dark robe she had never seen before, belted at the waist, and he looked so incredibly handsome, unshaven but also effortlessly elegant, close-cropped brown hair seeming to

set off his blue eyes so dramatically that they almost glowed, that Maud felt lightheaded at the sight. He smiled at her with an unguarded, approving expression that took her breath away. She realized suddenly she hadn't seen that smile since Thanksgiving, and she felt for the first time that she understood: he wanted to take care of her. His way of taking care of her involved things she hadn't expected, but it appeared that as difficult as it might be to learn her lesson, she must now learn it, because David had decided to take her in hand.

He nodded towards the center of the room, the smile disappearing and a stern look replacing it that made Maud remember what Alice had said about keeping her eyes downcast. There stood the little kneeling desk, which seemed lower than most, and padded across the top, where her elbows would go.

All the warmth David's smile had given her seemed to vanish in an instant. She tried to hold onto it: she knew it still existed, somewhere, but the thing upon which she must kneel in her shameful new underwear filled her with dread. Shaking with fear at the thought of how she would look to David, kneeling there in front of him, Maud lowered her gaze and walked slowly towards the center of the room, now seeing with a hot blush that three older men sat at a long table on the other side of the kneeling desk. That she must not raise her eyes to look at the men's faces and must only have the sense of their age and their imposing, authoritative presence seemed to make the shame even worse. Maud knelt, wondering whether she might actually scorch the skin of her cheeks with the heat of the blood that rushed to them.

"Maud Fredericks," said a voice from the center of the table, "you have come here to answer for your disobedience

and disrespect to the gentleman who stands behind you, who loves you and whom you love. Do you confess your love for him?”

She could not help it: the question startled her so thoroughly that her eyes darted upward, to see the three men, in robes like the one David wore: all of them so grave, all of them looking so grave. It took her a long moment to realize that the man on the left was Officer Miller and the man on the right had been the one standing in a trenchcoat outside her apartment. She gave a little gasp when she recognized them, but the red-haired policeman and the dark-haired, bearded man from her apartment made no sign they had ever met her before.

All of them looking at her, kneeling before them in lacy black underwear that meant Maud had come here in order to have her body given to David — in order to submit to David’s firm hand and to his hard cock.

She lowered her eyes, swallowing hard. “I do,” she said softly, for what else could she say but the truth?

“We are the disciplinary tribunal of the Secret Society of Saint Valentine,” the man in the center said. “In our review of your case, we have found sufficient evidence of your need for discipline and dominance by the man you love to bring you here. Master Inquirer, please proceed.”

The bearded man who sat to Maud’s right said, “Maud Fredericks, you will now acknowledge your faults, and receive your just reward for them. Please tell us in your own words of your disobedience to the man you love, whose word should be law to you.”

Maud found to her astonishment that she began speaking without even considering what to say, or whether she should

speak at all. She had already admitted that she loved David, and wasn't it true — for her, at least, her body cried out — that she should obey him? “David —”

The man in the center interrupted her, though. “You will call him your master from henceforth, Maud, in this house and anywhere else he chooses. Begin again.”

Startled again, she looked up for a second time, and saw that the man's gray eyes were regarding her severely. He spoke again. “Keep your eyes where they belong, girl.”

To her dismay, Maud felt her body respond to the man's arrogant, commanding tone. Though she had resolved to try to obey, to try to be a good girl, confusion took hold of her for a moment at the feeling of warmth between her thighs. So when the man said, “Mr. Carroll, I think you should give your girl a proper sight to look upon,” and David suddenly appeared in front of her, between the kneeling desk and the table, and began to unfasten the belt of his robe, Maud didn't understand right away what was taking place.

Then the sight of David's cock, rising from his loins towards her, framed in the strange shorts of black cotton that seemed to declare his erect penis and wrinkled scrotum the most important things in the world to the girl he claimed, made her gasp. She shook her head without meaning to, not refusing or denying but as if to say that she didn't feel ready to look at her master that way. Maud thought of herself as sexually active, but she had never had a man's cock so close to her face and the shame of it made her feel faint even as her helpless arousal continued to grow.

“This is my cock, Maud,” David said. “From now on, you will please it as I command. Do you understand? Say, *yes, master.*”

“Yes, master,” Maud whispered.

“When your master’s cock is in front of you, Maud,” said the man in the center, “you must look only at it, to show your respect for your master’s rights. Now, keeping your eyes where they belong, please begin your confession again.”

Maud looked at the hard phallus, swaying slightly in front of her. David held his hands at his sides and suddenly she longed to have those hands upon her, even if they were to hold her head still so he could thrust himself inside her mouth — the thing she had never done, with him or anyone, because it seemed too subservient, too shameful. As if he read her mind, his right hand reached out, but only to stroke her cheek. The tenderness of the gesture and the warmth of his knuckles seemed to fill her heart with light. She even thought she could hear David’s beautiful voice in her mind, somehow: *You can do it. Now we both know that we want the same thing. Time to live happily ever after, as kinky and shameful as our happy ending will be.*

“My master told me he was going to spank me, and have sex with me from behind,” she said steadily, looking at her master’s beautiful cock, “and I told him not to be silly. My master told me he would spank me, and I would have to please him with my mouth and have him in my bottom to help me learn respect, and I walked away.”

The man on the right asked, “Did Mr. Carroll tell you why he was going to spank you?”

“Y–yes,” Maud said, realizing how she was incriminating herself and suddenly terrified anew of what the consequences might be. “I didn’t tell him something I should have told him, and I drank too much and ruined a special night we’d planned.”

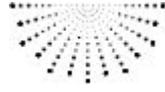
The man in the center said, “Master Instructor, please give your charge.” Maud bit her lips and kept her eyes on David’s cock. Now she felt that she wanted to have it in her mouth, wanted to please him, to make up for her infractions. A new sort of thought came to her: *Maybe if I pleasure him well enough, he won’t spank me?*

Now Officer Miller, the man on the left, spoke for the first time. “Maud Fredericks, you will be taken in hand now. After you are awarded, your master will spank you over his knee, to punish you for your failure to obey him and to teach you that from now on your bare bottom will receive regular discipline. Then you will go with him to his room and he will enjoy your bodily charms with all the thoroughness at his disposal, training you to please him as he possesses you along every path of pleasure you afford.”

Inches away from Maud’s face, David’s cock seemed to leap at these words, and at last Maud felt herself give in, her own heart thrilling at the clear arousal of the man she loved, and her own pussy tingling and melting into the lacy black thong.

The man in the center took up the discourse. “We award Maud Fredericks to David Carroll, and we wish you all the joy of this St. Valentine’s Day. Open your mouth, now, and receive your master.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



REWARD

“What?” Maud gasped. David’s cock gave one of its little leaps, rising with a little jerk from the wiry brown fleece that — now by contrast with the new bareness between her own thighs — had begun to seem like almost as much a mark of his authority over her as his cock itself. She tried to keep her eyes there, where she knew David wanted them to be, adoring his rigid length, the fluting curves of its head, the special little eye at its very tip from which came the seed with which perhaps David would one day make her the mother of his child if she learned to please him.

Maud realized, though dimly, that all thoughts she now had about David’s cock represented the emergence of a long-buried set of desires. She could no longer deny that although the shame and the fear continued, she also wanted these men to give her to David: award her so that he and she would always understand Maud’s sacred duty to obey him and to please him. She wanted him to use her with his beautiful penis until he had not the slightest doubt that Maud knew that she existed to be his.

But to take it in her mouth... ever since she and her friends had begun to talk about sex, Maud had resolved that she would not be the kind of girl who did that. Sex needed to follow the patterns of nature, she had always reasoned whenever she felt

the temptation to do something strange, no matter how her hidden desires urged her to shameful acts. When David had said in the hotel room on New Year's Day that when they got home to his apartment Maud would give him a blowjob and then offer her bottom for his use, she had felt she had no choice at all but to get up and walk away, because otherwise she would have said, *Yes, oh, God, yes.*

Now, even so, to do it. To show David that her mouth would henceforth be a place for thrusting and filling with his penis, whenever he felt the urge to take his pleasure there... how could she? And with those three men watching?

David's voice came from above her, stern but calm, like a hammer in velvet. "Maud, is this your obedience? Do I need to whip you, even before I take you over my knee? Open your mouth and show me how good a girl you can be."

That. *That* did it. The thought of the spanking over his knee, of the intimacy they would know when at last her master gave her the punishment fit for a naughty little girl who must learn how to behave. Whipping, paddling, caning: they all made Maud's heart leap not just with fear but also with excitement, she could confess to herself now. But the idea that to be taken in hand by David meant loving guidance given with a firm hand upon her bare bottom as she lay upended upon his masculine lap, and then, as he had outlined all the way back on Thanksgiving, sex according to his idea of how he should take her, sex from behind... that image, rejected with fright in November, claimed her so thoroughly that without even willing it Maud opened her mouth wide, and stuck out her tongue, knowing instinctively that what David would like would be to see her — again like a little girl — preparing to receive a new kind of candy, or communion.

He took his cock in his left hand, while he rested his right lightly on the back of her head, as if just to warn her that she would not be allowed to avoid what would now occur. No escape now from her master placing his penis on her tongue, and saying, “Good girl,” and then thrusting inside her slowly, sheathing himself with a little grunt of pleasure that made Maud’s pussy tingle.

The cock bulked very big inside her mouth. Maud’s eyes began to water almost instantly, but that hidden part of her, strangely, loved that David didn’t seem to care at all. He murmured encouragements, telling her how well she was doing, and that his cock felt good, but he did not change his steady rhythm when Maud gagged a little, and when, her jaw aching a little, she did try to move her head away, he gripped her firmly and would not allow it, but thrust in deeper, pressing the head of his cock against her palate, seeking the back of her throat.

“Shh, my good girl,” he said. “You’re learning. You’ll get better.”

Then he withdrew, leaving Maud gasping, the saliva feeling strange and tasting salty in her mouth, even foamy from the sticky semen that had leaked out like a foretaste of what David’s manhood had in store for her. She bent her head and looked at the green padded top of the kneeling desk, recovering her breath. David had taken a step back.

“Please rise, now, Maud Fredericks, and walk to the other side of the kneeling desk. You will then bend over until your hands are upon the kneeler and your bottom, turned towards us, is well presented. We will then award to Mr. Carroll your cunt and your anus, once he has uncovered your nakedness before us.”

No. If her breath had returned to her lungs fully, she might have said it, and who knew what punishments might lie in store. But her mind stuck there, anyway, as she looked down at her forearms, resting on the upper part of the kneeling desk, where the chairman had just said she must present her bottom, raised and turned towards them, ready for... surely they wouldn't have David... surely David wouldn't, here in this room, with the three men watching?

“Miss Fredericks,” said Officer Miller, the Master of Instruction. “We understand how difficult this can be for young ladies, even after they have taken their masters’ penises into their mouths. But as Mr. Carroll quite rightly instructed you a few moments ago, if you do not obey us he has every right to whip you until you do. So you had better do as you’re told and present your backside for inspection and enjoyment, as Mr. Carroll will no doubt require of you on a daily basis once he has brought you home. You must begin to accustom yourself to obedience, no matter how great the shame you feel, Miss Fredericks. Your master’s wishes, and his pleasures, are what matters now.”

David’s voice came, then, much gentler than that of the Master Instructor. “You may look me in the eye, Maud,” he said. He had stepped forward again, so that his cock hung, glistening with Maud’s saliva, right before her eyes.

She looked up, feeling her brow furrow and grow clouded, wishing two very different things: that she could cheerfully obey him and do his terrible bidding, show her naked bottom and her waxed pussy, even receive his beautiful cock there, because he wanted it; and at the same time that he would tell her that she need not do what the chairman said — that, yes, his pleasure mattered but, no, his will for her did not include this ultimate humiliation, this lowest of all abasements.

David's mouth had turned up at the corners very slightly. In his eyes she saw... love.

He put his right hand out again, to cup her chin gently, to stroke her neck under her ear and make her shiver. Then he spoke. "Maud, I want you to do as the chairman has said. I want you to do it because I know that I love you, and you love me, and that this, as strange and new as it seems, is what we both want and need. I am taking you in hand today in every way, and although before today I wasn't sure that what I wanted from you, and for you, would be right for you, now I have not the slightest doubt."

Maud felt her eyes widen, even as the trouble vanished from her brow. She took a deep breath of the air of the tribunal room, with its ancient scent of masculine privilege: leather, and baize, and cigars of bygone years. That breath seemed to fill her with her first taste of the unalloyed joy of submission she had always known she craved, but never admitted to needing.

At the physical sensation of that joyous breath in her chest, Maud sobbed, "Yes." Without thinking about it, she dropped her eyes again to David's still hard cock, and she leaned forward and kissed it, to show him she wanted to be the kind of good girl who kisses her master's cock.

"Get up," he said in a more severe voice that Maud nevertheless found even more exciting than his gentle one, "and present your bottom to the tribunal. I want to show them what a treasure they're awarding me."

Maud got up, then, on shaking legs, and made her way the three steps to the other side of the kneeling desk. The blood rushed to her cheeks to have to face the opposite wall, which bore a painting of some god having his way with a nymph

over a fallen tree trunk where it appeared the god had made the nymph bend over just as Maud must now, while the four men behind her watched at their leisure, evaluating the quality of her little bottom.

“Spread your feet, and bend over, Maud,” David said. “Hands on the kneeler and back arched to display everything I like to see.”

Awkwardly, thinking with another flush of shame what the spreading of her feet would expose, Maud obeyed. The top of the desk, where her elbows had rested, came not uncomfortably against her naked tummy. The arching of her back seemed the worst part: to position herself over the furniture was one thing, but then to have to make that further gesture, assume that shameful pose...

“I congratulate you, Mr. Carroll,” came the chairman’s voice from behind her, “on the acquisition of a very fine piece of ass.”

Maud’s heart raced, and her breathing quickened. She had never imagined that mere words could produce the effect that simple, terrible phrase *piece of ass* had just done: her whole body went hot, and cold, and she felt her pussy gush with arousal as it never, ever had before.

“Uncover her nakedness, if you would,” said the Master Instructor, and then David’s hands were upon her, pulling down the black lace thong, all the way to her knees, so that it stretched, and seemed to bind her there.

“Nicely waxed,” commented the Master Inquirer. “You’ll have a nice ride there, Mr. Carroll. A sweet young cunt for Valentine’s Day is always a treat.”

The chairman said. “Place your hands upon the bottom, if you would, Mr. Carroll. Open it just a bit so we can see the anus. Yes, thank you, just like that. My, that’s lovely. So very pink and tight. You’ll have a delightful time training her there.”

“Oh, God,” Maud whispered at the terrible sensation of the air upon her there, and the image in her mind of what David and the tribunal saw.

“By the authority vested in me by the Secret Society of Saint Valentine,” the chairman declared in a solemn voice, “I hereby award this anus and this cunt to David Carroll, to use and to master as shall best please him. Now, Miss Fredericks, you may rise and, with your panties left where they are, walk over to the chair and stand by its left side. Your master will spank you now.”

Over David’s lap Maud went, with her panties down, and received her long-delayed spanking. It went on and on, until her backside felt like it was on fire. At first it felt terribly embarrassing to be disciplined like a naughty little girl, upended for a well-deserved punishment, but as she felt the firmness of her master’s hand, so different from the police paddle, so much more intimate, claiming her bare bottom as his place to teach her how to be good for him, she really did feel taken in hand, cared for.

David led her upstairs, then, to the beautiful room with the enormous tub, even nicer than the hotel room from New Year’s. She was not allowed to pull up her panties, and they passed many men in the same robes, some of them leading their own girls in lingerie. Somewhere in the huge house a band played romantic music.

But all Maud wanted was what David did in their room: without a word he bent her over the bed and entered her, his hands gripping her hips firmly so that he could press his loins very close to her blazing, punished backside. She remembered how he had said at Thanksgiving that he wanted to have her this way to make Maud feel submissive. Now, looking down at the bedspread, she could hardly believe she had had such trouble understanding how much she needed that feeling.

Then at last he prepared her anus, and entered her there, still in the same position. He made her cry out at the burning pain of opening the way her master demanded, and at having to be so terribly full of cock back there, down there. As David began to thrust and to ride her backside for his pleasure, Maud's feverish mind flashed to the moment she had first seen the summons, and thought it a wedding invitation. What had David said, inside the room of discipline? *As strange and new as it seems.*

David moved his hand from her hip down between her legs, as he drove in and out of her bottom. He touched Maud's clit, and suddenly she was coming harder than she had ever thought possible, screaming out her pleasure and shaking in David's grasp.

"Master?" she whispered, when he too had come, and they had showered and climbed into the big tub together at last, David's arms around Maud in the bubbles.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Can I get awarded to you every Valentine's Day?"

The End

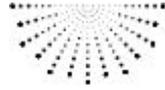
ABOUT EMILY TILTON

USA Today bestselling author Emily Tilton, whose books have hit number one on Amazon in six different erotica categories, is a professor who lives in New England and has two wonderful children. Her stories are what she wishes her real sex-life could be.

To receive Emily's newsletter, with free reads and sneak peeks of upcoming titles, go to <https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/k8d6a9>

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A LITTLE ADJUSTMENT BY
KATE OLIVER



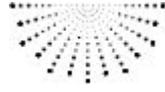
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

So happy to be a part of this project. I've always enjoyed Maren's writing and even though I've only spoken with her a few times, she has always been so kind and it is evident how much she cares about this community, just as we all care for her. Keeping you in my thoughts, Maren.

CHAPTER 1



CASSIE

“Cassie, let’s go, babe!” Brady yelled from downstairs.

Rolling her eyes, Cassie continued packing her suitcase for the ‘secret’ getaway that her husband wouldn’t tell her anything about. He’d told her to pack for three days and not ask any questions. Because he didn’t tell her anything other than that, she was totally overpacking to be prepared for every scenario.

Her husband was the sweetest man she knew, but lately, he’d been distant and working more than usual. It worried her, especially since she knew she hadn’t been the easiest person to be with. Because he’d been so distant lately, Cassie had found herself getting more and more snappy with him. Brady never lost his temper, even when she acted out. Being an only child, she’d always been a bit spoiled and temperamental, but it had been getting worse, and she felt like she couldn’t get control over it.

Several minutes later, Cassie heard her husband’s footsteps as he walked into their bedroom. He came and stood beside her, staring at her suitcase lying open on the bed.

“Baby, you don’t need all this. I told you, just the essentials. Everything else is covered,” he said, shaking his head and reaching to close her suitcase.

Cassie yanked the suitcase back open.

“I’m not done packing!” she replied hotly.

Brady’s jaw clenched slightly, but he didn’t snap back at her. No, he never did. He was always the steady one between the two of them.

“Please hurry up and finish. You already have plenty packed,” he told her.

Cassie knew she’d hit the husband jackpot when she’d married Brady. He had looks, personality, and heart. She never knew what he saw in her, but he seemed to adore her even with her mood swings and terrible attitude.

Brady sat on the edge of the bed and watched as she grabbed several more articles of clothing out of their walk-in closet. She knew she was pushing his buttons by taking her time. Sometimes she wondered if she did it on purpose, hoping to get a reaction out of him.

Finally closing the suitcase, she tried to zip it closed, but it was too full. She looked at Brady, waiting for him to get the hint that she needed help. He looked amused as he watched her struggle with the zipper, which only irritated her more.

“Are you going to help me, or are you just going to sit there and do nothing?”

She was getting annoyed with this whole surprise trip. She wouldn’t have had to pack so much if he’d told her where they were going. Brady stood and without a word, worked the zipper until her suitcase was securely closed before heading out of the bedroom with the heavy luggage.

By the time Cassie came out of the house, Brady was standing outside by the car, waiting for her. It irritated her that he was so calm when she was obviously in a crappy mood.

She didn't say anything to him when he opened the car door for her. Instead, she threw her purse and jacket in the back and slid into her seat. Brady closed the car door and walked over to the driver's side.

"I'm really looking forward to this weekend. We need it," he said.

She wanted to have a good weekend with him, too, but things had been so off lately between them that she was starting to think they were at the beginning of the end of their short marriage.

When she'd first met Brady, she'd been head over heels for him. Really, she was *still* head over heels for him, but they'd just grown apart. They didn't do things as a couple anymore. She didn't think he was being unfaithful, but she did wonder if he was getting fed up with her and the way she acted toward him.

"Yeah," she replied quietly as he started driving.

She didn't know how long the drive was going to be, so she tilted the seat back slightly and put on her sunglasses as Brady merged onto the freeway. She noticed he seemed lost in thought and quieter than usual as he drove. Cassie wondered what he was thinking about, but was afraid to ask for fear of the response. She didn't want to lose her husband—she loved him with all her heart—but she was afraid he might already have made up his mind about their relationship.

Is this weekend his way of giving us one last shot?

If it was, she didn't want to mess it up or ruin it, but at the same time, she was mad at him for letting their relationship get to this point. He was supposed to be the leader in their marriage and protect it in any way possible. At least, that's

what he'd promised her when they'd said their vows to each other. When she thought about it, she hadn't exactly kept her vows, either. She didn't take care of his needs or respect him in the way she should.

They had been driving for nearly an hour in silence before Cassie drifted to sleep. Brady had turned her seat warmer on as he always did when it was cold. His thoughtfulness was one of the things she loved so much about him. She knew she took those things for granted.

When she woke up, she didn't know where they were or how long she'd been sleeping, but she felt like her bladder was about to burst.

"I need to pee."

He looked over at her, reaching his hand to rub her thigh gently.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Okay, we'll pull off on the next exit so you can go potty," he replied.

Cassie had never heard him use the term 'potty' before and found it strange. Yet at the same time, her tummy felt like a butterfly was fluttering around inside.

He pulled off on the next exit and pulled into a gas station. She didn't wait for him to let her out before she got out of the car and walked in to use the bathroom, Brady following her into the store and down the hall.

"What are you doing?" she snapped.

Brady leaned up against the wall across from the bathroom door.

"Making sure my girl is safe in this sketchy gas station bathroom. Go on, go potty. I'll wait here."

Brady was well built, six feet tall, and muscular. He looked like he worked out daily, though he only went to the gym a couple times a week. She knew he would protect her with his life if it ever came down to it, but he wasn't the kind of guy who would go looking to beat someone up for no reason, either. Still, it gave her a warm rush to know he was there to protect her. And the way he spoke to her was almost as if she were a child. It probably should have annoyed her, but that fluttering feeling started happening again as she stepped inside the private bathroom and locked the door.

Cassie finished in the bathroom and came out to see Brady still standing against the wall where he said he'd be.

"Did you wash your hands?" he asked, staring down at her intently.

The question caught her off guard, and she stared at him for a long moment. It was weird that the question made her nipples harden, right? Annoyed with herself for the way her body was reacting, she glared up at him.

"Um, yeah, just like every other time I go to the bathroom."

Cassie walked out of the store and to the car, getting in before Brady could open the door for her.

"How much longer until we're there?" she asked.

Brady started the car and looked over at her with an unreadable expression.

"Is someone being a whiny little girl?" he asked.

Cassie scowled and rolled her eyes at him, though her clit seemed to feel differently about the question, and that just annoyed her more. She wasn't a little girl. She was a strong, independent woman.

“Still about an hour’s drive.”

Cassie rolled her eyes again.

“Why did you have to pick somewhere so far away?” she asked, looking at her phone. “And I only have one bar on my phone because we’re in the middle of nowhere. This is going to be fun. I sure hope there’s Wi-Fi wherever it is we’re going.”

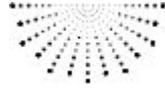
She dropped her phone back in her lap, her impatience growing by the minute.

Brady started driving again, ignoring her complaints. Cassie crossed her arms, laid her head back on the headrest, and sighed loudly. She hated that her husband never argued with her when she was being difficult.

Maybe he just doesn’t care enough about you to fight with you.

Swallowing the lump forming in her throat, Cassie stared out the window in a daze for the rest of the drive.

CHAPTER 2



BRADY

As he drove his wife toward the special weekend he had planned, Brady was deep in thought about how he hoped everything would play out. His sweet little wife was already being a brat, which seemed to be her normal personality lately, and he hoped this weekend would change that going forward. He knew he was taking a huge risk and that Cassie might possibly end things with him, but he also knew if things didn't change drastically, their marriage was going to end anyway.

The minute he'd laid eyes on Cassie when they'd first met, he had known he wanted her to be his wife. What he hadn't realized was how difficult she could be. She'd always been a bit of a brat. It was one of the things he'd fallen in love with, because she kept him on his toes. But over the past couple years since they'd gotten married, she seemed to keep getting more difficult and more childish.

Her attitude had gotten worse as time went on, making it hard to be around her at times. His solution had been to start working more and taking on more accounts to have a reason to be gone from home. It had been fantastic for their bank account, but he'd realized he was losing his wife. They weren't going to make it another year if something didn't quickly change.

The look on Cassie's face when he had asked if she'd washed her hands after going to the bathroom told him it would be a very interesting weekend. However, as soon as they were settled in at their destination, he would sit her down for a very serious heart-to-heart conversation on what he expected out of her and how their marriage would be moving forward.

Brady had packed everything needed for the weekend as he'd been preparing for this trip for weeks. He planned to turn his hotheaded wife into a sweet Little girl who would most definitely have a red-hot bottom for most of the weekend. If he were lucky, it would be a permanent change. If not, he could almost guarantee divorce would be the next step for them, so he needed to give it everything he had.

He'd ordered all the supplies and had them shipped to his workplace, so she had no idea what she was in for. He had a suitcase full of onesies, footie pajamas, cute panties, a stuffed animal, and some coloring supplies. All the necessities that a Little needed for a weekend away. Brady had also already ordered groceries to be delivered to the cabin. He had planned everything down to the last detail. The only wild card was his wife.

As a teenager, he had discovered his interest in being a Daddy Dom, but had never experienced being a Daddy in real life. He'd read enough stories, watched plenty of videos, and fantasized enough to know what he was doing. He had also never shared with Cassie his interest in it because he wasn't really sure how she would react. She loved the times that he'd been dominant in bed, and hoped she would respond to what he was going to suggest with as much enthusiasm.

Doubtful.

As time had gone on and she'd gotten brattier and had her tantrums, he'd realized it might be just what she needed, and what they needed to save their marriage. She definitely needed some regular discipline. There was no doubt about that.

She was the perfect fit to be his Little girl. She was small and moody, with natural Little tendencies she didn't even realize she had. He'd picked up on them right away when they had met.

"We're almost there, baby girl," he said, squeezing her hand.

She eyed him out of the corner of her sunglasses. "Good. I need to pee again."

Her tone was dry, and she seemed uninterested in having any kind of conversation other than the necessary comments. It always seemed like she *wanted* to pick a fight, but he always did his best not to react in a way that would make it worse. He refused to have a volatile relationship where they were always fighting. Instead, he hoped his plan to add regular discipline as part of their marriage would encourage her to think twice before acting out toward him in the future.

Making a right turn, Brady drove slowly down a bumpy gravel road toward the remote cabin he'd rented. It was a place one of his coworkers raved about. He wanted it to be as remote as possible so he and Cassie could really unplug for the weekend and just be together. He was pretty sure there would be no cell signal out where they were going, and there was no Wi-Fi. The advertisement for the cabin used that as a selling point for people wanting to shut out the digital world, and that was precisely what he wanted for the weekend.

The cabin was nearly a mile down the gravel road, and he could see Cassie squirming in her seat. The bumpy road was

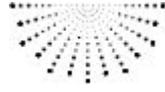
probably not helping her need to pee, and he had to force himself not to grin with amusement. She didn't say anything as he drove until he pulled up in front of the log cabin and parked.

"Finally," she said as she got out of the car and scanned the cabin.

It didn't look like anything special from the outside, but he knew from the pictures it was gorgeous and comfortable on the inside. Brady got out and opened the trunk, pulling out the suitcase he'd packed for the weekend. Cassie was fidgeting by the front door as he took his time pulling the other bags out of the car. He was enjoying seeing his girl squirm, and at the same time, was surprised she hadn't snapped at him for not opening the door quickly enough.

Brady carried the bags to the porch and entered the code for the front door. He swung the door open for Cassie to walk in before him and followed her inside.

CHAPTER 3



CASSIE

The further out Brady had driven, the more irritated she'd felt about this whole weekend idea. They'd barely said anything the entire drive except when she'd told him she needed to go to the bathroom. When they arrived at the cabin, she was relieved to finally be out of the car. The cabin was beautifully decorated inside, with rustic touches and exquisite views through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Cassie found the bathroom and felt better when she finished. She wandered around to check out all the amenities. The tub in the main bathroom was big enough for at least two people, and the tiled shower was gigantic, with several sprayers that would spray a person every which way. She looked forward to a soak in the tub later on. When she walked back out to the living room, Brady was sitting on the couch.

“Have you found the Wi-Fi password? I have no service,” she said, holding up her cell phone.

Brady shook his head. “There’s no Wi-Fi.”

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees as she scowled at him.

“What do you mean there’s no Wi-Fi? What kind of vacation is this? What am I supposed to do all weekend? This is bullshit, Brady.”

“Stop,” Brady said sharply, catching her off guard.

She froze and stared down at him. She’d never heard him talk in such a stern voice.

“Cassie, we need to talk.”

She felt her anger rise to the surface.

“Oh, here we go. You brought me out here to tell me you’re done with me. Why the fuck couldn’t you do that back home so I could actually leave?” She was nearly yelling.

“Cassie, stop it, now. Sit down,” Brady said in a slightly raised voice.

The steel in his tone was so firm that she instantly sat down. She opened her mouth to say something, but he held up his hand and shook his head.

“I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen. Both you and I know we have been distant lately, and I’ve been working more so I haven’t been home as much. We have an issue in our marriage, and I brought you here this weekend because we need to fix it. I want my wife back.”

A lump started forming in her throat. It killed her inside knowing they were failing.

“Cassie, since we got married, your attitude has been getting worse and worse. You have tantrums, you treat me like crap, you try to start fights, and quite frankly, you’ve been acting like a childish brat. I haven’t been doing my part in leading you as I promised I would when we got married, but that is going to change.

“I brought you here this weekend to start a new dynamic with you where I will be your Daddy, and you will be my

Little girl. You will submit to me and my rules, as well as my discipline, which you badly need.”

Cassie sprang to her feet. “What the fuck, have you lost your mind?”

Brady stood and walked toward her, grabbing her wrist as she tried to walk out of the living room.

“Cassie, sit down right now before I put you over my lap and give you your first spanking,” he said sharply.

Cassie turned and looked up at him. She wasn’t afraid of Brady, but she could sense he meant what he’d just said. His grip on her wrist was firm but not painful, and the look in his eyes was dark, as though he was ready for whatever she threw at him. Cassie moved toward the couch and sat down again with a huff, Brady holding on to her wrist the entire time.

“Do you want our marriage to work, Cassie? Do you want to be married to me?”

She felt a lump in her throat form as he asked that question. She felt guilty that he would even ask that or assume she didn’t want to be married to him.

“Of course, I do, Brady.”

“If we are going to work, things need to change. You act like a child, and I think it would be beneficial for you to get treated like one. I also think it will create a different type of bond between us,” he told her.

“Brady, don’t be ridiculous. That is crazy. We can work things out. I’ll stop being so cranky with you.”

Her mind was reeling as she tried to figure out where he would get such an insane idea, and if he was just trying to

scare her. And for whatever reason, that butterfly feeling was in her tummy again.

“No, Cassie. This is not an option. We’ve had talks before about your bad attitude, and nothing ever changes. It’s time for a serious change. If you want to stay married and be my wife, you will submit to me and do this. You would have a safeword so if you ever felt like you were in danger or needed things to stop, you’d be able to say the word, and everything would stop so we could talk about it and readjust as needed.

“Either you agree to trying this and be my Little girl and submit to my discipline, or we need to go our separate ways. I can’t live like this anymore.”

His voice sounded so broken, and it made her ache. She wouldn’t agree to this crazy idea of his, though. She was a grown woman. And the idea of being spanked by her husband? And calling him Daddy? That was just insane. Right?

“I’m not doing it. No fucking way,” she replied.

Her irritation returned as she realized she’d wasted her whole day coming out here with him for him to give her this ultimatum. Brady was quiet for several minutes. He looked as though he was trying to process what had just happened and what to say next.

“We’ll drive home tomorrow; it’s too late to drive home tonight. I’ll contact an attorney when we get home and move out of the house and stay with my brother or something. Go ahead and sleep in the main bedroom. I’ll take the second bedroom,” he said quietly.

Brady stood, grabbed his suitcase, and walked down the hall. She heard a bedroom door shut softly behind him.

Cassie slumped on the couch as tears began to fall. The love of her life had just told her he was filing for divorce. How had things gotten this bad? Why was she always so horrible to him?

Standing up from the couch, Cassie rolled her suitcase toward the master bedroom. Sitting down on the massive bed, she grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her chest as she cried quietly.

Hours passed, and Cassie felt numb from the inside out. Replaying their conversation in her head, she realized just how horrible she had been to him the past couple of years. He was right about her acting like a spoiled brat, and her attitude getting worse. The worst part was that she didn't even know why she acted that way. He had always treated her like a princess, even when she was terrible to him.

She heard Brady walking around the cabin, and then the sound of the fridge door opening and closing. Tiptoeing to the bedroom door, she peeked out to listen to what he was doing. She closed the door quickly when she heard him walking back toward the hall and into the guest room.

Opening the door again, Cassie walked down the hall toward the guest bedroom. She needed to talk to Brady and get him to change his mind. She needed to convince him she wouldn't act like that anymore.

As she stood in front of the door, Cassie realized she didn't think she could make that kind of promise. She had no explanation for why she acted the way she did, much less how she would change it. As she turned around to walk back to her

room, the door suddenly opened. Brady nearly crashed into her as he walked into the hall.

“Oh, sorry. I... Uh... I was just gonna grab something from the kitchen. Did you need something?” he asked.

He looked like he'd been crying, too, which only broke her heart even more.

“No, I was just going to come talk to you,” she said, not looking him in the eye.

Brady leaned up against the doorframe. “What's up?”

Cassie didn't know what to say, so she started rambling.

“Brady, I don't want to get divorced. I love you, and you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I know I've been a bitch lately, and my attitude has been bad, and I will work on changing that. I don't want us to end.”

She could feel herself trembling, and her voice shook as she spoke.

“Cassie, it's too late for you to offer to work on changing your attitude. I love you too, baby, but I can't live like this anymore. I won't be treated like this for the rest of my life. I told you earlier what the options are, and unless you're willing to at least try to submit to me and be my Little girl, we have nothing more to talk about.”

His voice was calm but firm. She felt her shoulders sag, and tears began to fall from her eyes. Brady left her where she was standing and walked toward the kitchen.

Going back to the main bedroom, Cassie closed herself in the room and crawled into the soft bed. She was still in her clothes, and she hadn't eaten since breakfast, but she didn't

care. Her heart was shattered, and she couldn't blame anyone but herself.

Brady had always been so loving and had tried so hard to make her happy, but she took him for granted. She always pushed his buttons, sometimes on purpose, trying to get a reaction out of him, and she didn't even know why or what reaction she wanted. Now that he was reacting, she didn't know what to do about it.

A soft knock on her door brought her out of her thoughts.

"Come in," she said, wiping her tears.

Brady opened the door and walked in, holding a small plate in his hand.

"Here, you haven't eaten all day. I'm going to bed. We'll leave first thing tomorrow."

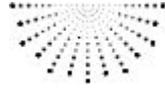
He set the plate on the nightstand next to the bed and walked out of the room, shutting the door gently. Cassie felt her heart sink. Looking over at the nightstand, she saw a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with the crust cut off on the small pink plastic plate. He always did sweet stuff like that, and she'd never appreciated it.

Cassie ate a few bites of the sandwich and replayed their day in her head. He said he wanted her to submit to him and be his Little girl. Why would that make a difference in their relationship? As shocked as she had been that he'd talked so sternly to her earlier, it also made her tummy do somersaults when he took control like that. He'd never spoken to her that way, and she kind of wished he had, because then maybe she wouldn't act out the way she did all the time. Was that what it would be like if he were her Daddy?

Would submitting to her husband be that bad? She'd read plenty of books that had dominance and submission in them, and even a few Daddy and Little books, but she'd never even imagined those kinds of things were actually something that happened in real life. There was a difference between fiction and reality, and she didn't know how she felt about being treated as a Little girl. Or being spanked. Part of her hated it and part of her was squirming inside at the thought of it.

After only eating half the sandwich, she put the plate aside and pulled the covers up to her chin. She wasn't tired, and she couldn't stop thinking about Brady. Was she willing to try something that would take away her control so they could save their marriage?

CHAPTER 4



Leaving Cassie in the large bedroom when he'd taken her a sandwich had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. She'd looked as though her whole world was ending when he'd walked in, and it had killed him inside not to comfort her.

He loved her, but he hadn't been happy for a while, and it was evident she wasn't, either. Something had to change, and he knew her trying to be better would only result in a good couple of weeks before she would go back to having the same terrible attitude. He had to stay strong and see this through, even if it meant divorce.

He'd expected her not to like the idea of being his Little, but he'd hoped that when he gave her the ultimatum, she would agree to at least try it. That's all he wanted, for her to try. For her to show that he was as important to her as she was to him. It broke his heart that she wasn't even willing to try for the sake of their marriage. He should have expected her answer to be no. She always wanted him to be the one to give in instead of her giving in to anything.

Brady stripped down to his boxer briefs and pulled the covers back, climbing into bed. He didn't expect he'd be able to sleep much, but he was mentally and emotionally drained. He wondered where he'd gone wrong with Cassie, and what

he could have done differently in their relationship so it never would have gotten to the point it was now. He should have been firmer with her from the beginning, and maybe introduced her to being Little earlier in their relationship. He should have started disciplining her when she had her tantrums. Maybe that would have helped, and maybe she would respect him more if he had.

He finally drifted to sleep sometime in the middle of the night, but it wasn't a restful sleep. He woke up a little after six with the sun beating in the window. It was quiet in the house. Only the sound of birds chirping in the distance broke up the silence.

He wondered how Cassie had slept and how she would act toward him on the drive home. He hoped she would be nonconfrontational, but knowing Cassie, she might not be as quiet as she was the night before.

Brady lay in bed for a bit longer, trying to think of what he was going to do with his life going forward without Cassie. After a while, he heard footsteps in the hallway that stopped in front of his door, and then a light knock.

“Come in.”

He sat up in bed, and when Cassie walked in, she looked as though she hadn't slept a wink all night. He wanted to hold her and rock her to sleep, and if he were her Daddy, he would.

“Can we talk, please?” she asked politely.

She stood near the door and waited for his approval. He was pleased that she was calm.

“Yes. Come, sit down.”

He patted the mattress, and she looked relieved. She walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, not looking at him.

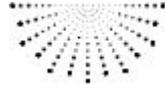
“Brady, I love you with all my heart. I don’t want to lose you or lose our marriage. We fell in love with each other and still love each other. I was up all night thinking, and I realized I have been horrible to you the past couple of years. I don’t have an explanation as to why. You treat me like a princess, and I have taken that for granted.”

He didn’t agree or disagree. Instead, he waited for her to continue.

She took a deep breath and looked him in the eye.

“I will do whatever it takes to save us, including trying what you suggested yesterday. I don’t want to lose you. Please, Brady.”

CHAPTER 5



CASSIE

Cassie hadn't slept all night. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Brady and their marriage, and she had eventually concluded he was the most important person in her life. It would devastate her to lose him. Around four o'clock in the morning, she'd decided she would do whatever he wanted to try in order to save them. She loved her husband and knew without a doubt he would never do anything to harm her.

She'd also come to realize just how terrible she'd been to him since they'd gotten married, and deserved whatever she had coming. Whatever it was he expected out of the whole being 'Little' thing, she just hoped it would work for them and she could have her loving husband back. Cassie also hoped she could be the wife he needed and deserved. Because he really did deserve the best.

Her entire body had been trembling as she'd tiptoed to his bedroom. She had never been so nervous in her life. After all, she was signing up for something she knew hardly anything about and had a feeling it would be something that didn't come easy to her. Cassie didn't care. She was up for it no matter what. She just hoped he wouldn't tell her it was too late, considering the way she'd acted the day before. Sitting in silence on the bed, Cassie held in a breath as she stared at

Brady when she'd finally finished talking. His expression was unreadable, making her palms sweat.

“Cassie, what I’m asking isn’t a game. It would be our marriage dynamic going forward.”

She thought about it briefly before nodding her head. “Okay.”

“This means you will submit to my rules and discipline. It means that I am the Daddy and you are the Little girl, and I have the final say. It means obeying me all the time, not just when you’re in the mood. Do you understand all of this, Cassie?”

She swallowed and contemplated if she could really do this, but she had already made up her mind. Backing out wasn’t an option for her. Her marriage was on the line.

“I understand,” she said quietly.

They both sat in silence for a few minutes. Brady seemed deep in thought, and she didn’t know what else to say.

“From now on, you call me Daddy. This is our last chance, Cassie. I love you so much, and I want this to work, baby girl.”

Cassie felt as though her heart was whole again as she lunged from the edge of the bed into Brady’s arms, hugging him tightly. She began crying sloppy tears as she sobbed against his shoulder.

“I’m sorry I’ve been this way to you. I want this to work so badly. I don’t want to lose you,” she cried.

“I know, baby girl. I want this to work, too. We’re starting fresh now, and going forward, you’re not going to mistreat

Daddy. If you're mean to me or disrespectful, I will discipline you. Understand?"

Cassie nodded her head.

"I want you to climb off Daddy's lap and lay down on the bed. I'm going to get you changed into some different clothes, and then I will hold you again. I don't think either of us got very much sleep last night, so maybe we can even take a nap."

Shyness overtook her, but she slowly climbed off his lap and lay on the bed. Brady stood and grabbed his large suitcase, setting it on the chair. She saw an array of pastel pinks and purples inside as he opened it. She wondered where all this stuff had come from and why he had so much of it. Had he been planning this for a long time?

He chose a pair of panties that looked like they had ruffles on them. Cassie blushed and looked away, embarrassed at the thought of how she might look in them. She was a grown woman with a job and responsibilities, and now her husband was going to dress her like a Little girl.

He came back to the bed with his hands full, dropping everything on the mattress next to her. Brady began undressing her without asking for her help or telling her to do it. He pulled her pajama pants off and dropped them on the floor. When he pulled her panties down, Cassie felt a shiver go through her body. It had been months since they'd had sex, and she was now extremely happy she had shaved that morning.

He held the light pink ruffled panties up to show her before he slid them over her feet and up her legs.

"Lift your bottom."

Cassie lifted her hips and he slid the panties into place.

“Sit up, baby girl,” he instructed again.

He proceeded to pull her tank top up and over her head, leaving her completely naked except for the ruffly panties. It felt silly, and she had no idea how in the world this would save her marriage.

How will he ever find me attractive after this?

Brady held up a pastel pink tee that looked like it would only cover halfway down her tummy with the words *Daddy's Girl* printed across the front of it. She thought it was cute, but not for an adult woman. This was crazy and embarrassing, but her husband seemed to be in his element as he slid it over her head.

“I feel stupid, Brady,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

He was working to put a pair of socks with ruffles around the ankles on her feet.

“I’m sorry, what did you call me?” he asked, looking up at her.

He paused as he waited for her to answer.

Uh-oh.

“Sorry. I’m not used to this. I feel like I look ridiculous.”

She realized she sounded whiny, and that irritated her.

“You look adorable, and you’ll get used to this. It’s not an option, Cassie. Little girls wear what their Daddies put them in.”

The firmness in his voice both surprised and aroused her.

“I know,” she replied quietly.

She had agreed to this, and if looking like an idiot would save her marriage, she would look like an idiot.

“Now, what’s my name?” he asked with a raised brow.

Cassie looked up at him and felt her tummy flutter at the thought of calling him Daddy. It was an unexpected, exciting feeling.

“Daddy,” she said softly.

Brady’s grin was a reward in itself, but the words that came out next were the icing on the cake.

“That’s my good girl.”

Her tummy fluttered again, and she felt warm all over. She might have felt like an idiot dressed this way, but the way her husband was looking at her and talking to her made her feel like the most special thing in the world.

Brady held out his hands for her and helped her sit up.

“I have something else for you,” Brady said, walking back over to the suitcase.

When he turned around, he had a small purple stuffed hippo in one hand and a pastel pink pacifier in the other. Cassie smiled at the cute little hippo. She’d always loved stuffed animals and still had her favorite stuffed bear from when she was a kid. Brady had bought her a couple of stuffed animals over the years, but she had them tucked away in the back of their closet.

She realized he might have bought them for her as a way to make her feel Little. She wondered if this had always been something he’d wanted with her as she thought back to some of the different things he’d done over the years that now seemed to relate to being a Daddy and a Little.

Brady handed the hippo to her. She hugged the toy to her chest and felt herself relax slightly as she ran her fingers over the soft fur. He held the pacifier up to her mouth and waited. She felt a flush of embarrassment run across her cheeks, knowing what he was expecting from her.

Opening her mouth slightly as she peered up at him, she felt Brady slip the nipple inside. It was larger than she expected, definitely not an infant pacifier. Did they actually make pacifiers for adults? Was the Daddy and Little thing something many people did? Cassie had so many questions going through her head as she began sucking on the pacifier.

“Let’s crawl back into bed and snuggle, baby girl. We can take a nap for a bit. I think both of us are exhausted and need some snuggle time.”

He motioned for her to climb in under the blankets. Cassie lay back and rolled over to crawl up to the pillows. She knew her ruffled bottom was on display to her husband, and she wondered if he liked what he saw.

Brady climbed into bed and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her against him. She smiled as she felt his hard cock pressing up against her backside. It intrigued her that he was so turned on by this, and the thought of him being turned on by it made her clit throb with need.

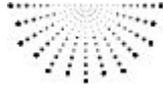
“I love you, Cassie. Don’t forget that, baby. I want this to work for us. Close your eyes and let’s rest for a while,” Brady said quietly in her ear, kissing the back of her head.

Cassie nuzzled in closer to him and smiled as she pulled the pacifier from her lips.

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Brady tightened his arm around her and kissed her head again. Cassie put the pacifier back in her mouth and relaxed against him as she quickly faded to sleep.

CHAPTER 6



Cassie fell asleep quickly in his arms. Her warm body snuggled up against his gave him the feeling that they would be able to make it work. His comfort was interrupted by the throbbing hard-on that was caused by seeing his adorable wife in ruffled panties with a pacifier in her mouth. She had looked adorable and picture-perfect when he'd gotten her changed. Her blushing cheeks were a giveaway regarding how shy she was feeling about it all, but that just made his dick throb more.

He'd been shocked when she'd come to him and agreed to be his Little. Brady had never been prouder of his wife for making the decision to try what he'd suggested, even though he knew it would be hard for her.

Brady woke up to feeling Cassie squirming in his arms. He didn't know how long they'd been sleeping. Looking at the bedside table clock, he realized they'd slept for over three hours. Rubbing his hand over her thigh, she squirmed again and turned to face him. She still looked sleepy as she snuggled her face up against his chest.

“Hey, baby girl, how'd you sleep?”

“Really good. I was really tired,” she replied after she pulled the pacifier free from her lips. “I need to pee.”

“Okay, baby girl. Let's go.”

He climbed out of bed and held his hand out for her. She slid her small hand into his and followed him to the bathroom.

“I can go by myself,” she said when he didn’t leave her.

Brady smiled to himself, knowing she wasn’t going to like his answer.

“Cassie, you’re my Little girl now, and Little girls need their Daddies help in the bathroom.”

Cassie was silent for a moment before she replied. “But I’m not a real Little girl. We’re just playing pretend.”

It bothered Brady that she said they were playing pretend. This wasn’t a pretend thing for him or something that was going to be temporary, and she needed to get used to that.

“This isn’t pretend, Cassie. I told you it was going to be this way going forward.”

Cassie lifted her gaze to him, and he couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“You really expect me to go to the bathroom in front of you, Brady?” she asked.

Brady raised his eyebrow at her, waiting for her to realize she’d called him by his first name. He was pleased when she corrected herself.

“Sorry, I meant Daddy. I’m not used to calling you Daddy.”

“I know you’re not, but you need to get used to it. Otherwise, you will find yourself bent over my knee getting your bottom spanked to help you remember.”

Cassie stuck her bottom lip out slightly in a pout. She started squirming more urgently, and Brady realized she was

doing the potty dance.

“Yes, Cassie, I expect you to go potty in front of me, and I will clean you up when you’re done.”

Her eyes went big and she gasped. “You are not wiping me after I go to the bathroom!”

Her wide eyes turned into a glare.

“Watch your tone, Little girl. Now, go potty unless you’d prefer I put you in a diaper,” he said firmly.

Cassie looked at him in complete shock but hustled to pull her panties down and sit on the toilet.

“I know this is a new experience for you, and I know there are parts of it that are going to be uncomfortable, but that comes along with this dynamic. You need to realize that now and accept it because if you continue to fight me on it, you will be a very unhappy little girl with a sore bottom and early bedtimes.”

“It’s embarrassing,” she replied in a whiny voice.

She rested her elbows on her knees as she stared at the floor.

“There is absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about between a Daddy and his Little.”

She fidgeted silently on the toilet.

“Is this something that you really like? All of this?” she asked, using her hands to gesture towards her sitting on the toilet.

“Yes, it does, Cassie. If I’m being totally honest with you, it’s something I’ve always been interested in, even before we met. I’ve thought about asking you to be my Little girl so

many times over the past few years, but since things have been a little rough for us, I never did. But seeing you in that outfit, how adorable and sweet you looked with a pacifier in your mouth, knowing you are trusting me to take care of you and discipline you when needed... All of that makes me very happy.”

It felt like a weight lifted off his shoulders by telling her his secret.

Cassie sighed. “I wish you would have told me sooner.”

“Would you have left me?” he asked.

He was afraid to hear the answer, but he needed to know. She looked up at him, and saw the same love and adoration in her eyes that he’d seen on their wedding night.

“No. I wouldn’t have. But maybe we wouldn’t have gotten to this point in our marriage. Then again, I might have freaked out and not given it a chance, so maybe this is a good thing. Either way, I’m glad you told me all that. This is not easy for me, but I don’t want to lose you.”

Brady could see the blush on her cheeks as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she let her bladder go. Cassie opened her eyes and looked up at him nervously when she’d finished.

“That was such a good girl, Cassie.”

She lowered her gaze and blushed.

“Look at me, little girl.”

Cassie obeyed and looked at him.

“I’m very proud of you.”

He quickly grabbed some tissue off the roll and stood in front of her. “Stand up and bend over, touching your toes.”

Hesitantly, she stood and did as he said, allowing him to clean her up. He flushed the toilet and washed his hands before leading her back to the bed. After they climbed back under the covers, he pulled her to him and brushed his lips across hers.

She parted her lips, and Brady kissed her deeper and with more urgency as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He felt as though his dick was going to explode in his underwear, but he didn't want to move too fast. Sex wouldn't fix their relationship, and he wanted to make sure their new dynamic was flowing smoothly before making love to her. He also didn't want her to think that if she had sex with him, it would make everything better, and then she wouldn't have to be Little anymore.

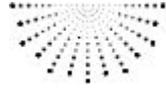
Reluctantly, Brady pulled his lips away, and she let out a small whimper. Resting his forehead on hers, he took in her sweet scent.

“I don't think I tell you enough how beautiful you are, baby,” he whispered.

She smiled and nuzzled her face against his. “Thank you, Daddy.”

Damn. He loved hearing her call him that.

CHAPTER 7



CASSIE

The kiss she'd shared with Brady was one of the most intimate experiences they'd had in a long time. She didn't know why being dressed up as a Little and kissing her man was such a turn-on for her or why it felt so right, but for the first time in a long time, she felt as though she and Brady would be okay.

“You ready to eat something, baby?”

Cassie nodded. “Yes. I'm so hungry.”

Brady climbed out of bed and helped Cassie get on her feet. She loved the ruffle socks she had on and felt like they were the cutest part of her outfit. She followed him out to the kitchen, feeling light and happy for the first time in a long time. He told her to snuggle up on the couch and watch cartoons while he made food.

From the couch, she watched him move around in the kitchen, looking for different items in the cupboards. Cassie turned her attention back to the TV, bringing her knees up to her chest and burying herself in the soft pink blanket. Several minutes later, Brady brought her a sippy cup of juice. As he handed the cup to her, he leaned down and kissed her forehead.

“I love you, baby girl.”

She felt a mix of emotions wash over her. The primary emotion was guilt for how badly she'd treated her husband. He'd always been so good to her, even when she was a complete bitch, and he always kept his cool and loved her through it despite her continuing to push him away.

Lifting the cup to her mouth to take a drink as she was lost in her thoughts, Cassie automatically opened her mouth and sucked the juice from the spout. She examined the cute bunny cup and smiled to herself after she finished swallowing. It matched the color of her outfit.

“Come here, baby girl. I made pancakes.”

Cassie stood from the couch and wrapped the soft blanket around her, carrying her sippy cup into the kitchen. He had a plate sitting on the small café table in the corner for her.

“Thank you, Daddy!”

The few bites of sandwich she'd eaten the night before had not been enough to keep her satisfied.

Cassie walked over to the table and saw the pancakes on a pink plastic princess plate. There was one big pancake and two small pancakes shaped into a Mickey Mouse head with blueberries for the eyes and smile.

“Oh my gosh! Daddy, it's so cute! It's too cute to eat.”

Brady chuckled and walked up behind her, patting her bottom. “There will be lots of cute pancakes in your future, baby girl, but they're for eating, so sit your cute bottom down and get busy.”

Cassie giggled and did as she was told. Brady had cooked for her many times throughout their relationship, but she'd never appreciated it. At least not until now.

“These are soooo good,” she said as she shoveled the buttery cakes into her mouth with her thick plastic fork.

Brady came and sat next to her with a stack of pancakes on his plate.

“Good girl. Thank you for eating for Daddy.”

Cassie watched him eat, feeling her heart swell for this man. Standing from her chair, she walked the couple of feet to where he was sitting and started climbing on his lap. Brady sat back and welcomed her in, positioning her so he could continue to eat. He reached over and slid her plate toward them. Picking up her fork, he cut a piece of pancake and brought it up to her mouth, waiting for her to open. Cassie opened her mouth and ate the piece that he fed her.

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice.

She sat bundled up in his lap while he ate his breakfast, occasionally taking a drink from her sippy cup and eating the bites he continued to offer her.

After breakfast, Brady sent her back to the couch to watch cartoons while he cleaned up the kitchen. Curling up on the sofa again, Cassie relaxed against the cushions and watched *Winnie the Pooh*. Brady brought her the pacifier from earlier and popped it into her mouth as he sat down next to her. He pulled her onto his lap and wrapped the blanket around her again.

“It’s really nice outside. How about we get dressed and go on a hike?”

Cassie nodded. They used to go hiking all the time when they’d first gotten together. It was something they loved doing, but it had been at least a year since they’d gone on a hike together.

“I’d love that,” she said, hugging him.

Brady lifted her and carried her to the bedroom, setting her down on the bed. He dug through the suitcase and pulled out several items of clothing.

“Come on. I want you to try to go potty before we leave to make sure you don’t have any accidents on the trail.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I don’t have to go potty, Daddy.”

Okay, she was really starting to sound like a Little girl.

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, you’re still going to try.”

He held out his hand and waited until she slid her hand into his and followed him to the bathroom. Brady tugged her panties down and let them drop to the floor. She sat on the toilet and could feel herself blushing again. Would she ever get used to her Daddy being in the bathroom while she went potty?

She was surprised when she actually peed. Maybe he knew her better than she knew herself. He cleaned her up like he had the first time and told her to leave her panties on the floor. She felt shy walking around half-naked while he was fully clothed, but he was her Daddy, so it didn’t really matter.

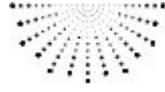
When they were back in the bedroom, Brady removed her socks and then pulled the tee over her head, leaving her standing completely naked in front of him. Her nipples hardened under his attention, but he didn’t pay them any attention as he pulled another piece of clothing over her head. When he pulled it down her tummy, she realized it had crotch snaps and hippos printed all over it.

“Is this a onesie?” she asked.

He nodded as he reached between her thighs and began snapping the crotch together. When his hand brushed against her pussy, she reached out to grab hold of his shoulders to steady herself. It had been far too long since her husband had touched her there, and it wouldn't take much to send her over the edge.

By the time he had all the snaps closed, Cassie was nearly panting. Brady didn't seem to notice as he held a pair of shorts down by her feet and told her to step in. After he finished buttoning her shorts, he helped her into a pair of socks and sneakers and even tied the laces for her.

CHAPTER 8



BRADY

The weather was comfortably warm, and the trails around the cabin were breathtaking. Cassie walked behind him slightly as they hiked. He always walked in front when they were hiking in case they came across any snakes or other critters that would freak her out. Cassie also liked to stop occasionally and look at plants and flowers. Brady checked on her frequently, making sure she was doing okay. His short little wife had a hard time keeping up with him at times.

Turning around to check on her, Cassie looked like she was deep in thought about something as she walked.

“What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours, baby girl?”

Cassie snapped out of her thought and looked up at him, smiling the sweetest of smiles.

“Nothing, Daddy. Just daydreaming, I guess.”

Brady stopped walking and waited for her to catch up.

“Daydreaming about good things, I hope?”

Cassie smiled and nodded.

“Yeah. Definitely good things,” she replied. “I don’t know if it’s this...thing that we’re doing or what, but I have never

felt closer to you, and I don't want this feeling to end between us."

Brady felt a lump form in his throat. Hearing that from her made all their struggles worth it if it meant they would be able to make it work going forward.

"Baby girl, being in a dynamic like this is a very different type of bond, and I think it will bring us closer than ever and save us. You just have to trust me and trust that I would never do anything to harm you."

Cassie thought about it for a moment and nodded again.

"I do trust you. I always have, and I know you love me more than anything. Otherwise, you wouldn't have put up with me for this long."

Brady stepped toward her and hugged her tight against him. She wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him back.

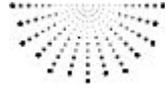
"Do you want to keep going, or are you tired?" he asked, still embracing her.

"We can keep going. I've missed our hiking adventures together," she replied, releasing him.

Brady began walking again, this time holding on to her hand as they walked. They pointed out sights to each other as they went until they reached the top of the trail at a lookout. As they looked over the scenery, Brady stood behind Cassie with his arms wrapped around her front. Every now and then, he nuzzled her neck and kissed her cheek.

If things could stay this way permanently, he knew they would be just fine.

CHAPTER 9



CASSIE

A bunny crossed the trail, and Cassie let go of Brady's hand to try and get closer to it. When it hopped away, she followed the path it was taking.

"Don't go far, baby. Stay where I can see you," he called out.

She was too interested in the bunny to pay attention to what he said as she continued following the little creature. She wondered if it was a mama bunny that would lead Cassie to her babies.

"I suggest you get back to where I can see you, Little girl, before you get in trouble," Brady called out.

The bunny hopped away quickly at the sound of his voice, and Cassie froze, feeling her temper reaching the surface. She stomped back to where she could see him.

"That's not fair! You scared away the bunny, jerk! And you can't just threaten me to get me to do what you want! I am still a grown woman, you know," she yelled.

Brady raised his eyebrow.

"Little girl, you just earned yourself your first spanking. You agreed to this, and I told you that disrespect would not be tolerated. Come here."

“No! You can’t spank me,” she said, glaring up at him.

Brady crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m going to count to three, and if you aren’t over here by the time I get to three, I’m going to come get you and your spanking will be much worse if that happens. One.”

Cassie continued glaring at him. If he wanted to have a standoff with her, she would hold her ground.

“Two.”

His eyes were locked on Cassie as he waited. Cassie took a deep breath as she started to realize he was completely serious.

“Wait,” she said abruptly before he got to three.

Brady raised his eyebrows. “What?”

“I don’t want a spanking. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for apologizing. Now, come over here, Cassie. You’re still getting a spanking. I’ve let you get away with your disrespect for too long.”

Cassie frowned. She had hoped he would change his mind since she’d apologized. Slowly, she walked over to him. She was scared and embarrassed that she was about to submit to a spanking from her husband. And was he really going to spank her out on the hiking trail? There wasn’t anyone else out there, but still.

“Good girl,” he said when she stood in front of him.

He grabbed each of her hands and squeezed gently. “It’s going to be okay, but we need to do this. You need to know that I’m going to follow through with things.”

Cassie nodded and felt herself on the verge of tears. She needed to show her husband that she was taking this seriously and that she had meant what she'd said.

He walked her over to a log lying on the side of the path and sat down. He quickly unbuttoned her shorts and pulled them down. When she made a whimpering sound, he gave her a stern look and she quieted. It was obvious he meant business.

“Over my lap.”

He took her hand and guided her so she was lying face down over his lap. She was only over his lap for a brief moment before she felt the sting of his hand smack her bottom just below the edge of her onesie. She yelped and squirmed as the feeling set in and another smack landed on the other cheek.

His smacks concentrated on the exposed skin under the edges of her onesie, and almost immediately, Cassie was in tears as she kicked her feet, trying to dodge his hand.

“Daddy, I’m sorry!”

Reaching her hand back, Cassie tried to block her bottom from his hand, but instead, he clasped his other hand over her wrist and held it tightly to her back. He began spanking harder and more rapidly, causing her to cry louder as she struggled against his hold. After several minutes of fighting against him, she felt herself give in, and her body went limp over his lap. Suddenly, the spanking stopped as quickly as it had started.

“It’s all over, baby.”

He pulled her up and settled her into his lap. She continued crying as she frantically tried wiping her face. She couldn’t stop the tears or stop her nose from running. She felt like a snotty mess, and on top of that, her bottom was on fire. He

pulled her in to snuggle his chest, and Cassie buried her face in his T-shirt, using it as her own personal tissue.

“Shhhh, it’s okay, baby girl. Daddy has you,” he said softly as he rubbed her back and rocked her gently.

Cassie felt herself calming down slightly, and despite the mess she was, she felt comforted by him holding her.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” she said between deep breaths.

Brady nodded and tilted his head so he was close to her face, kissing her forehead.

“I know, baby. It’s all over, though, and Daddy forgives you. I just hope it will be a reminder in the future before you decide to be disrespectful or call me names.”

Cassie nodded. “I got snot on your shirt.”

Brady chuckled and smiled down at her. “You sure did, baby. I should spank you for that.”

Cassie looked up at him wide-eyed. He winked at her, kissing her forehead again.

“Daddy’s kidding, baby. You can wipe your snot on me anytime you need. You’re my baby, and I love you, even the snotty parts of you,” he said, squeezing her against him.

Cassie smiled and grabbed onto his shirt, wiping her face on it again. Brady laughed and tickled her tummy, making her giggle.

“Daddyyyyy!”

He stopped tickling her and looked at her. The love and attraction in his eyes made Cassie feel emotional. She had never seen or experienced this side of Brady. He had always made her feel attractive and loved, but not like this. This was a

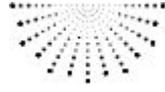
whole new level of love from him, and one she never wanted to go away.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Brady closed his eyes briefly before opening them. She could swear she saw a tear forming in the corner of his eye before he blinked it away.

“I love you, too, Cassie.”

CHAPTER 10



Brady kissed her as she sat on his lap with the heat of her spanked bottom radiating through his pants. His cock stiffened, and she must have felt it because she started squirming against him as she parted her lips to invite him to explore her mouth. When he finally released her from the kiss, they were both panting.

“You like Daddy’s hard-on, baby girl?”

Cassie nodded and began to grind her bottom against him.

“Get on your knees, Cassie,” he told her as he pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the ground in front of him so her knees weren’t resting on the dirt.

Cassie got down on her knees and looked up at him without hesitation. He could barely contain himself as he looked down at his Little girl, who seemed eager to please him. He unbuttoned his pants and pulled his underwear down, letting his cock spring out. He groaned when she instantly grabbed hold of it and kissed the tip of the velvety skin before wrapping her lips around the head.

Brady threw his head back as she began sucking his cock, stroking the base, and playing gently with his balls. She knew exactly what he liked. As she continued to lick and suck,

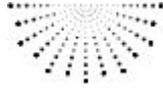
Brady could feel the tension growing in him and knew it wouldn't take much more before he exploded in her mouth.

“Baby, I'm going to come, and you're going to swallow all of it. Understand?”

Cassie nodded, her eyes locked with his. He couldn't contain himself any longer, and throwing his head back, Brady exploded into her mouth. Cassie took it all in as she continued to suck while he came. Brady opened his eyes and looked down at her as she wiped the corners of her mouth, a smile tugging at her lips.

“That's my good girl,” he said, running his hands through her hair.

CHAPTER 11



CASSIE

Cassie couldn't explain all the feelings she had as she swallowed her husband's come while on her knees in the middle of a hiking trail. She had just participated in one of the hottest experiences of her life. Her clit was throbbing as she sucked him, and she felt so incredibly close to him it made her want to cry. After she'd sucked the last bit of come from his cock and swallowed as he'd told her to, he helped her stand, pulled her shorts up, and then wrapped his arms around her.

She snuggled into his arms, feeling safe and loved.

"Baby girl, you're amazing. I'm so proud of you," he whispered as he held her. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm perfect, Daddy."

His arms tightened around her. "Shall we head back to the cabin so Daddy can take care of his sweet Little girl?"

Cassie nodded. "Umm, yes, please!"

He chuckled and held her hand as they began walking.

As soon as they got back to the cabin, Brady told her to lie on the bed. He dug through the suitcase, and when he walked toward her, he had a vibrating wand in his hand.

"What are you doing with that?" she asked worriedly.

Brady grinned. "I'm going to make my baby girl feel as good as she made Daddy feel."

Cassie shivered at that thought.

Brady pulled her shorts down and threw them on the floor before unsnapping the onesie, exposing her pussy to him. It was such an intimate feeling, allowing him to dress and undress her like that.

"Who do you belong to?" he asked.

"You," she said quietly, squirming as he touched the head of the turned-off vibrator to her clit.

"And who am I?"

His eyes were dark as he watched her.

"Daddy."

As soon as she said it, Brady clicked on the vibrator, and she cried out in both surprise and pleasure at the powerful sensation.

"That's right, baby. You belong to Daddy," he said, applying pressure to the wand.

She squirmed and spread her legs a little wider as Brady continued to move the wand over her clit. At the same time, he slid two fingers into her tight channel and began thrusting in and out. She was on the edge of orgasming as she gripped the sheets beside her. Brady must have sensed she was close because he flipped the switch on the wand to high.

"Come for me, baby," he growled.

Cassie screamed as her body exploded. When her screams finally quieted, he switched off the wand and lay down next to her, wrapping her up in his arms.

Brady held her quietly, stroking her hair as she came down from her high. Once she felt somewhat normal again, she pulled her head away from his chest and looked up at him. He smiled at her, his face full of love, and it made her melt for him.

“I love you, Daddy,” she whispered, snuggling back into him.

He tightened his hold on her.

“I love you, too, baby girl. How about I run a hot bath for you to soak in? I brought bubbles and bath toys.”

A bath sounded glorious, and bath toys and bubbles sounded even better.

“Yes, please.”

He poured bubble bath into the water and threw some floating toys in for her before helping her out of her clothes.

Holding on to her hand, he helped her into the tub, and she sank down to submerge herself.

“Is the water okay?” he asked, dipping his hand in it to check.

Cassie nodded and smiled at him. “It’s perfect. Will you stay in here with me?”

She felt vulnerable and didn’t want Brady to leave her alone in the bath for some reason.

He smiled sweetly and nodded. “Of course, I will, baby girl.”

Cassie felt relieved and blinked back the tears forming in her eyes.

“What’s wrong, baby girl?” he asked, looking concerned as he sat on the edge of the tub.

“I just don’t know why you have always been so kind and loving to me, and I’ve always treated you so terribly. You are the most loving, kind, and forgiving man, and I don’t deserve you.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and he reached over to wipe them away.

“Cassie, the day I met you, I knew you were meant to be my wife. You may not have always acted right, but maybe I should have asserted my authority over you from the get-go. Either way, baby, we deserve each other because we’re meant to be together, and we love each other very much. I have already forgiven you for the past, and I need you to forgive yourself and know how much I love you.”

Cassie smiled at him and reached out her hand to hold his. He squeezed her hand and lifted it to his mouth, kissing it multiple times.

“If me being your Little girl is as important to you as it seems, and you truly think this will save our marriage, then I will be your Little girl forever. Today has been the best day of our marriage, and I feel so close to you right now that I can’t even describe it. The way you’ve been looking at me all day makes me feel like the most special, beautiful girl on the planet.”

Brady grinned at her and kissed her hand again. “That’s because you are the most special and beautiful girl on the planet to me.”

As Cassie relaxed in the water, Brady sat on the edge of the tub, using a washcloth to wash her body. She played with

the rubber animal toys that he'd dumped in. They squirted water, and when she sprayed her Daddy, he gave her a stern look, but she could tell he was on the verge of smiling. After he washed her, Brady unplugged the tub and let the water drain.

“Stand up, baby.”

She quickly obeyed and stepped into the towel he was holding out for her. He wrapped her up and led her to the bedroom.

After he dried her off, he pulled out a pair of footie pajamas with unicorns all over them. They made her feel like a little girl. Cassie realized she liked this feeling. It was comforting, and she felt cute.

“Come on, baby. Let's go into the living room, and I'll turn on a movie for you while I make us dinner.”

Grabbing her stuffed hippo, Cassie followed him to the living room. He reached for the pink throw blanket on the couch and spread it out on the floor for her, tossing some pillows down along with it. Cassie got down on the floor and lay on her tummy while he found a movie for her to watch.

Cassie lay quietly on the floor, watching the movie and snuggling her hippo while he made dinner. When he came back into the living room, he had the plastic princess plate in his hand. As he sat down on the couch near her, Cassie got up on all fours and crawled over to him.

“Good girl. Are you hungry? I made some chicken nuggets with macaroni and cheese and grapes.”

Three of her favorite foods. Brady picked up a nugget and held it up to her mouth.

“Open.”

She complied and opened her mouth, taking a bite. Brady fed her the entire meal, and she sat happily at his feet, accepting it. When she finished the last bite, Brady leaned down and kissed her nose.

“Good girl. Did you get full?”

“Yes, Daddy. I’m full.”

Nodding, he stood and walked to the kitchen, coming back with a regular plate for himself. He sat and began to eat while Cassie sat at his feet, watching the movie. Occasionally, he would reach out and briefly play with her hair. Cassie relaxed against his leg. She felt peaceful at his feet, like she belonged there.

After dinner, Brady told Cassie it was time for bed. She pouted briefly, not wanting this wonderful, perfect day to end.

“Come on, baby, no pouting. You know what happens when you misbehave. Daddy will go to bed with you and snuggle you. Besides, I can tell you’re sleepy. It’s been a busy and emotional day for us both.”

Cassie agreed with that. She was tired, and it had been an intense day in so many ways. Cassie followed Brady to the bedroom, and he helped her brush her teeth and go potty before they both climbed into bed. As he pulled her closer and nuzzled the back of her neck, Cassie sighed and closed her eyes.

“I don’t want this to end, Brady. I want to feel this every day for the rest of our lives.”

Brady tightened his arm around her.

“It’s not going to end, Cassie. When we go home, you will still be my baby girl. You will still submit to me and be my

Little girl, and I will be your Daddy. Nothing is going to change when we go home. Understand, little one?”

Cassie nodded.

“When we go back home, things are going to change, Cassie. I’m not going to be working long hours anymore, and you won’t be going out for drinks after work anymore. We need to focus on our relationship. If you want to go out for drinks after work, Daddy will be meeting you there so we can spend the time together. There will be rules in place for you, and if you break the rules, or disrespect me or our marriage, there will be consequences for you. It’s my job to lead you and our marriage, and if that means being strict with you, I will be as strict as needed. Do you understand?”

Cassie nodded her head again.

“Yes, Daddy.”

She loved that her husband was taking control and protecting their marriage. It also turned her on that he was being so stern and taking charge.

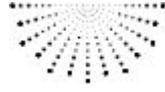
“Good girl,” he said, kissing the back of her head.

He reached over to the nightstand, grabbed her pacifier, and popped it into her mouth.

“Go to sleep, princess.”

Sucking on the pacifier soothed her as she dozed off to sleep in her Daddy’s arms.

CHAPTER 12



“Daddy, there’s deer outside!” Cassie squealed as they sat in the living room with the fireplace warming the entire cabin for them.

It was barely daylight out, and the layer of low fog made it even harder to see, but sure enough, when he looked outside, there were four deer and one enormous buck outside in the yard.

“I see that, baby. Wow. Those antlers are enormous!” Brady said as he watched them eat from a low limb.

“I want to go give them some apples,” she announced as she sprang up from the couch.

“You can’t go out there, baby girl. They are wild animals, and they could hurt you if you spook them. Especially the buck.”

Cassie glared at him as she put her hands on her hips.

“I’m not just going to run up to them, Brady. Duh. I’ll go slowly. It’ll be fine,” she argued.

Raising his eyebrow, he pinned her with a stern expression. “I said no, Little girl. It isn’t safe.”

He watched as something flashed in her eyes, and then she lifted her foot and stomped it on the floor. He would have

found it adorable, except he knew his naughty wife was going to make an appearance.

“You are such a...a...stupid jerkface!” she screamed as she stomped again.

Calmly getting up from the couch, Brady walked over and stood in front of his Little girl, who was visibly fuming.

“Do I call you names?” he asked in a low voice.

Her bottom lip trembled just slightly as she peered up at him from under her lashes.

“No,” she said sulkily.

“Right. So what makes you think it’s okay to call me names? Isn’t that against the rules we set up?” he asked.

She dropped her hands from her hips, and her shoulders sagged. “But I just want to go pet the deer.”

Cupping her chin gently, Brady pinned her with a stern look. “And Daddy said no. I didn’t say no just to be mean. I said no because it’s dangerous, and I don’t want you getting hurt. Now, since you decided to be naughty and disrespectful, you can march yourself into the bedroom and stand in the corner for ten minutes before your spanking.”

A feeling of amusement passed through him when her mouth dropped open, and he saw a look of defiance flicker in her eyes. But to his shock, it quickly passed, and she nodded sadly before turning toward the bedroom.

He followed and sat on the bed as she stood with her nose in the corner. He was proud of her for accepting her punishment.

After ten minutes passed, he cleared his throat. “Come here, Little girl.”

When she turned toward him, he pointed between his legs for her to come stand between them. She walked slowly toward him, arriving between his legs.

“Do we call each other names?” he asked as he started tugging her leggings down.

“No, Daddy,” she answered quietly.

“That’s right. We don’t. And when you call Daddy names, what happens?” he asked.

Cassie sniffled. “I gets a spankin’.”

He wanted to smile at how small she sounded, but he kept his expression stern. It made him feel good to know she was feeling Little at that moment, as she should.

“That’s right. Come on,” he said as he helped her over his lap.

She whimpered as he rested his hand on her panty-covered bottom.

“I love you, Little girl,” he told her before lifting his hand and delivering the first swat.

Cassie yelped and immediately started squirming as he spanked her. She was a fighter, and he loved that about her, but he needed to remain firm and show her that he would always follow through with what he said.

“I’s sorry, Daddy!” she cried.

Ignoring her pleas, Brady continued to spank her for several minutes before he paused briefly to pull down her panties. The sound of protest that came from her actually made him smile as he started spanking her again, focusing on the fleshy part of her lower bottom.

“Ouchie!” she cried out as she started sobbing.

It only took a few more smacks before she went limp over his lap and he stopped spanking her. Pulling her up into his arms, he rocked her and whispered soothing words to her as she calmed down.

“I’m sorry for being mean, Daddy. You’re not really a jerkface,” she said softly.

Kissing the top of her head, Brady squeezed her against him. “I forgive you, baby girl. I love you so much. Thank you for apologizing.”

The weekend had been just what he and Cassie needed to rekindle their marriage, and gave him the confirmation he needed that this was the right call for them. She needed a Daddy and a leader in her life, and he realized that her tantrums and attitudes had been an outcry for that all along.

He had never seen Cassie so loving and sweet as he had at the cabin. She seemed to embrace being his Little girl. He just hoped that once they returned home, she would be just as enthusiastic. He knew that while they were at the cabin, it was easy to be his Little girl without any of the outside world interrupting their dynamic. He just hoped she was as serious about saving their marriage as he was and would continue to allow him to be her Daddy.

Zippering up the suitcase full of all the new stuff he’d gotten her, he carried it out to their car. Cassie was sitting on the couch where he’d told her to stay, with her hippo, her blanket, and a pacifier in her mouth, watching cartoons. She’d told him that morning she was sad to leave the cabin. Brady had

promised he would bring her back again soon for another weekend without Wi-Fi. She'd stuck her tongue out at him and giggled. It pleased him that the attitude she'd had when they arrived at the cabin had seemed to disappear entirely and was now replaced with a carefree, loving Little girl he adored.

“Alright, princess, the car is all packed. I have snackies and a sippy cup of juice for you for the ride.”

Cassie grinned and walked over to him, dragging her blanket with her. Together, they walked out of the cabin and to the car.

Brady opened the car door for her and buckled her seat belt before laying her blanket over her lap and handing her the lunch bag he'd filled with snacks. As they began the drive home, Cassie was bubbly and much chattier than she had been on the drive to the cabin only a few days before. After about an hour, Cassie quieted down, and he could tell she was feeling sleepy.

“Close your eyes, baby girl, and rest.”

She nodded and pulled the blanket up over her. When she reached over and grabbed his hand, Brady felt a lump form in his throat. The affection she'd been showing him the past couple of days had been heaven for him and made him feel closer to her than he'd ever felt.

When they were a little over an hour away from home, Cassie woke up and sleepily yawned. She smiled over at him and then dug into the lunch bag, pulling out her sippy cup and a Ziploc bag of goldfish crackers. She snacked and drank her juice while he drove, occasionally holding a cracker up to his mouth to offer it to him. Brady opened his mouth and pretended to bite her fingers when she fed him a cracker.

Cassie squealed and giggled each time, snatching her hand away from him.

“You’re so silly!”

Hearing her laugh made him feel like he had done the right thing as a husband, and he would make the same decision over and over again if it meant his baby girl was as happy and carefree as she was right now.

“Daddy,” she said quietly after a few minutes.

Brady looked over at her, concerned with how serious she sounded all of a sudden.

“Yes, baby?”

Cassie looked over at him and smiled softly.

“No matter what happens when we return to the real world, please make sure I’m always your Little girl, no matter what. I don’t want to lose this connection, and I really like being Little. Especially since I’m *your* Little.”

Brady felt as though everything that had been weighing him down the past year completely lifted and everything would be okay.

“I promise, Cassie. You’ll be my Little girl forever and ever, and I won’t let that change.”

She nodded her head as a tear rolled down her cheek. “I love you so much, Brady. Thank you for giving me the ultimatum and saving our marriage. I’m so happy and proud to be your wife.”

“I love you, too, Cassie. But my name is Daddy unless you want your bottom spanked,” he replied, winking at her and smiling.

Cassie laughed and stuck her tongue out at him, knowing he was playing with her.

“Okay, *Brady*.”

Brady grinned and raised his eyebrow at her.

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that when we get home, Little girl.”

She grinned, too, and made a silly face at him.

Yeah. Life was good.

ABOUT KATE OLIVER

Kate Oliver has aspired to be an author all her life. From the time she was known as “that girl who always has her nose stuck in a book”, Kate Oliver has wanted to be a writer. Currently, fetish romance is her favorite for both reading and writing. Her favorite part of writing her own books is dreaming up the hot and steamy, yet loving and strict, Daddies that Littles dream about.

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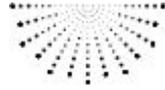
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MARRYING A MURDERER
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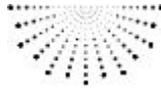
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

For Maren Smith, a wonderful and dedicated author, one who has inspired and mentored so many new authors, including me some ten years ago.

Thank you, dearest Maren.

CHAPTER ONE



St Elmo, Colorado – 1884

Withdrawing deeper into the protection of the dark shadow, Verity flattened herself against the wall, closing her eyes against the moonlight, terrified her eye reflection might give away her presence. The man had not yet moved from where he stood over the prone body now lying lifeless in the dirt.

Had he seen her? She risked a quick glance through her fingers, he was now crouched low over his victim searching the body of the man she'd just seen brutally murdered.

Turning, he glanced behind him. Verity's breath became ragged. She snapped her eyes shut again, praying silently. Her heart hammered. The sound of her own blood racing through her veins thrummed in her ears. Had the killer spotted her? It seemed not, for as she peered through half closed lids, he tilted his head up to gaze up into the darkening sky causing his face to become clearly outlined by the rising moon. A handsome, pleasant-faced man, yet someone to be feared. A murderer.

Suddenly he moved. Her breath caught in her throat. She froze; fist in mouth to stifle a whimper of terror.

Stalking away without a backward glance, the murderer left the dead man where he lay in a pool of darkening blood. Verity's breath escaped in a whoosh of relief. Sweat dampened her skin. Doubling over, she retched until there was nothing left in her stomach.

Inching away from where she'd been ill, she peered into the street. He'd not returned. Shrouded between the shadow of the two tall buildings feeling terrified to move, she opted to stay where she was. Time passed, yet still she remained hidden. Eventually, feeling braver, she slunk from her hiding place and moved cautiously forward, nervous the killer might return to the scene of the crime.

Drawing her shawl over her head she garnered the courage to venture into the open street. She scurried up the boardwalk to Mrs. Campbell's boarding house where she was staying.

Having just arrived in St Elmo, Colorado to teach school, the very last thing she needed was notoriety and so she decided not to tell a soul what she'd witnessed. It had been clear in the letter of appointment she'd received that the town was looking for a school master, not a mistress. The last thing she needed now was to become embroiled in a notorious trial as a key witness and risk public ridicule which might lead to the loss of this much needed post. There was nowhere else for her to go. Her parents were dead and as soon as she'd received her teaching certificate, her mean-spirited aunt told her it was time for her to leave. This post was the only one that had accepted her application.

If she should become the center of attention and be gossiped about, the parents and the school board might want her gone. They were not happy to have an unseasoned teacher, yet alone a woman, in the post. Since no male application had

been received, they had reluctantly accepted hers. Guiltily she decided it was in her best interests to stay silent, to watch and wait to see how this horrible drama unfolded.

Every morning since she'd witnessed the murder, she encouraged her landlady to gossip. Apart from being regaled by the various town-folks' health issues, it seemed that no murder had been reported.

Two days later she came down to breakfast to find Mrs. Campbell all a twitter.

“Miss Lasse, something dreadful has happened in town, I would not have heard about it, but for the boy delivering a telegram for you. Apparently, a man has been found dead in the street!”

“Oh, my goodness, how dreadful!” Verity exclaimed.

“Isn't it? The matter has been duly reported to the sheriff who is investigating. The lad told me he thinks it was murder. I don't know as I'll sleep easy tonight knowing there's a killer on the loose. Oh, my days what is the town coming too?”

Verity nodded, inwardly sighing with relief. She might be able to sleep at night again now that she knew the law had taken charge of the poor man's demise.

“Do they know anything about who the dead man might be?” she asked.

Mrs. Campbell snorted. “Yes, and you may be sure no one will mourn him! Billy Tucker is no loss to this world.”

Verity found her landlady's description of the dead man's character partially reassuring. It would have been far worse to

hear that she'd witnessed the murder of a good man. However much she tried, she couldn't erase the dreadful moment when she'd watched Mr. Tucker's life blood ebb away. That violent deed invaded her dreams, badly affecting her ability to sleep. Time and again she awoke shaken and drenched in sweat, her vivid nightmares recalling in detail Billy Tucker's last moments.

"Well, are you going to read it?" Mrs. Campbell interrupted her thoughts, nodding at the telegram she'd placed before her.

"Oh yes, of course." She scanned the note. *'I am married STOP No need for your return STOP Have a good life STOP Aunt Susan STOP'*

"Not bad news I hope?" Mrs. Campbell asked curiously.

"No, no, not at all... It's from my aunt and astonishingly she has married." No need to explain to her landlady that this was her aunt's way of ensuring that her niece got the message that she was unwelcome and should never return. Verity folded the telegram and slipped into her pocket. Since she had no intention of living under her aunt's roof ever again, no reply was necessary.

Keeping to the guest house, she whiled away her time by assisting Mrs. Campbell. Sometimes sewing the many threadbare sheets which her landlady used for her guests. Helping with the daily chores, Verity tried to be as useful as she could. Helping her landlady kept the dark memories at bay. She was due to begin teaching at the town's small school the following week. Since her foray after dark into the streets

of St Elmo, she'd not ventured forth in the evenings, not wanting any reminders of that horrible night. Nor had she seen the murderer since that day. She fervently hoped that the man was locked up safely up in a cell. But if he'd not yet been apprehended, she consoled herself with the fact he must surely have left town. Afterall, wouldn't he be long gone by now?

Sunlight glinted off the whitewashed walls of the wooden school building. Verity took a moment to stand and admire her new place of work. The schoolhouse was surrounded by forest. Woodland reached the outer edges of the boundary. Aspen trees rustled prettily swaying in the gentle breeze. The compact building housed a small square bell tower sat atop the roof. It was a pretty, peaceful place. Drawing in a fortifying breath, she realised she could be very happy working here.

Stepping inside the bright interior, she took a moment to cast her eye over the rows of desks, cupboards, blackboard and potbellied stove, currently unlit before she untied the rope that was the bell pull. With one tug a satisfying clang tolled, ringing out the message that school was back in session.

Her first day as the town's new teacher went surprisingly well. The lessons ran smoothly, despite her jittery nerves. Sixteen pupils attended. All the children were remarkably well behaved, considering they ranged from six to fifteen. Verity was delighted to find that she had twin girls in her class and found it fascinating that although they were identical in their outward appearance; their characters were as different as night from day.

Grace, a sweet rather shy girl, wished only to please her new teacher; however, Mercy, her twin, appeared to be a

headstrong, sassy child who possessed a smart mouth. Verity asked Mercy to stay behind after school. Both six-year-olds obediently remained seated as the other children filed out of the door at the end of the day.

“Come over here and stand before me, please, girls,” she called from where she was seated behind her desk. They obediently came forward, both girls shuffled their feet as they stood in front of her desk.

“I was disappointed by your behaviour today, Mercy. I would have expected you to make more of an effort to impress me on my first day as your new teacher.” Grace looked down at her feet shame faced. Meanwhile, her twin, Mercy, merely kicked her toe, looking surly.

“What is your explanation, young lady?” she asked turning her sternest gaze upon Mercy.

“Please Miss, she’s upset because our mother died,” Grace mumbled. Verity’s heart immediately overflowed with sympathy.

“I’m very sorry to hear that, girls. I too lost my mother as a child. I know how difficult it is to get by without a mother’s love.” She noticed Mercy’s bottom lip tremble.

“Perhaps you should both take tomorrow off and spend the day at home doing the things you enjoy. When you come back to school, if you find lessons get too much for either of you, then I want you to come and tell me. Perhaps I can help in some way... Are we agreed?” she suggested.

“They’re better off here than at home, miss. I can’t be there to watch them and work the ranch at the same time. They need to keep busy. It’s best they remain in school.”

Verity started at the sound of a gruff male voice. She hadn't noticed the arrival of the very tall man leaning against the door frame, hat in hand. The light from the open door placed his face in shadow. She rose and moved forward to greet him.

It was only when she was a yard or so away from the girls' father that recognition struck. Blanching, she saw a face she'd last seen under bright moon light several nights ago; a face that haunted her day and night... The face of a murderer.

Her head spun; she felt nauseous. Weakness spread to her outer limbs. Stretching out a hand to a desk top, she steadied herself.

"I know you mean well, miss, but truth be told, the girls are safer in school than at home right now," he said, crossing to where she stood. He seemed not to notice her pallor.

"Go outside and wait in the buggy," he instructed the twins. The adults stood silent, waiting until the girls departed. Verity writhed in fear. Her mind raced. Whatever should she do? The door banged shut behind the twins. She gave a violent start. The man finally appeared to notice her tension.

"There's no cause to be nervous around me, miss. I'm not riled by your suggestion. I'm simply telling you how things are at home right now. See, my wife didn't just up and die; she was attacked and murdered while she was alone in the ranch house. I don't want my girls staying out there alone after such violence. D'you see my point?"

"I, why yes, I do. I am so sorry. How awful, Mr...?" She couldn't for the life of her remember the twins surname she was in such a tizzy. Confusingly, for a killer, the man seemed nice, not how she'd expect a murderer to behave at all. However, she knew from first-hand experience how a person's

character could be deceptive. Just look at her aunt. Society regarded her aunt as some kind of saint. They viewed her as a kindly soul who'd gladly taken in her orphaned niece. Yet nothing could have been further from the truth. Her aunt Susan had wanted the money her parents had set aside for her upbringing. Susan had begrudged every cent she needed to spend on her niece.

“Miss, ma'am?” His voice drew her back to the present.

Verity recalled this man's wife had been murdered. Chilled by his nearness, she stepped away from the desk. Distancing herself from him.

“Name's Calhoun. Jake Calhoun, howdy do, miss.” He stepped toward her closing the gap she'd been careful to create, and held out his hand. A tall man, well-muscled from toiling outdoors, he towered over her.

Verity realized she was openly gaping. Snapping her mouth closed, she made a determined effort to pull her wits together. Tentatively she held out her hand which he engulfed within his own warm and calloused hand. She noted his firm grip.

“How do you do? I am, Miss Verity Lasse, the new school teacher.” *Talk about stating the obvious.* “I took up position as school mistress today. I have to tell you, Mr. Calhoun, that I am concerned about your daughter, Mercy. She is obviously finding it difficult to deal with what has happened to her mother.”

“Yeah, I guess we're all struggling to come to terms with Megan's murder, even though it took place several months back. The shock of it seems to have only recently hit the girls. I would hire a housekeeper, but it seems that no good woman wants to work out on a ranch so far out of town... Well, not

since my wife was killed leastways.” He shrugged and took to turning his hat slowly around in his hands.

A cold chill seeped down Verity’s spine as the horrible realization struck her that this man might actually *be* his wife’s killer. After all, hadn’t she witnessed him murder a man in cold blood only last week? What was there to say Calhoun hadn’t killed his own wife too? She edged backwards until she reached her desk and slipped behind it; feeling a bit safer with the sturdy wooden desk between them.

“You have my deepest sympathy. Please rest assured that I’ll do my best to safeguard your children while they are in my care. Good afternoon, Mr. Calhoun,” she said briskly, dismissing him in her best schoolmarm voice.

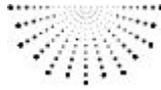
He stared at her for an uncomfortably long moment before he placed his hat firmly on his head and finally turned away. Once he reached the doorway, Calhoun turned, looked back at her, his eyes shadowed by the brim of his hat. Her heart thumped in her chest. *Now what?*

“I’m glad to know my girls will be here with you during daylight hours. I like you, Miss Lasse.” With that, the murderer left the schoolhouse.

As the screen door banged shut, Verity went limp with relief. Her breath expelled as she collapsed onto her chair.

Dear Lord, whatever was she to do?

CHAPTER TWO



A restless weekend followed, one where no amount of chores kept her anxiousness at bay. It was with trepidation that Verity returned to the schoolhouse on Monday. Using her ingenuity, she managed to keep both the twins busy all week. Early on, she kept glancing across at the door, fearful that Mr. Calhoun might reappear, but as the middle of the week came and went, she relaxed.

Whenever Mercy began to act a little antsy, she would find a special task for the child, like cleaning the blackboard, or handing out text books. One day she brought apples into school from a surplus growing in Mrs. Campbell's orchard. She asked the twins to wash them in the water barrel outside before distributing among the other pupils.

Friday crept up fast, she couldn't believe she'd completed her second week of teaching school. Absorbed with tidying up after the children had left for the weekend, she was startled by the deep clearing of a throat. Spinning around, she saw it was him; Mr. Calhoun. She stumbled backwards.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you, miss. I just stopped by to thank you for making my girls more settled; they seem much happier this week. Don't rightly know what you did to achieve it, but I can tell you that those girls of mine have

wanted to come to school every single day this week. Knowing they are happy and cared for has removed a burden from my mind, and so I thought I should stop by and thank you.” After this pretty speech, Verity relaxed a little.

“Why Mr. Calhoun, thank you for your praise. I feel real’ sorry for your family’s loss. Naturally, I should like to help the girls feel safer.” She forced a stiff smile. The grin he returned lit up his face. She stared. Mr. Calhoun seemed transformed. Why had she not noticed his good looks before? He was a very handsome man.

Probably because I was scared to death of him after I witnessed him murder that man. She surmised. Yet, was that what she had really and truly witnessed, could she be mistaken about what she’d seen? To cover her confusion, she began to wipe down the blackboard for the second time.

“I wonder if I might prevail upon you to sit with us in church, come Sunday. The girls would like it very much if you did. I thought maybe you might like to come back with us afterwards and join us for lunch at the ranch? I’d make sure you were back in town by dark.” Verity halted mid swipe of the blackboard. This was unforeseen. “I-I’ll give your kind invitation some thought and get back to you. Thank you for the invitation.”

His lip kicked up in an enchanting grin.

“I understand if you’d prefer not to. Folks seem to be giving The Circle C a wide berth at the moment. Can’t say as I blame them, but it is hard on the children. Don’t decide right now you can give it some thought and let me know come Sunday. Until then, Miss Lasse, good day.” He tipped his hat and turned to go, striding toward the door.

“I haven’t refused your invitation, Mr. Calhoun,” she called after his retreating back. *Dammit. I’m such a fool. The man is surely a murderer!* Just because he has a lovely smile and appears to be a good father, she was actually starting to like him. What on earth was wrong with her? She’d seen him kill a man with her very own eyes, for goodness sakes!

Despite her misgivings, Verity locked up the school and almost skipped back to her lodgings with a light step. All day Saturday she pondered upon Mr. Calhoun. Could she be mistaken in his identity? What if it had merely been a trick of the light? After all, moonshine often distorted one’s vision at night.

That afternoon she tried on her two, formal, ‘Sunday-go-to-meeting’ gowns, just in case he called on her the following day. Finally deciding on her blue sprigged gown rather than her darker, more reserved burgundy outfit, Verity convinced herself her decision was solely based on the fact the material was lighter, and therefore more suited to this warmer weather. Truth be told, she knew the sky-blue floral complimented her cornflower blue eyes and drew masculine eyes to her shapely figure.

However, he didn’t call for her come Sunday morning. Verity acknowledged her disappointment, but dismissed her feelings as immature and foolish. She walked into church behind an elderly couple who moved with a hesitant, slow gait which suited her. It gave her an opportunity to cast her gaze over the town’s congregation.

Mr. Calhoun must have been watching out for her because she saw him rise from his place on a pew and wave in her

direction. With a nervous smile, she walked down the aisle to where he and the twins were seated.

“Howdy, Miss Lasse,” Grace trilled while Mercy gave her a wide grin and patted the seat beside her. Verity had little choice other than to sit between the two girls.

“Hello girls, you both look very pretty today. What lovely frocks,” she praised.

“Ma made them for us. Pink for Gracie an’ blue for me!” Mercy explained.

“What a very clever lady your mother must have been. I wish I had been able to meet her,” she replied gently. Grace’s eyes shone with unshed tears, but Mercy nodded solemnly.

“She would have liked you, miss,” the child told her.

Verity liked the fact that Mr. Calhoun hugged Grace into his side and kissed the top of her head. It was hard to imagine this kindly man as a murderer. Verity took Mercy’s hand in her own, and pressed her fingers gently.

“I think perhaps I would have liked her too,” she whispered.

People around them rose to their feet. The pastor had arrived. Verity stood along with the Calhoun family and began to sing the opening hymn along with the congregation. Glancing across at Jake, she was surprised to find him watching her, his expression intense. “Thank you,” he mouthed.

“You’re welcome,” she answered then looked front, to re-join the singing.

Despite her protests to the contrary, the Calhoun family pressed her into accepting their luncheon invitation. Verity concentrated on the girls chatter and forced all thoughts of murder to the back of her mind.

The meal turned out to be surprisingly good. A rich beef stew served with homemade bread to mop up the gravy.

“Quillian, our bunk house cook, has been cooking for us since Meg, Megan...” He glanced across at the twins before adding, “...passed. I can’t seem to get a woman to come work for me since she, er, died.”

Verity nodded sympathetically, glancing over at the twins as they chattered, heads pressed together. They didn’t appear to be listening to them, but she was aware that you could never tell what a child might pick up from an adult conversation.

She liked the spacious single-story ranch house. A huge stone fireplace dominated the main living area. There were wooden rockers dotted about the room, each set with a plump embroidered cushion. A rug woven in similar colors lay upon the floor in front of the hearth. It was a warm and inviting home.

“Meg sewed an awful lot. It was much more than simple dressmaking. She enjoyed embroidery as a hobby,” Jake explained.

“It is lovely, very inviting and homely. I am sorry I didn’t get to meet her,” she told him sincerely.

“I think she’d have liked you.”

She returned his smile. “The furniture is beautiful, and quite unusual.”

“My father made most of it, and I still make pieces to order. There are too many trees hereabouts to make decent

living out of running cattle. I made all the beds in the house and carved them too.”

Warmth spread over her at the mention of the beds. She turned away least he noticed her unwarranted reaction. She worried that the rest of the day would feel awkward, but she needn't have been concerned, for it seemed Jake was keen to put her at her ease; the rest of the day passed by pleasantly. Verity couldn't help glancing over at Jake Calhoun surreptitiously. Whenever she thought he wasn't looking, she glanced his way. He was a fine-looking specimen of manhood. Every time he caught her eye, he gave her that grin and her insides tightened. Surely, she must be mistaken about him? This man couldn't possibly be a killer. He was a kind and gentle father. She decided to let go of her prejudice against him and shove her memories to the back of her mind.

Later, Jake drove her back to Mrs. Campbell's, arriving promptly at six o' clock. After helping her to the ground and escorting her to the door he left, tipping his hat at her as he turned the buggy away. She stood on the porch and waved goodbye. The twins returned her gesture frantically waving with all the exuberance of youth. She grinned and entered the house buoyed up with happiness.

Church followed by lunch at the Aspen Ranch soon became a regular Sunday feature for Verity.

She discovered Jake was an engaging companion. It was after one of these Sunday lunches some six weeks later that she returned to the guest house to find Mrs. Campbell waiting for her, along with three other much older ladies. As she entered, Mrs. Campbell called to her from the parlour where the seated ladies arose and nodded to her as she joined them.

The atmosphere felt decidedly chilly. Verity realized that these women were no friends of her landlady.

“Miss Lasse, good afternoon. I am Mrs. Hale, may I introduce Mrs. Smith and Miss Thomas. Our reason for visiting you today is that it has come to the school board’s attention that you are frequenting the house of an unmarried man, un-chaperoned.”

“Visiting him on a regular basis,” Miss Thomas added in a nasally whine.

“How I spend my day off is surely of no concern of yours. However, I will tell you that I am attending church with a bereaved family each Sunday. They are kind enough to invite me for luncheon afterwards. I spend time with the family, particularly with the two children who are pupils at my school.”

The woman bristled but it was Mrs. Smith who interjected. “It is not *your* school, Miss Lasse. You are merely an employee of the school-board.”

Verity noticed Mrs. Campbell fidget; her lips tightly compressed.

“Surely you see how scandalous this liaison is, my dear?” Mrs. Hale boomed. The other two women twittered their agreement.

“I can assure you that Miss Lasse is a most chaste and polite young lady. Your slur upon her character is wholly unfounded!” Mrs. Campbell interjected vehemently.

“Nevertheless, we have decided to remove you from your position as teacher here. We have found a far more suitable applicant for the position and he can begin on Monday, tomorrow. Your services are no longer required, Miss Lasse. I

bid you good afternoon!” Mrs. Hale stated pompously and with that the women stood, preparing to leave.

Verity trembled with outrage. So that was what all this was about; they preferred to have a man in the post as teacher, but since no male candidate had originally applied, they’d hired her to fill in until they found a male teacher. She guessed a later applicant, a man, now wished to take up the post and so the board had decided to find the means to push her out.

“One moment please, ladies. My contract states quite clearly that I will receive a months’ notice upon dismissal.”

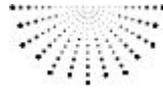
“If you read on, dear, it also states that no notice will be given for poor conduct, or character or theft. I believe loose morals cover the poor character clause quite adequately.”

Verity was struck dumb by the sheer animosity of these women. She could think of nothing else to say in order to convince them to change their narrow-minded views and watched silently fuming as they swept from the room. Mrs. Campbell made no move to show them out, but stayed put. Leaning over, she patted Verity’s arm and murmured encouraging platitudes.

What on earth I am I supposed to do now? With no home to return to and no income, beyond the little she had managed to save over the past six weeks, she was homeless. Those nasty, vicious old tabbies! Reaction set in, trembling violently she dropped her head onto her chest in defeat.

“I’ll fetch some coffee and then we can figure out what to do next.” Mrs. Campbell scurried off. Verity was grateful to her for using the word ‘we.’

CHAPTER THREE



After giving the matter a great deal of thought, Verity decided that even though she hated the idea, she must return to her aunt's house, however unwelcome she would be. Perhaps she'd be able to find employment in a larger, less parochial school? Somewhere within the city maybe, where people were more cosmopolitan, and less likely to be so judgemental. The thought was not a happy one. Her aunt would not be pleased to see her but Verity felt she was left with little choice.

On Monday morning she walked over to the stage office to find out if she could meet the cost of a single stage ticket to Buena Vista and then another ticket onto Kansas. Luckily, she had just enough money to cover the journey, but no more. Her heart sank at the thought of the horribly long haul that lay before her. With no further funds she may well have to go hungry for duration of the trip. When she had travelled to St. Elmo a couple of months previous, her journey had been one of adventure and excitement. She'd found the discomfort and hardship of the long trip out West nothing more than a fascinating experience. The idea of a return trip amidst the heat and dust which would lead ultimately to facing the wrathful ridicule of her aunt, soul destroying.

That evening she helped Mrs. Campbell to prepare supper. While she stood peeling the vegetables there was an almighty

hammering at the front door. Mrs. Campbell hurried to answer the caller. Verity heard a demanding male voice stridently shout her name. She hastened into the hallway wiping her hands on her apron and saw Mrs. Campbell holding the open door.

“Why weren’t you in school today? I have had the most awful time getting Mercy to stay put there, and then to top it all, she ran away. I have been searching for her up until an hour ago! What have you got to say for yourself, young lady, eh?”

“Mr. Calhoun, how dare you take that tone with Miss Lasse! She has been dismissed from the school by the board, all because of her association with *you*! She has been accused of lacking in moral fiber!”

Verity was touched that Mrs. Campbell leapt to her defence so vehemently.

“Land’s sakes, is this true?” Jake looked incredulous. He took a step in her direction.

She stepped back. “Yes. I shouldn’t have gone to your ranch alone without another female as chaperone. I’m returning to the city. I leave this Thursday for Kansas City.” She watched as Jake snatched his hat from his head and ran a large hand through his unruly hair.

“Miss Lasse, will you step outside with me for a moment? I have to speak with you.”

Mrs. Campbell bristled. “I don’t believe that to be a good idea, Mr. Calhoun, someone might see you and make matters worse for Miss Lasse. However, I am happy to make my parlour available to you, just for a moment or two, you understand?”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am. I’ll take you up on that offer, Miss Lasse... after you.” He pointed his hat toward the open parlour. She walked stiffly before him, leading the way into the room. Jake followed shutting the door firmly behind him. She turned to confront him, but before she could even open her mouth, Jake pulled her into his arms and brought his lips down on hers.

The way his mouth crushed hers was intoxicating. She tasted wood smoke on his tongue and smelt leather, sandalwood, and man. His kiss was tender yet firm. In her mind she knew she ought to push him away, but the heat of his hard, lean body pressed up against hers felt exciting.

Finishing his fleeting exploration of her mouth, he tightened his hold on her. Verity slid her arms up about his waist. Lost in new sensations, she heard a low moan and realized it came from deep within her and attempted to pull free of him, suddenly aware of her *‘lack of moral fiber.’* It seemed that Jake was having none of it and kept a firm grip on her.

He interposed his knee between her legs, his thigh pressed hard up against her womanhood causing her to gasp. Her thin day gown gave little protection against the thrilling pressure. It was intoxicating, but she knew it was wrong. *What is the matter with me?*

It seemed as though because she’d been accused of being a loose woman, she needed to act upon it.

As her mind raced with logic, the awakening awareness of her body’s physical need surpassed all reason. It was as though his kisses drugged her, but oh how wonderful it felt to be held in this man’s arms. She wanted more, but she had no idea what

'more' might lead to. Verity only knew that at this moment she wanted Jake Calhoun to keep making her feel this way.

He pulled back and she mewled with disappointment. He chuckled; the deep sound reverberated through his chest and into hers.

"Verity, Miss Lasse, I have a proposal for you."

"Oh, yes?"

He chuckled again. "Well, miss, I guess that was kind of it —"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand?" she interrupted, bemused.

"Miss Lasse, Verity, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Stunned, she stared back him, mouth agape.

"Can you at least give me an answer?" he asked after the silence stretched. Merriment twinkling in his eye.

"I-I don't know what to say. What about the twins? You don't love me... I don't even know if I can love you."

"Whoa, calm down. It seems I'm the cause of this mess you've found yourself in and so I aim to fix it. I like you a lot, young lady, and I think after that kiss, it's clear to me that you like me some, too. I'd miss you if you left St Elmo and I know my girls sure would. Plus, they need a mother and I sure am in need of a wife. What do you say, Miss Lasse? Will you marry me and make me one happy man?"

She found herself returning his warm lopsided grin. Her heart swelled with pleasure. Maybe Jake would understand about her desire to teach at the school again, if an opportunity arose? Most men wanted their wives to give up any job they had once married. Perhaps Jake would prove to be the

exception to the rule? Verity opened her mouth to ask him, but he lowered his to cover hers again and heat rose between them, turning all her thoughts to mush. Finally, he set her back from him. She noticed he was panting. Staring at him perplexed, she realised she knew nothing of men and their desires.

Certainly, marriage would silence the town gossips, and she would never have to return with her tail between her legs to sour Aunt Susan.

There was only one fly in the ointment, the niggling and insistent voice in her head that warned her over and over that Jake Calhoun was indeed a murderer.

Pulling herself together, she took a breath. “Thank you for your proposal, Mr. Calhoun. I need time to think about your kind offer.”

“Take all the time you need, but don’t skip town without telling me first,” he winked, but his words held a thread of steel.

She bristled. “I assure you; I would not do such an underhanded thing.”

“Well, that’s good to know. Perhaps you’d join me on a picnic tomorrow and you can give me your answer then?”

As she hesitated, his hand stole out to take hers. His thumb swept back and forth over her palm. His warm gaze encouraged her and so she nodded her assent.

“Til tomorrow then.” He turned, moving out into the hallway where she watched as he put on his hat.

She remained standing in the parlour. Listening, she heard Mrs. Campbell’s voice call, “good evening,” as her landlady

saw Jake off the premises. A moment later she appeared in the doorway. "Well?" she asked.

"Did you over hear? Mr. Calhoun proposed to me," Verity said.

"He did?" Mrs. Campbell replied, not answering her question; her landlady obviously wasn't going to admit to eavesdropping. "That's wonderful, my dear, it solves all your problems. Congratulations!"

"I haven't given him a reply yet. He's taking me on a picnic tomorrow. I told him I'd give him my answer then."

Mrs. Campbell reached out and took both Verity's hands in hers. "My dear girl, allow me to offer you some motherly advice. Accept that man. There're aren't many good-looking, kind men about and Mr. Calhoun is both. You couldn't do much better. You told me yourself your aunt won't be pleased to see you return. Tell you what I'll do, I'll bake up a storm for that picnic tomorrow. Believe me, the best way to man's heart is through his stomach!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Campbell, you've been most kind. I'll think on it overnight and let you know my decision in the morning."

Mrs. Campbell dropped her hands from hers. "Miss Lasse, do me a favor and call me, Mary."

"Thank you, Mary. In which case, please call me, Verity." She smiled at the older woman who had shown her more kindness in the last few weeks than her own aunt had.

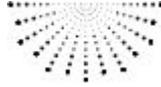
"Thank you. Now please listen to me, Verity. I want you to make quite certain that you make the right decision. It is not often a woman gets an opportunity which rescues her from a

bad situation. A proposal from such a nice man is not to be overlooked.”

“You’re right, thank you, ma’am, I promise I am going to give the matter some very deep thought. Goodnight, Mrs. Campbell... I mean, Mary.”

It’s not quite as simple as you suppose, Mary. The real question being, do I risk marrying a man I believe to be a murderer?

CHAPTER FOUR



He called for her at noon, driving the buggy. Despite his protestation that he'd packed ample food, Mrs. Campbell insisted on handing him a basket full of picnic provisions.

The path Jake took was rough and the buggy lurched unsteadily on the uneven ground. Neither spoke above their initial greetings, yet the silence felt comfortable between them despite the lurching ride. Verity was grateful when he shucked an arm around her waist holding her secure at his side. The views of the surrounding mountains were quite lovely. Soon the press of dark firs gave way to more open woodland, with deciduous and pretty aspen trees.

Verity was still undecided how to answer Jake. Torn by her attraction to him as a man and the secret she held, that he might be a murderer. The question had kept her tossing and turning all night still echoed in her mind now. What if Jake *had* killed the man who'd murdered his wife? Didn't mean he was no danger to her, or to society? He'd simply taken justice into his own hands. Yes, she acknowledged that was wrong and yet the Bible stated an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Her thoughts ricocheted inside her head in an endless cycle of indecision.

“What'd you think?”

She startled at the sound of his voice, drawing her from her turmoil. "I'm sorry?"

"Is this an adequate place to picnic?" He swept his arm out.

She looked about at the shaded area he'd selected. They'd stopped beside a small watering hole.

"It's a delightful spot, Mr. Calhoun," she said.

"The pool is little known hereabouts. It's fed via an underground tributary from Grizzly Creek over yonder." He pointed in the direction of the large creek.

His mouth stretched in a wide smile as he lifted her down from her seat. Setting her carefully onto her feet, he turned to fetch the picnic hampers. "Would you be so kind as to carry the rug?" he asked.

Fetching the folded blanket from the buggy seat, she followed him to a shady spot situated beneath the bough of a willow tree. Shaking out the rug, she waited for Jake to set down the two hampers before she settled. He sat beside her.

"I think we should eat before you give me my answer, because if you refuse me, I'll have no appetite, an' I'm mighty hungry right now."

"Well, we certainly can't have that!" She rummaged around Mrs. Campbell's basket and pulled out a chequered napkin bundle which contained two chicken pies. Handing him one, she was startled by the look of hunger in his eyes.

"My word, but you look ravenous!" she exclaimed.

"You've no idea, Miss Lasse," he replied dryly.

Verity was entranced by the buzz of brightly-colored humming birds which darted among the branches of the

surrounding trees. The flutter of their tiny wings reverberated in the sultry air.

Casting surreptitious looks at him from under her lashes, Verity barely registered the taste of the food she ate. Every female part of her tingled, reacting to his close proximity. *What should my answer be?* She still had no idea.

“Miss Lasse... Miss Lasse?”

“Hmm?”

“Your thoughts are miles away. I asked if you’d had enough to eat.”

She smiled. “Yes, thank you.”

“I wonder, before you give me my answer, might I kiss you?” he asked.

She blinked in surprise. Did she want her thoughts to become more muddled than they were? His kiss the day before had left her senses in havoc. “Is that usual?” she said, hoping to stall him.

He winked. “Well, I’m no expert on betrothals, but I’d say under the circumstances it couldn’t hurt... After all, I’m courting you.”

She flushed; her mouth went dry. Unable to reply, she nodded.

He leaned in; she felt one large hand cup her neck, drawing her close. His face loomed and his lips grazed hers. She gasped as softly, sensually he plied her mouth apart and traced the seam of her lips with his tongue. Verity had never been kissed by another man. The sensation of his tongue on her was unbelievably intimate.

Relaxing, she allowed him to take the lead. His explorations grew bolder as his tongue swept deep inside her mouth. Parting for him, she allowed him access. His masculine taste and smell intoxicated her. Encouraged by her enjoyment, Verity decided she wanted to join in the game. Sliding her own tongue to tangle with his, she felt his intake of breath. He tugged her down onto his lap; his hands supported her shoulders as he plundered her mouth.

Removing his mouth from hers caused surprising disappointment. She mewled at the loss.

“Give me your answer now, honey. I ask again, will you marry me?” His husky voice combined with the male scent of him added fuel to her already heated blood.

“Yes, Jake.” The words spilled from her easily, without conscious thought. Her mind raised a whimper of caution, but her heated body forcefully overruled all common sense.

“I promise to love and protect you, Verity. I know I failed before with Meg, but I swear I’ll never make the same mistake again. I’ll keep you and our family from harm.”

Jake’s sincerity appeared genuine. She nodded and he lowered his mouth back to hers. This was what she wanted, more of the same and met him eagerly in a passionate kiss to seal their promise.

In the week leading up to their wedding, Jake took her into the Stark mercantile and general store and made introductions to the owner. “Mr. Stark, this here is my affianced, Miss Lasse. Come Sunday she will be my wife and I want to set up an account with you for her.”

“Congratulations, Jake. Miss Lasse, a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Casting her a warm smile, the aging store owner held out his hand.

Verity shook it. “I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Stark.”

“Honey, why don’t you go and find some material to make clothes for you and the twins,” Jake said and then looked awkward. “I’m sorry I should have you asked first, do you sew?”

“Yes, Jake. I am used to making my own clothes,” she reassured him.

“I do carry a selection of premade ladies’ gowns, if that helps?” Mr. Stark interjected. “Over there.” He pointed to a rail covered in a dust sheet.

“I expect they are rather pricey,” Verity murmured.

“Honey, I want you to go select two. I can afford them. Think of them as my wedding gift to you.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am,” Jake said firmly.

She reached out her hand and took his, giving it a brief squeeze. It felt very forward touching him this way in a public place.

While she was searching the rack for a suitable gown, she overheard Jake asking Mr. Stark about the purchase of a wedding band. She felt relieved because this was something she hadn’t wanted to voice. Her concern that she would be married using a dead woman’s ring had been weighing on her mind. Ordinarily she could have overlooked that aspect, but because Jake’s first wife had been murdered, Verity felt it cast a shadow over her future. She finished searching the ladies’

dresses; none were suitable for ranch life. She decided to add more fabric to her pile and make her own clothing.

Verity pondered long and hard on a wedding gift for him. She had her father's gold pocket watch, the only item listed as hers in his will. It was the only item her aunt had been unable to keep after Verity's parents had died. The corner of her mind that remained uncertain of Jake's involvement in the murder, kept her from giving the watch to him as a gift. Instead, she purchased four neckerchiefs for him to wear around the ranch.

“What do you plan to wear on your wedding day?” Mary Campbell asked her the following morning.

“I've no time to make anything new, so my blue sprigged gown will have to do.” She shrugged, resigned.

Mrs. Campbell clicked her tongue. “You just hand that gown over to me and I'll pretty it up some. I have a piece of lace that will look just fine at the cuffs and on neck. I even have enough to trim your blue bonnet. You'll look pretty as a picture come Sunday!”

Verity hugged the older woman. “Thank you. You have been kinder to me than my own aunt ever was!” she exclaimed.

“You're welcome, my dear. Don't you give that nasty old aunt of yours another thought. She's a darn fool if she didn't realise how lucky she was to have a lovely girl like you for a niece. In fact, from now on as far as I'm concerned, you are *my* niece!”

Verity's eyes misted over with emotion and she embraced her friend warmly.

On the day of her wedding Mary Campbell filled the copper tub and Verity bathed. They ate a light breakfast of scrambled eggs and then the older woman helped her to dress. The made-over blue sprigged gown with its newly trimmed blue bonnet looked very fine indeed.

Their wedding was a simple affair, held at the end of the Sunday service. No one walked Verity down the aisle, or gave her away. The Pastor simply called their names and they walked to the front of the church together. The twins came to the altar and stood flanking them, one either side. They wore matching cotton dresses and each girl held a bouquet of wildflowers. Verity held a bunch of the same; Jake had presented them to her upon her arrival at the church.

Jake looked smarter than Verity had ever seen him, dressed in clean dark pants, a white shirt worn with a fine embroidered waistcoat which, he later confessed, his mother, now deceased, had sewn for him on the occasion of his first wedding. Verity didn't mind, for she fully appreciated that Megan was a part of their family. She held no jealousy for Jake's first wife, the poor lady.

The minister said the words over them and they replied with the correct responses. In no time at all they were declared husband and wife. Jake barely kissed her, pecking at her cheek. Since Verity was extremely conscious of the entire town watching them, she was grateful for his consideration. She thought that he was protecting her reputation and it seemed that her assumption was correct because once outside the church, he whisked her behind the building, took her in his arms and kissed her passionately until she was giddy.

Mrs. Campbell came up trumps again and offered to have the twins stay with her overnight. It meant that they could begin their marriage in complete privacy. The landlady explained she had no children of her own, at least none which still lived, having lost both her husband and children to a cholera outbreak some years back. She seemed delighted to take on a grandmotherly role with Grace and Mercy. The girls responded to her kindness by holding her hands and bestowing kisses and hugs on the dear lady, their affection appeared to delight Mrs. Campbell. She fondly suggested the twins call her Aunt Mary.

It was a jolly group that sat down to dinner in the boarding house that evening. Mary Campbell prepared a magnificent meal for them all. Her homemade steak pie, served with roasted potatoes and green beans, covered in rich gravy was declared delicious by Grace; they all echoed her praise. That was followed by a peach cobbler and thick golden cream.

Later, Jake took Grace and Mercy upstairs to settle them for the night in Verity's old bedroom. Verity followed to say her goodnight.

"Love you, Pa! I am so glad you are our new mother, Miss Lasse," Mercy said.

She bent to kiss each child. "I am too, Mercy, but now that I am your stepmother, please just call me Aunt Verity. Mrs. Campbell will be here if you need anything, and we'll be back to collect you both tomorrow night. Sleep well, girls!"

"Pa?"

"Yes, Grace?"

“You won’t forget about us, and leave us here, will you?”

Verity’s heart constricted with pity. She vowed to be the best mother she could be to these two grieving children.

Jake dropped to his knees beside his daughters. With a palm caressing each daughter’s cheek, he calmed their fear. “You two are the most precious things in our lives. Neither of us will ever forget either of you. This arrangement is for one night only. It is so that we can get to know one another properly, without any interruptions. I promise you; we will be back to collect you both tomorrow.” He kissed each girl in turn and left the lamp turned low.

As Jake and Verity prepared to leave, Mary presented them with a basket of baked goods to take out with them to the ranch.

While they travelled, Jake pointed to various trees, describing where they marked the boundary to his land, *their land*, she realized with surprise. Other than that, the ride was silent.

When they arrived, Jake lifted her down from the buggy but instead of setting her on her feet, he held her in his arms, carrying her up the porch steps. At the top he deftly swung her up and over his shoulder with Verity squealing as her head hung down over his back. The position enabled him to free up his hands and unlock the door into the house. He lifted her over the threshold and then set her down carefully upon her feet. Kicking the door closed with his foot he didn’t take his eyes off her for a single second. He stood studying her for a moment, his eyes soft, and expression gentle. A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth as she squirmed under his scrutiny.

“Mrs. Calhoun, you sure are a tempting sight. I’m gonna give you plenty of sugar tonight, even though you’re already

as sweet as any candy.” Before she could react to this endearing, if odd declaration, he reached for her. Cupping her face between his palms he lowered his head to hers in a searing kiss. She moaned against his mouth.

Scooping her back up in his arms he carried her through the main living area to the back of the house where she'd never been before. He walked down a passageway, past three closed doors to a room at the end of the hallway.

CHAPTER FIVE



Opening the door into the bedroom with a push of his boot, he carried her inside and placed her on her feet.

Immediately he began to pull the pins from her hair, placing them into a small porcelain pin dish resting on the vanity table. Her curls began to fall, tumbling in disarray about her shoulders. With parted fingers he pushed his hands through her soft tresses. “I have wanted to do that for such a long time... I love your hair.” Placing a kiss on her forehead, he turned and shrugged off his waistcoat. Verity accepted the breathing space gratefully. It gave her a chance to glance about her new bedroom.

It was spacious, like the rest of the ranch house. A large carved wooden bed, covered in a beautiful homemade quilt, stood against one wall and her eyes lingered there for a moment. Suddenly aware of Jake watching her, she flushed and kept her glance away from his. Casting her gaze around the rest of the room, she took in pretty rose floral curtains, stirring gently in the breeze from the open window. A pretty basin and ewer set atop a chest of drawers and a wooden closet stood next to that. An upholstered chair sat beneath the window. She wondered if Megan had created this pretty chamber... Perhaps she had died here, in this very room. A shudder of unease travelled down her spine.

Brought back to the present by the feel of a warm hand upon her shoulder, she looked up at Jake and saw his reassuring smile and then he moved to undo the back buttons on her gown. She shivered as his lips caressed her neck. Gently he slipped the gown down over her front; he pushed the material over her hips, with a whisper the gown dropped to the floor. Next, he unhooked her corset. Once she was free of that, his hands grazed over her shift tracing her nipples which hardened into aching peaks. All thoughts of the past and Jake's first wife dissipated as her blood sped through her veins.

His mouth descended on hers, gentle at first, but as their tongues met, his mouth became more demanding. When he pulled back from her, he left her reeling. Verity's lips felt swollen, her body ached with unexplained need. He tugged the lace of her shift, stopping only to kiss and nibble the area around her neck. The small caresses caused her insides to melt, while her breath caught in her throat.

She'd read many a romance and yet she had no idea that the small touches of a man could render a woman utterly powerless in his arms. Her inexperienced body had no defence against the sensations of his touch. A heated rush of wet hunger flared between her legs, an area that had never awoken in such a raw and primal way before which both scared and excited her in equal measure.

Jake pushed her shift down so it fell to join her petticoats and gown. Lowering his head to her bosom all those raw feelings narrowed to her breasts and nipples. Gasping aloud she gripped his thick hair as he suckled the hard, aching tips of her now fully exposed breasts. A small cry of delight escaped her as he drew a pebbled bud deep into his mouth, his teeth grazing the hardened peak. She writhed against him wanting more, so much more.

“Please...” she begged, but for what she pleaded, she knew not. Verity had no idea what it was she needed from him. She only knew that it had to be *more*. He murmured something about how lovely she was as his hand tugged at the ribbon of her drawers. Warm hands pushed them downward over her hips until they fell in a puddle at her feet.

“Step out of the dress and petticoats,” he ordered gruffly. She sidestepped out of them. He bent to remove the garment and placed it over the chair, then turned her to face him.

He embraced her, pulling her against his hard masculine form. He placed his leg between her own, deliberately forcing his thigh up against the apex of her thighs.

His head lowered to hers and again they kissed. Heated need arose in her core which soon became an insistent ache, a powerful overriding yearning for something she knew only he held the key to. She found herself rubbing her cleft against his leg. The pressure felt so good.

“Please...”

“Hush,” he murmured, gentling her with work roughened hands which skimmed her naked flanks, up her back and down again, drifting down over the curve of her buttocks. His body pressed hard against hers. Goose bumps rose, a reaction to his caresses.

“Please...” Verity mewled again, unaware that she was repeating a mantra. He dipped and lifted her into his arms. Walking across to the bed, he placed her down gently upon the quilt, then turned away to disrobe.

She watched her new husband with a mixture of interest and trepidation as inch by inch his naked body was gradually revealed. First the solid muscle of his bare chest, covered in

whorls of dark hair that ended in a single dark line disappearing like an arrow into the waist of his pants. A moment later he shucked them down over lean hips, revealing long, well-muscled, legs. He straightened to full height.

Sucking in her breath, Verity stared, awestruck. Never having beheld a man unclothed before, she found the sight both shocking, yet intriguing. His erection jutted stiff and proud standing thickly above his stomach button. The sight of it forbidding and thrilling to behold. Her knowledge of anatomy and biology did extend to knowing where that large organ was supposed to go, but she was totally unconvinced it would fit.

Jake winked at her. “You can close your mouth, honey, I shan’t be using that today. I’ll educate you that way another time.” He chuckled.

Huh? Whatever does he mean by that?

“This here is my cock and all men have one. Mine is, I hope, the first you’ve seen?” He paused to give her time to answer. Unable to force a single word past her dry lips, she merely nodded. He grinned. “I’m mighty pleased to hear that, because I intend mine to be the first and *last* cock, you’ll ever lay eyes on.”

Again, she could only nod. Blushing furiously, she pulled her heated gaze from his groin; her gaze fixed determinedly on his face. Jake gave a rumble of deep laughter and came over to the bed which dipped heavily as he knelt beside her.

She turned her head aside in embarrassment. Lying down, he turned her to face him and pressed his lips to hers. Hands stroked over her quivering flesh leaving a trail of heat in their wake. She sighed as he slipped an arm about her, tugging her

naked length against him. His sheer size made her feel safe as he enclosed her in the warmth of his embrace.

Trailing kisses down her body, he spent an inordinate amount of time worrying each of her taut, pebbled nipples. Arching against his flesh she felt the hardness of his cock press against her drenched cleft. For some unknown reason this both excited her and scared her in equal measure. She closed her thighs against any sudden invasion, only to find she needed friction there which seemed sadly lacking.

Jake appeared to ignore her reaction, continuing his ravishment of her breasts. Kissing, licking and even giving her breasts gentle nips with his teeth. She writhed mindlessly, her head switching restlessly from side to side.

She felt his hand reach into the apex of her thighs and part the tight furrow of her sex. It was as though he'd lit a candle, *there*, in her secret place. Her flesh seared white hot with desire. Without conscious thought, she spread her legs. Jake took the opportunity to edge his shoulders between her parted thighs.

When he lowered his head and licked the seam of her private area, she bucked in shock, almost unseating him. Her hands flew to his head, grasping handfuls of his thick, unruly hair. A tide of bliss cut through her core, her knees turned to water; she lost any desire to push him away and simply hung on. There was so much pressure building inside her and nowhere for these incredible feelings to go. She wailed her confusion. A sudden uncoiling began from somewhere deep within. It was as though she might fly, seeming to soar above herself as a wondrous bliss encased her, rolling throughout her whole being. She cried out, as the powerful sensation left her floating somewhere between heaven and earth.

She must have slept for a moment or two because when she came to, she found herself staring into Jake's expressive brown eyes. He leant forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"I have never seen a response as powerful as that before." He appeared to hesitate, she flushed, feeling ashamed. "I-I'm sorry," she muttered.

"No, I meant that as a compliment. You're adorable, Mrs. Calhoun. I'm so pleased to find you enjoy my love making." He frowned. "I am right, you did enjoy what just happened, didn't you?"

Her face flooded with color. "Yes, yes, I did. I-It was *amazing*. I-I think I might love you, Mr. Calhoun," she said softly. His face split into a wide grin.

"I love you too, Mrs. Calhoun."

"And now I'm truly your wife," she murmured, her face pressed in between his shoulder and neck. She breathed in his male scent; it was such an aphrodisiac.

"Hmm, well, not quite yet." He pulled back and looked down at her.

"But..." she began. He shook his head and raised his body pointing at his swollen organ. Hastily she looked away. Heat radiated hotly in her cheeks. She'd assumed the wondrous thing she'd experienced was all there was to love making.

"My cock goes inside of you, into the part where I pleased you just now. The first time is gonna sting a bit, and feel mighty strange, but I promise you will soon come to enjoy the marriage act as much as I."

"Must we do that?" she asked nervously.

“Honey, it’s the act of sexual intercourse that consummates and legalizes a marriage, and not what I just did to you with my hands and mouth. That was called foreplay, sweetheart. I did that in order to ready you for my entry into your body.”

Surprised that there was more to this than she’d imagined, Verity couldn’t think of a single reply.

“Darlin’?” Jake gaze roamed over her face anxiously. She raised her hand and smoothed the worry lines that formed across his forehead.

“I’m okay, let’s move on to the next part,” she agreed softly.

Although Jake was very gentle with her, using his fingers to play and stretch her virginal channel, she couldn’t relax. Not now she understood where that large part of his anatomy was going to go. She was fearful. Jake murmured reassurance and asked her to part her legs. He slid his large form over her body and Verity slowly opened her legs to accept him. Gripping his shoulders, she held onto him with rising trepidation. The first tentative thrust of his hips, lodged him inside her. As he breached her entrance, she breathed a sigh of relief. Thinking that was the sum of it, she relaxed beneath him. Her hands released their grip and she caressed his shoulders.

A sudden surge which coincided with a tearing sensation inside, forced an indignant squeal from her throat. She lay beneath him in shocked surprise as his hips rocked back and forth; the action slid his shaft in and out of her slippery channel. The feeling strange, but not altogether unpleasant.

His hand slipped between them; his fingers touched her just above the place he was seated inside causing a sweet throb which flared to life as he rocked inside her. Her hips rose to

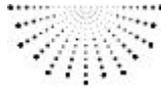
meet his in an involuntary and desperate attempt to attain the dizzying heights she'd achieved moments before.

Soon the intimacy drew mewls and cries from her as she flew higher, attaining the rapture she'd experienced before. Jake's thrusts escalated, his turgid cock filling her as she squirmed beneath him, the repeated ebb and flow of his penetration pushed her over the edge into sheer bliss, the ecstasy indescribable. Her climax was deep, fulfilling and totally satisfying.

Warmth flooded her channel. She enjoyed the sound of his throaty growl of pleasure as his cock pulsed inside her filling her with his seed.

Afterward, Verity lay entwined in Jake's arms, flummoxed and delighted in equal measures. With labored breath and her mind full of wonder, she mused on the fact she'd had no idea that such pleasure had awaited her in her marriage bed.

CHAPTER SIX



Verity was a truly contented wife. Jake had explained that Megan hadn't much enjoyed the conjugal side of married life. A fact she was at a loss to understand, until he explained that Megan had been taught by her mother that it was sinful for a good woman to experience pleasure in the marriage bed. Jake explained that Megan had always been racked by guilt when she'd culminated during lovemaking, and no amount of reassurance on his part could dislodge his wife's preconceptions.

For Verity those precious moments alone while she writhed beneath him in pleasure at night, were the highlight of her day.

When Jake was away working on the ranch, she worried about the murderer returning to the scene of his crime.

"Jake, supposing the man who killed Megan comes back?" she asked him one morning after he returned from taking the girls to school. She'd been alone inside the house and she'd felt afraid.

"Did I mention my brother was a lawman hereabouts? Ned's been gone several months. I'm pretty sure he took off on the trail of the man who killed Megan. Tell you what,

darlin', how about I give you lessons with my Remington rifle; would that help you feel safer?"

She slipped her arms about his waist and laid her head on his chest. "Yes, thank you, it would."

He kept his promise, and every day after he'd dropped the twins at school he'd return and take her back where he taught her how to shoot.

Verity's confidence grew as she began to regularly hit her mark.

Jake hung the rifle on the wall, where she could reach it quickly, should she need a weapon.

Days passed, she settled down to enjoy keeping house and caring for her new family. Any thoughts she'd entertained that her husband could be responsible for Billy Tucker's death she firmly quashed.

Being stepmother to the girls came naturally to her and she quickly came to love both girls. However, she was not at all happy with the way the new school master punished the children so readily. He seemed to be too eager to use the cane.

One girl in particular seemed to be constantly punished. This more than upset Verity, for she knew that Alma was a good girl, but one who struggled to recognise her letters. In her opinion, what the child needed was encouragement, not punishment. Eventually Alma's mother approached Verity after school, and suggested that they set up school for girls only. There were many unhappy parents with daughters now unwilling to return to school where harsh discipline was the new regime, and girls were treated as secondary to the boys in class.

Verity decided to discuss the issue with Jake. She waited until she'd tucked the twins up in their beds before she raised the issue. Yet when she explained the problem, Jake seemed wholly unconcerned.

His argument was that since the girls hadn't shown any physical harm from the occasional smacks they'd received in school; he didn't want her to interfere. He was at pains to point out that actions in life had consequences. He said that the twins needed to learn this harsh lesson because life was cruel and they must toughen up. It turned into their first real disagreement. When Jake wouldn't countenance her plea to speak with the schoolmaster, she'd cussed him and flounced from the room. Marching into their bedroom, she slammed the door so hard that solid though the ranch house was, the walls actually shook.

Angrily she muttered as she changed into her nightgown and washed. Sitting at the dressing table brushing out her hair, she saw the door open in the mirror and Jake entered the room.

"Come here." His voice sounded deeper and colder than his usual tone. Giving her hair a final brush, she set it back on the table top.

"No, bring me your hairbrush."

She stared at him, perplexed. "Why?"

He frowned. "Please do as I ask, Mrs. Calhoun."

"*Mrs. Calhoun*, really?" She pulled a face at such silly formality, but nevertheless picking up the brush, she handed it to him.

"Remember I mentioned that actions that have consequences which we discussed earlier?"

She nodded, frowning.

“Well, they also apply to you. I demand respect from my wife. Verity, you promised me in your wedding vows, before God and witnesses, to obey me. Shouting and dripping scorn at me when I don’t agree with you over something, is not respectful, and that behavior will never be left unpunished.”

She blanched and stepped back. Jake was holding her brush, smacking it gently into the palm of his hand. Surely, he wasn’t thinking of using it on her?

“I apologise for yelling at you, dear, but you should listen to me. I *am* a school mistress and I know the best way to teach children right from wrong. I don’t think you quite understand. It seems to me that you’re not actually capable of appreciating the problem. Perhaps if I explain again but more calmly this time?”

“That’s enough!”

“*Excuse me?*”

“I said, enough! You sound mighty condescending. I won’t have you talking down to me in that insolent tone!”

“Oh really? Well, how about if I tell you, that for a murderer, you are darned lucky I am talking to you at all...”

Jake grabbed her by the shoulders and brought her up onto her tip toes. His eyes bored into hers. “What are you talking about? I’m no murderer! Do you honestly think that I could have killed Megan, the mother of my own children?”

Verity had a slow fuse as far as temper was concerned but, once fully riled, she simply lost control, and blew.

“The man in the street, remember? I saw you, you *wicked* thing! You stuck a knife in him! I watched you do it, so don’t try and deny it!”

He let her go so suddenly that she stumbled backward onto the bed and bounced. Steadying herself, she sat up and remained there. Jake spun away. He ran a hand through his hair, obviously agitated.

“You believe that I *killed* a man, and yet you still married me?” he asked, ashen faced.

She gulped at the lump which formed in her throat at his stricken look.

“Jake, I...” Her ire instantly drained away, replaced by regret that she’d spoken so harshly.

He turned and stalked from the room, closing the door quietly behind him. Verity sat in shocked silence until it became apparent that he wasn’t coming back. She considered her options. Go after him, but what then? How could she make this right between them? Perhaps she should get into bed and hope that he would join her later.

She turned down the wick on the lamp. After tossing and turning for a couple of hours trying to come up with a way to make things right between them, she finally drifted into a troubled sleep. Waking before it was light, she sat up. How could things ever be the same now she’d told her husband she believed he was a murderer?

“They can’t be,” she choked the words aloud. Tears of regret cascaded down her cheeks. She couldn’t see how things could ever be right between them again. Not after her careless, hurtful words of distrust. There was nothing for it, but to leave, and she must leave before daylight. Of course, the twins would be upset, but it was early days into the marriage, it wasn’t as though she’d made a huge impact on the family in the short time she’d lived here. The girls would soon adjust to living alone again with their father.

Dressing hastily in her warmest gown, she packed her valise and wrapped her woollen shawl about her shoulders. She would return to Mrs. Campbell's and consider her options. A sob escaped her. How could she have gone so quickly from joy to utter desolation?

Outside, she drew in a breath of relief that Jake hadn't heard her leave. Hastening over to the barn Verity realized the buggy wouldn't be hitched. She was going to have to saddle a horse and ride into town in darkness.

Selecting the gentle horse she'd ridden previously on her visits to the ranch, she fetched a saddle and reins. Trying to recall where each of the straps fitted took all her concentration. Finally, she had the animal fully tacked and fetched her valise and hooked the handles over the pommel.

“Verity!”

A loud voice called, as her horse ambled out of the barn. Kicking the animal's flanks, she urged it forward.

“Verity, stop! Hold hard!”

She recognised her husband's voice.

“Verity, I said stop!”

How dare he order her? She clicked her tongue, and the horse leapt forward.

Holding on, she gave the animal its head. Riding into the darkness was a fearful, yet exhilarating experience.

She held on tight as the night breeze tugged at her hair. For a brief time, all seemed well, until something gave beneath her. A loosening, a slipping, and then she was sliding. It all happened so fast. One minute she was riding high, the next she

was spinning, tumbling to the ground, the breath knocked forcefully from her lungs.

Gasping, she lay still, utterly winded.

“Verity!”

The sound of Jake’s voice was welcoming. Help had arrived. She rolled over in an attempt to sit, and moaned.

“Stay where you are, until I’ve checked you over!” he scolded.

It was such a relief to feel large capable hands skimming her body, testing her limbs for broken bones. Once he’d established, she was whole, he asked if she had the breath to stand. At her nod, Jake helped her to her feet. Keeping a firm hold of her, he led her slowly to where his horse stood placidly by. There was no sign of her own ride.

“There you go.” He lifted her up onto his saddle, keeping a hold of the reins.

“You think I might ride off on your horse?” she asked.

“I’m taking no chances with you after this escapade,” he growled.

“Jake, I’m sorry, but you have to let me go!” she wailed.

“I’ll do no such thing. You’re my wife. I’m taking you home where you belong.”

“But...”

“That’s enough. We’ll discuss this back at the ranch.”

Leaning back against him, Verity felt fury emanating from him in waves. Yet she appreciated his gentle touch and protection.

He rode back home, taking them directly into the barn. The sky was showing the first streaks of dawn as they dismounted. Moments later her own horse trotted in, having found his own way back. Jake tethered the horses and turned to her.

“You’ll never, I repeat, *never, ever* do such a dangerous thing again, Mrs. Calhoun. You might have been dragged for miles with your foot caught in the stirrup. The girth wasn’t tight enough and your saddle slipped, a greenhorn error. I need to show you how to tack a horse properly.”

“But Jake...”

“No, you don’t get to talk. Leaving in the dead of night was both cowardly and dangerous in equal measures. I’m going to punish you, wife. I mean to make an impression upon you. In future you’ll always think twice before doing something so rash. Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to ride a horse so poorly tacked? You might have been dragged for miles, or killed outright,” he scolded.

She watched his hands drop to his waist. Deft fingers unbuckled his belt.

“Jake?” she queried, tremulous.

“Turnabout, and bend over the straw bale.”

She glanced behind her and saw where he meant. “Jake, *please*,” Verity pleaded.

“There will never be compromise where your safety is concerned, Verity. Do as I say. Obey me as your husband.” His tone held no compromise.

Twirling a finger, he indicated she should turnabout.

One look at his features so sternly set, Verity reluctantly did as he instructed. Obediently placing herself bent over the

prickly straw.

Jake lifted her gown and petticoats, and tucked them around her waist. His hand reached about her waist to tug on the ribbon at the front of her drawers, once loosened; he eased the garment down over her hips, where they dropped to her knees.

She whimpered as his hand caressed her naked buttocks.

“I didn’t think I would ever need to take my belt to you, Verity. As a school teacher, I credited you with more sense.”

A sob caught in her throat at his tone of disappointment. “I’m sorry.” There seemed to be nothing else she could say to mitigate her circumstances.

“I’m giving you ten strikes for running away, and another ten for ignoring me when I told you to stop.”

She gripped the rope that held the straw in the bale, and prepared for the first blow. A snap of leather, a whoosh, a crack, and searing pain flared across her naked skin. Verity howled and leapt up clutching her buttock cheeks.

“Get back in position,” he growled. “Or I’ll add another ten to the tally.”

She whined that he was an utter beast, but did as he directed.

Another, then another fell; after that they landed one after the other in quick succession. She stamped her feet and cursed.

“Mrs. Calhoun, even though these spanking hurts, I will not countenance my wife cussing. One more strike will be added to the tally every time you swear, young lady.”

She wailed her distress; the last note of her cry rose in a crescendo as pain flared from the stinging welt.

“I’m sorry!” she cried.

“Sure, you are.”

Her hands flew back and clasped her scalded backside.

“Do I need to tie your hands to keep them from harm, darlin’?” he asked.

“Enough, please Jake, I’ve learned my lesson!” she whimpered.

“Not after nine, you haven’t. I need this spanking to sting each and every time you sit on your pretty little ass for at least three days. I mean for this punishment to make a lasting impression.”

“I don’t hold with corporal punishment!” she yelled.

“That explains why you don’t know that actions have consequences, but you’ll learn real quick. You’re a smart little school marm.”

“You, you, *beastly* man!” she snarled.

“Still so full of, vim an’ vinegar, darlin’? You’ve clearly not yet learned your lesson.”

This time the belt caught her under her rump, right across the tender flesh of her thighs. Before she could gather the breath to shriek, another landed full across her plump rounded cheeks. Four more welts had her shouting desperate apologies, yet still the chastisement continued.

Panting, she gripped the bale rope as though it could save her. Turning her head slightly to look at her husband she saw his stern implacable resolve, and quickly looked front again. The next two blows released a torrent of pent-up emotion; she bawled. It was then the oddest thing happened, her respect for

Jake flourished, and grew so strong, it replaced her own sense of self-righteousness.

“Stay where you are for a moment longer,” he ordered gruffly.

Wasn't her punishment over? Her poor behind felt double its normal size, and throbbed with pain.

She could hear Jake rummaging around somewhere in the barn. Placing her head in her arms, Verity wept. Cold swept across her fleshy backside.

She realized that Jake massaged unguent into her fiery flesh. It stung and soothed in equal measure.

“There now, that should prevent any bruising.” He tugged to her feet and turned her to him. Strong arms wrapped her close to his chest. She burrowed into him and wept softly.

“There now, 'tis over. Am I right in thinking this was your first spanking?”

“Yes, and I hope it will be my last!” she exclaimed; her words muffled in his shirt.

He chuckled; the sound vibrated under her ear. “Oh, I doubt that, Mrs. Calhoun. You are far too spirited for your own good!”

“Why did you marry me then?” she asked huffily.

“You need a strong man to keep you safe, an' I couldn't bear the thought of another man stealing your kisses, or touching your gorgeous body. You're mine, Verity. I wanted you from the first moment I set eyes on you in that school house.”

“R-really?” she peered up at him through a prism of tears.

“Yes, and darlin’, I swear on each of my precious daughter’s lives, that I’m not the man you saw murder Billy Tucker... D’you believe me Verity?”

Her heart warmed at his words. “Yes, I believe you, Jake. I wouldn’t have married you if I hadn’t been pretty certain that you wouldn’t commit such a heinous crime. My temper got the better of me. Forgive me for my hurtful words?”

He lifted her chin. Before she could say more, his lips came down and crushed hers.

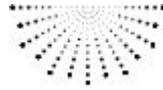
Heat flared between them. Her desperate need for him both shocked and enthralled her. It seemed a kiss wasn’t enough for him either, because he spun her about, his hand firm in the small of her back, and pushed her down over the straw bale once more. Flicking up her gown, he grasped her hips with firm hands. One smooth snake of his hips and he’d penetrated her slick channel. Her moan of supplication seemed to motivate him into further action. Her body welcomed his invasion, spasming and fluttering around his thick pounding shaft.

Verity, overwhelmed by his dominant masculinity, relaxed into submission. “I’m yours, Jake, I love you... I never meant to hurt you!” She jumped as his palm cracked across the tender flesh of her bottom with a resounding crack.

“Don’t you ever forget who you belong to woman, you’re mine. I promise to care for you ‘til death do us part. I love you too, you little hellion.” With one final, powerful thrust he froze in position emitting a satisfied groan.

Coiling bliss unravelled and Verity cried his name as a tide of light and joy flooded her. Deep in her flexing channel, she felt the swell and release of her husband’s cock as he coated her womb, marking her wholly as his.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Grace woke her up on the following morning. She'd slept later than usual, but thankfully it was Saturday and there was no school for the girls. Pulling on her robe, she went to make breakfast, her hair still mussed since Jake hadn't returned her brush. Entering the kitchen, she saw the brush on the kitchen dresser. There was no sign of her husband, but that didn't worry her. It was usual for Jake to be up and out early working on the ranch although he was usually back about now, hungry and ready to eat breakfast with his family.

Returning to her room, she brushed out the tangles from her hair then washed and dressed. Back in the kitchen, she put the skillet on the stove to heat and set the bacon to fry. Meanwhile, she mixed batter for pancakes, and put water on to heat for coffee.

"Go and get dressed, please girls," she called, and poured the pancake batter into the pre heated pan.

"Oh look, Ma, its Uncle Ned! He must have come back with Pa!" Grace yelled excitedly.

Verity froze; she didn't take in the 'uncle' part of Grace's news at all. She focussed entirely on the '*Ma.*' It was the first time that either of the twins had called her Ma and tears

flooded her eyes. Mercy wandered in and smiled sweetly at her. Impulsively, Verity hugged the girl to her.

“I love you!” she told the child.

Grace ran over and flung her arms about them.

“Both of you,” Verity added dropping a kiss on each child’s head.

“We love you too, Ma!” Mercy responded.

“We do,” Grace agreed, so naturally that Verity had to hold back tears of joy.

“Scoot now and get yourselves washed and dressed, Pa’s here for his breakfast,” she told them, mopping her eyes and smiling.

“*And* Uncle Ned!” Grace reminded her. The girls scampered away to their room.

Verity heard two deep voices approach. She hoped the atmosphere between her and Jake wouldn’t be awkward, or strained in front of his brother. The screen door banged.

“Verity, this here is my brother, Ned. He’d like a word with you.”

She turned around; a polite and welcoming smile pasted on her face. Her smile faded as she stared incredulously at the two Jakes who stood before her.

“Come, sit over here and let me explain something to you, ma’am,” one of the Jakes said. Bemused, Verity did as he suggested, plonking herself down onto a chair. The ache in her backside instantly reminded her of her husband’s promise that she would feel his chastisement for a few days to come; she wriggled uncomfortably on her seat.

“It’s real nice to meet my new sister-in-law. I’m Ned, Jake’s brother, an’ sheriff of St Elmo. I used to be a Texas Ranger until I heard that my twin, Jake, had settled here in Colorado, on the family ranch, helping our Pa to run things. I decided I’d had enough of Texas, and the lowdown rotten scum I was expected to catch. I came home to Colorado, but I was never one for ranching. When Pa up and died, I took my share of the ranch in cash, bought me a house in town and got married. I accepted the job of sheriff. It seems the old sheriff had enough of law enforcement an’ wanted to retire, which suited me.”

Ned paused and Verity nodded to show she understood his tale so far. She had a pretty good idea where this was leading and cast a quick glance at Jake, who she saw was watching her closely.

Both men had the same chiselled faces, presently set in firm lines. On closer inspection, it struck her there were certain differences between the two brothers. Their eye color for instance. Jake’s eyes were an intense golden brown, whereas Ned’s were of a more tawney. His hair was much darker too, while his face looked leaner, verging on thin. She decided she’d know them apart because the timbre of Jake’s voice was slightly deeper than his twin brothers.

“Two years back, a Ranger came here to warn me that a man I’d put in the penitentiary for several violent crimes, had been released. Seemed the no-good sonofabitch held a grudge against me and was threatening to come after me and mine. Eventually he arrived here in town, but apart from gambling and drinking he did nothing I could arrest him for.” He paused and Verity glanced over at Jake, this time he met her eyes square on and held out his hand to her. She gave hers over

gladly. Gently he squeezed her fingers. They stayed that way with their hands knotted, resting across the table.

“Thing is, this man, Billy Tucker, didn’t know I had a twin. He must have seen Jake in town one day an’ mistook him for me. Sonofabitch followed my brother back here an’ waited until Jake left the house range before he snuck in and attacked and murdered poor Megan.” Ned paused, this time to hold the bridge of his nose. It was obvious he felt a deep sorrow at Megan’s unfair demise.

Jake placed his free hand on his brother’s shoulder and squeezed.

“It’s not your fault, Ned. I told you that,” he said huskily.

Ned nodded. There was a period of silence, broken only by the comforting tick of the mantle clock.

After a while Ned resumed his tale. “I put two an’ two together and hunted for the no-good murdering scum. I tracked the cur, but he led me a merry old dance. Finally, he circled back to St. Elmo. I followed him but he snuck off again an’ I lost him in the dark. Then one night, I heard cries and came across him raping a saloon dancer in a dead-end side street. I pulled him off the woman but he got away. I chased him around the town until he ambushed me an’ pulled a knife. I acted fast and managed to stab him first. See, it was me you saw kill Tucker, not Jake. Though Lord knows, I wouldn’t have blamed him one bit if he’d taken the law into his own hands after losing his wife that way.”

Verity held her husband’s gaze. “I saw Ned kill him, but I thought it was you, Jake. After I got to know you, I knew that if you’d murdered a man, it must have been for a darn good reason. I thought the man you’d killed must have been the

same man who murdered Megan and I could forgive you that... I'm sorry I didn't believe you at first, Jake."

"Well, you were right on one score, the man deserved to die. Except it wasn't Jake what done for him, it was me. I had to leave the following day to take Tucker's body back to Texas. See, Millie, my wife, decided to travel with me. I had promised her a couple of nights in a hotel to make up for us not being able to take a honeymoon when we were wed. When we arrived in Abilene, we discovered that Tucker was already wanted for violent rape so it appears that as soon as he was released, he was up to no good again. There you have the truth of it, Mrs. Calhoun. I've been out of town for quite some while. Millie and I, we're mighty sorry we missed your wedding."

"Please, call me Verity, Ned, we are family after all. Thank you for coming to explain all this."

She rose and crossed to Jake. Placing her arms about his neck, she leant in to kiss his cheek and whispered another apology in his ear.

He patted her bottom gently. "We'll discuss everything later."

Verity gathered his words meant he wasn't done with her yet.

The awkward moment was broken as the twins rushed into the kitchen. Grace flung herself onto her Uncle Ned, while Mercy scrambled into Jake's lap. The men chuckled and teased the children while Verity busied herself with serving breakfast and the subject was dropped.

Ned left around mid-morning. The girls nagged Jake to take them to the creek so they could swim. Verity packed them

all a simple picnic lunch of bread cheese and apples and the four of them set off in the buggy.

The day was sultry; the creek water warmed by the sun. Verity couldn't swim and so Jake gave her the first of many swimming lessons while the twins shouted encouragement. It was a magical afternoon. The sun dipped low in the sky by the time they packed up to return home. Heads lolling, the twins fell asleep in the buggy.

After supper, Jake carried each of his sleepy daughters to bed. As soon as their heads touched their pillows, they went out like candles in a breeze.

Meanwhile, Verity tidied the kitchen. She made a pot of coffee and set it on the low table in the living area. Then she fetched two objects from her vanity table, one she placed next to Jake's coffee. Adding cream to hers, she sat back and sipped in silence, pondering the difficult conversation to come.

He padded into the room so quietly that she jumped when he spoke.

"What's this?" He picked up the package she'd placed next to his coffee.

She blushed. "Something I should have given you on our wedding day."

Carefully peeling back, the soft leather pouch, Jake removed a gold watch and fob chain. He whistled through his teeth in surprise. "This is some gee-gaw!"

"It's solid gold. Originally it belonged to my grandfather. He bequeathed it to my father, who in turn left it to me. When my parents died, all their property went to my aunt for raising me, except that watch, which as I said, was entailed to me by

my father. I want you to have it, Jake, as a token of my love and esteem.”

“It’s beautiful, honey, thank you. We can hand it on to our son, when he comes of age.”

“If we have a son,” she added.

“Oh, I’ll give you a son, just you wait and see.” He winked.

She chuckled ruefully at his confidence. Taking a deep breath, she knew she’d come to the moment she was dreading.

“Jake, I kept that watch back because, as you now know, when we were wed, I still had lingering doubts about whether or not you were a murderer. I’ve thought it over, and I’ve decided that I deserve to be scolded.” She pulled the hairbrush from behind her back and placed it on the table. Jake looked at the brush and then at her, his brow furrowed. Picking up his coffee, he took a draught of the black brew.

Verity remained silent, watching. Finally, he set his cup aside and rubbed his palms downward over his sturdy thighs.

“I think you’re right; we do need to clear the air between us. Last night wasn’t about that. I’ve found that a spanking has the ability to straighten out grievances.”

Verity swallowed hard then murmured her agreement. After all, it was she who had suggested this.

“I don’t aim to use your hairbrush though, Verity, but I am gonna spank you. I was wounded last night and darned furious that you took such a risk with your life, which was why I was so harsh taking my belt to you. This morning I got to thinking about what a lucky man I am, because despite witnessing the man you imagined was me, killing a man, you still trusted me enough to marry me. Honey, this time I’m going to spank you

for not trusting me, and to clear away any residual discontent between us, so the slate will be clean. D'you agree?"

Verity licked her dry lips. "Yes, Sir." She gulped some coffee to steady her nerves.

She'd felt sheer mortification as she'd listened to him speak. To hear him say out loud that he agreed with her need to be chastised, and that he intended to spank her, was both scary yet strangely titillating.

Coughing, she spluttered as the remainder of her coffee shot down the wrong way. Jake was up and by her side in a second. Soothing her, he patted her back, when he was certain she'd stopped choking, he settled himself down on the couch, and drew her onto his lap. He stroked her hair and they sat in silence for a while, then he shifted.

"I want you to know that I've given careful consideration to your suggestion that you teach some girls here on the ranch. Mary Campbell approached me and explained how unhappy some of the girls at school are with the new schoolmaster. She said Grace and Mercy had complained to her of being frightened by the man. I don't want my girls, or any other girl, to be fearful in school. I'd like you to teach those girls, but I don't like the idea of having a home school here."

She wriggled and opened her mouth to argue, but he put a finger to her lips.

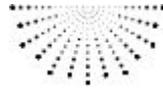
"Hush, hear me out. I've discussed the situation with Mary and she's willing for you to run the girl's school from her house. She says there is plenty of space and she does not have many visitors. The girl's parents will have to pay you in some way; no doubt most will pay you with produce, but I insist that you and Mary divide whatever you are given in the way of fees between the two of you."

Verity squealed with delight and bounced on his knee. She covered his face with kisses. Finally, he disentangled her arms from his neck.

His tone turned serious. “Okay, enough. It’s time, honey. Go get ready for bed then wait in the corner of the bedroom for me, nose to the wall. I’ll join you, by and by.”

Without comment, she nodded her understanding. Picking up their coffee cups she took them into the kitchen before heading to their room where she prepared for bed.

CHAPTER EIGHT



It felt foolish standing in the corner of the bedroom in her nightgown and bare feet. After time had passed and Jake had not showed, Verity decided to go to bed, but just as she turned to do so, the door opened and Jake entered the room. Quickly doing an about turn, she leaned closer into the wall, too nervous to look at him. His large presence overwhelmed her, causing a sense of vulnerability. The bed twanged and she realized he must have sat on the bed.

“Come here, Mrs. Calhoun.”

Reluctantly, she turned and slowly crossed to him. “Call me by my name, Jake.”

“You will always be, *Mrs. Calhoun*, when you are being punished. I thought I’d already explained that? Now be a good girl, and place yourself over my lap, before you’re tempted to say something that’ll warrant fetching your hairbrush.”

It appeared she hesitated a fraction too long because he clasped her about the waist and pulled her down over his thighs. She whimpered as he began to pull up her nightdress.

“No, don’t bare me, Jake,” she begged.

“Spankings are always given on the bare, darlin’; I mentioned that yesterday.”

Clinging frantically to the hem of her nightgown did no good, he was far more determined. In no time at all he had the material bunched up about her waist. Cool air circulated her naked flesh and humiliation swept over her.

She winced as he gently squeezed her tender buttocks.

“I’m spanking you because there is a need to clear the air and also for the scornful way you spoke to me yesterday. If I have to reprimand you about that lack of respect again, I’ll use your hairbrush and if that fails—”

“It won’t, it won’t fail, Mr. Calhoun!” she interrupted in panic, remembering to use his surname, which he’d said was appropriate under these circumstances.

“Nevertheless, if there should be a third occasion, I’ll take my belt to you. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Sir,” she mumbled. The ‘*Sir*,’ seemed appropriate while held in this ignoble position, head down over his knee. She was about to get her butt thoroughly spanked by her handsome, not to mention well-muscled and strong-armed, husband. The thought sent shivers down her spine, and to her surprise the stirrings of desire fluttered deep in the pit of her stomach.

When a sound like gunshot filled the room, for a moment she was flummoxed, unsure what the loud noise was. A sudden flare of pain seared her buttocks and she realized exactly what had happened. Her spanking had begun, and dang, but it hurt. This was neither sexy, nor pleasant; it was painful and because of her previous punishment last night, it stung like hell.

She struggled, and fought, determined to get away from the pain. Why was she unable to escape? She kicked and

wriggled her hips. Reaching down she gripped Jake's ankles in an attempt to propel herself forward, and off his knee.

"Settle down, Mrs. Calhoun, we have a longways to go yet."

She felt him anchor her firmly to his side by placing an arm around her waist. He lifted a leg over both hers to stop her kicking. Verity realized she was well and truly stuck. Opening her mouth, she shrieked with frustration. His reaction was to rain a barrage of spanks across her swaying behind. She struggled helplessly.

"The girls will hear and come in and then what will they think of you then!" she cried in rage.

"Then they'll be told that you have been a very naughty wife and needed a spanking," he replied calmly.

"Ooh, you, you—"

"Careful honey, remember I can still fetch that hairbrush."

His words caused her mouth to snap shut. Yelping, she cried as he roasted her bottom thoroughly. It wasn't long before she was apologising; *frantically* apologising, for not trusting him. She hoped her meekness would work and Jake would halt the spanking, but no, he continued to lift his palm until she sobbed and pleaded, gasped, and wept.

It was a while before she noticed his hand had stopped falling. Her hind-end aflame, his stroking caress felt like grit being rubbed into a wound. Verity pressed her lips together to stop herself from yelling at him to stop, knowing full well that any shrieking would more than likely to trigger more of the same chastisement.

Then his hand slipped lower, down over her buttocks, between her thighs. Suddenly her sex blazed like a furnace.

All the heat from her punished rear morphed into her quim. She was horrified by the low guttural moan that came out of her mouth at his brazen touch.

A chuckle reverberated overhead. “I thought that after your reaction last night, you might enjoy the added benefit that comes from a well spanked bottom. I know that Megan did.” He chortled.

Bemused, she gathered he must have spanked Megan on some occasion. Pondering this interesting titbit, Verity found herself wondering if his brother, Ned, also spanked his wife, Millie. That was one conversation she fully intended to have once she grew better acquainted with her new sister-in-law. All of a sudden, she didn’t feel hard done by. Spanking was obviously a part of marriage. As Jake’s questing fingers sent all other thoughts skittering from her mind, Verity gave herself over to the delightful benefit of being Jake’s wife.

When she came down from the novelty and euphoria of riding her husband’s cock, she realized she was happier than at any other time in her life.

There were no more shadows between them; the future seemed bright with possibilities.

“I love you, Mrs. Calhoun.”

“Oh dear, does that mean I am in for another spanking, *Mr. Calhoun?*” she asked saucily, reacting to his formality. She felt his merriment rumble through his bare chest.

“I love you, *Verity,*” he amended.

“I love you too, *Mr. Calhoun!*” She squealed as a large palm landed with a clap upon her exposed backside.

“I think I need to ride you as a reminder of who’s in charge of this household— ”

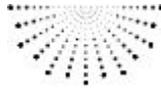
“*Noo*, please Jake, my poor bottom!”

He chuckled, flipped her off his chest and onto her back. Gazing down at her, his eyes travelled the length of her naked form, his pupil’s darkening with desire.

“Let’s make a baby, sweetheart,” he rasped softly.

Lowering his mouth to hers, she sighed with delight. Her arms snaked about his neck. Envisaging her future with Jake, she wondered how soon it would be before she fell pregnant... Goodness, who’d have thought that after marrying Jake, a man she’d thought was a murderer, everything had turned out so well?

EPILOGUE



“Mary— Ah, there you are!” Verity stepped into the parlour.

“Where are the girls?” Mrs. Campbell asked from her comfortable fireside chair.

“I said they could play outside while we wait for Jake to collect us. Mary, I just spoke to Agatha Murphy. Our numbers are to increase by another two pupils. The Murphy girls are joining us on Monday. We’re going to run out of space soon.”

“I suppose I could convert this parlour into a classroom?” Mary Campbell mused.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t hear of that...” The sound of a woman clearing her throat had Verity turning in surprise. She frowned at the unwelcome sight of Mrs. Hale from the school board. The woman had stepped uninvited into the parlour. Verity and Mary Campbell exchanged an anxious glance.

“Good afternoon, ladies. I hope I’m not interrupting?”

“Mrs. Hale, what can we do for you?” Mary asked coldly.

“There have been a number of complaints regarding the new school master. Apparently, his methods of disciplining the pupils have been deemed as rather harsh by parents. A deputation of them approached the school board yesterday and insisted the man be removed from his position. Therefore, I

have been asked to offer, Miss... I apologize, *Mrs. Calhoun*, her old job back as teacher.” Mrs. Hale looked as though she’d sucked on a lemon.

“I’ll have to ask my husband before I can give you a definitive answer,” Verity replied stiffly.

“Please don’t leave it too long, Mrs. Calhoun, or we’ll need to advertise for someone else to take up the position.” Mrs. Hale sniffed.

“What position is that?”

Verity sighed with relief. Jake had arrived to escort her and the twin’s home.

“Oh, Mr. Calhoun, how do you do?” Mrs. Hale simpered.

Jake lifted his hat. “Jus’ fine, ma’am. So, what’s this all about? Last thing I heard; you accused my wife of immodest behavior. Can’t say I feel kindly toward you, ma’am.”

“Oh, but that was a simple misunderstanding, Mr. Calhoun. I can assure you that now Verity is a married woman there will be no more gossip. I am here to persuade your *charming* wife to reconsider, and accept her previous teaching position at the school.”

“Verity, do you want to take back the job as school mistress at the school?”

She looked at her husband trying to gauge his opinion on the matter, but Jake wore his poker face, expressionless, giving nothing away.

“If you’re happy for me to do so, then yes, I would like to return and begin teaching at the school again, but with one proviso,” she added her gaze on Mrs. Hale.

“Yes?” The woman asked stiffly.

“I should like Mary to come in each day and read a story to the children, they love her tales, and she inspires them with her stories. She should be paid for her time.”

“Oh well, if that is all?” Mrs. Hale asked disdainfully.

“It is. Mary?” she prompted, turning to her friend.

Mary Campbell flushed with pleasure and nodded her agreement.

“Good, that’s settled then. I will report our discussion to the rest of the board and they will be in touch to offer Mrs. Campbell a part time teaching position.” Mrs. Hale turned to go.

“Good day to you, Mrs. Hale.” Jake took the woman by the arm and marched her through the hall. At the front door, he thrust her outside and closed the door with a snap.

Turning back into the house, he just had time to open his arms to capture Verity as she flew to him, pressing her lips to his. “Thank you, thank you!” she gasped.

“No, darlin’, thank you,” he drawled.

“For what?” she asked bemused.

“For bringing happiness back into our lives, but most of all, for trusting me, even when you believed I was a murderer.”

THE END

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Please, take a moment out of your busy day to leave a review for the books that you enjoy! It is often the only indication an author has that you love their books.

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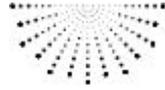
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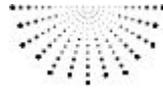


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CHAPTER ONE



January 15th

Victoria Faherty walked out of the commissary pushing the cart with baby Isaac, holding onto Gideon's hand, and yelling at "the twins" running ahead. "If you step foot in that street before me everyone will be going to bed directly after supper tonight. Don't *even* test me!"

Joel and Jesse stopped short on the edge of the sidewalk and looked at her sheepishly. Mama was not playing today. The kids had been relatively behaved in the store. Jesse especially had worked extra hard to help Tori find everything she needed and keep the littlest ones entertained. Everyone had actually completed their homeschool tasks for the day before lunch, but she couldn't let down her guard for a second or the troops would revolt. Having four boys under six was not for the faint of heart. Add to that her husband, David, had been deployed more months than he had been stateside over their marriage, and Tori sometimes felt like she deserved a purple heart just for holding down the fort at home. It was often grueling, and incredibly lonely, but she did it well. She had known coming into this marriage that it would be difficult, but neither of them could have foreseen her almost rabbit-like fertility. She glanced at the pink box in the buggy and held back a groan. *Children are a blessing, children are a blessing,*

children are a blessing... She recited the mantra she and David had always held to over and over in her head, but it was getting harder and harder to feel joy after she saw those two lines show up. Especially this time because Isaac wasn't even three months yet. All of her children were very close together, but less than a year between babies was a record even for her.

Pregnancy wasn't especially hard for her, but having so many back-to-back was taking its toll on her body. Not to mention that she never had a moment to herself. David had insisted before he left this last time that they budget in for a mother's helper, so she could have a couple afternoons a week to herself. But Tori had felt like that would be showing weakness, and Victoria Faherty never showed weakness. So, she had been putting the money into a savings account. That way she could surprise David when he got back. Maybe they could take a nice trip somewhere or invest in a nicer vehicle. Their twenty-year-old Dodge caravan had definitely seen better days. It was immaculate. Tori never allowed any eating or drinking in the vehicle, —and she always made sure it was up-to-date on oil changes and seasonal tune-ups. But there was no getting past it was an older car, and it would be nice to have something other than the radio to listen to on long trips.

Once she had buckled everyone into their seats and packed all of the sacks into the trunk, Tori drove back to their small townhouse. It was a two bedroom, but the rooms were quite spacious. The three older boys slept on pyramid bunks in one room, and Tori had converted the walk-in closet in the master bedroom to a small nursery for Isaac. He was still nursing at night, and it was easier to have him close by.

“Mama? Can we get pizza for dinner? We haven't had pizza in forever!” Joel shouted from the backseat.

“First off, is that your inside voice?” She glanced in the rearview at her first born, by 3 minutes, and quirked her eyebrow.

He sighed, but said in a much lower tone, “No, ma’am. But Mama-”

“Secondly, I didn’t hear a please...”

He let out a quiet grr. “Mama, can we *please* have pizza for dinner?”

She tried to hide her smile at his exasperation. He was right. They hadn’t had pizza in months, and they did pass a Little Caesar’s on the way home. It would be so easy to pick up a \$6 hot and ready. But she prided herself on feeding her family home cooked, from scratch, economical meals, and it always made her feel like a failure if they ate out.

Shaking her head, she looked in the mirror again. “Sorry, buddy. Not today. You guys finish up your workbooks, and we can have pizza as a reward. Good deal?”

Her son glared at her. He looked so much like his father when he furrowed his brows. “Fine. It’s not like you’re really asking me anyways.”

Both her eyebrows shot up at this. “Excuse me? Would you like to try again, young man, or do I need to pull this car right over?”

He shook his head. “No, ma’am! You don’t need to pull over. I’m sorry! Umm... Yes, ma’am that’s a good deal, and I can wait patiently.”

She nodded. “Good job.”

She cringed inwardly. Sometimes dealing with her sons made her feel like an evil jail keeper. She loved to do things

that gave them joy, but knew that too much of a good thing made spoiled brats. And, she was not going to raise brats. Her heart twinged thinking for a moment of her brother. He had been her mother's favorite, always getting everything he wanted, and where had that landed him? Jail at nineteen for selling pot to a neighbor. And then, in and out of rehabs until he had died from an overdose on heroin in his early twenties. Her resolve tightened. No sirree, her sons were not going to grow up to be like her brother. They were going to be respectable, functioning members of society. David felt the same way she did, although sometimes when he came home, he had a hard time upholding her rules because he missed the boys and it was easier for him to be soft with them. But she didn't have that luxury. She spent day in and day out with them, and she had to maintain her firm front. If she gave in an inch, they'd take a mile.

Once they got home, she smiled at her sons. "Man your battle stations."

The twins unhooked their brother, then the three of them hopped out of the car and stood on the sidewalk ready for action.

Tori smiled, popped the trunk, and started loading them up with bags. They really were good little helpers, and very strong for their ages. She grabbed the baby and the last few remaining bags, then led everyone into the house. "Joel, you're on frozen today, Jesse, you're on fridge, and Gid, you and Issac are on pantry duty with Mama. Let's see if we can break our record from last week—Go!" Everyone started rummaging through the grocery sacks and hurrying to put it all away in their proper places.

Just as Tori was instructing Gideon where to put the last can of kidney beans, Jesse and Joel came racing around the corner. “Done! Did we beat our record?” She smiled and glanced at the clock on the stove. “We did indeed! Seven minutes! Great job, team Faherty! How much faster did we do it this time compared to last time?” The boys scrunched up their faces, and Jesse got the answer first. “Two minutes! But, I’m not sure it’s fair ‘cause last time we went to Costco. And, that always takes forever to put away.” Tori ruffled his hair. “Good job, smarty-pants. All right, who’s ready for smoothies?” All the boys including Isaac started dancing and whooping and hollering.

Their weekly tradition after grocery shopping was fruit smoothies. This week she did greek yogurt, frozen blueberries, canned peaches, spinach, and a splash of honey. They went outside to drink them, and she let the boys run around and get out their “crazies.” After smoothies and outside was her favorite part of the day—rest time! Joel and Jesse in their own beds with books and quiet toys, Gideon in her bed with the iPod playing soft music, and Isaac in his pack and play in the closet. It was her guaranteed ninety minutes a day of peace, and she guarded it with her life.

After all the boys were settled in their respective places, and threatened with everything in her arsenal if they dared to show their faces before she came back for them, Tori settled down in the living room with her laptop. She wrote to David twice a day. During rest time, and after all the boys were in bed. Sometimes it was very short, and other times, pages long. But it was her job to keep him apprised of life on the home front, and she took her job seriously. But the job she took even more seriously than that was protecting him from undue worries. She rarely shared with him behavioral issues from the

boys, or problems with the house, or even worries she herself was facing. She worked hard to keep things very pleasant. Anecdotes about their days, what the boys were doing in their schoolwork, what was going on with their extended families, and anything interesting that happened on base.

David and Tori had had a domestic discipline arrangement from day one. They'd met in a "Loving Domestic Discipline" forum online. After her brother died Tori felt like she needed more structure in her life and research led her to the DD lifestyle. David had been the first person who had contacted her when she joined the group, and they'd begun their long-distance courtship almost immediately. These days it was low grade. Incredibly low grade. Tori always did everything perfectly and David never had anything to worry about. She was very proud of herself and how good of a support she was to him. Deep inside though she sometimes missed their discipline sessions, or David asking her to do things specifically. He didn't send chore lists or any expectations anymore because she didn't need them. She was in control of everything at home, and it worked really well for them.

Sighing, she opened up her email. No sense whining, even internally, about the lack of attention she'd been getting in that department lately.

Hello love!

How's the weather? Did you talk to the chaplain about that study you wanted to lead? I think that's a great idea. I'm sure the guys would receive a lot of comfort and encouragement.

The boys and I got groceries today. They are growing like weeds. You'd think we have a houseful of teens instead of mini-humans.

Jesse told me today that he loves me to Pluto and back because that's further away than the moon. He's been on a very sweet kick lately. I love it.

I'm heading up the FRG now. Charlotte Grayson had to step down because of health issues, and they asked me. I am honored. We are going to have monthly activities to try to keep morale up.

Love you to Pluto and back!

Wifey

She hit send and closed her eyes for a moment. She wouldn't admit it to anyone, but she was exhausted. When they had asked her to take Charlotte's place, her first thought had not been honor or excitement. It had been despair. Her stomach hurt at the thought of trying to add a single thing to her already overfilled plate, but she couldn't say no. That had always been a weakness of hers that David used to keep a tight watch on. She was incapable of saying no when asked to do something for someone else.

With a sigh she got up and went to prep everything for dinner. They were having spaghetti with whole wheat pasta, organic beef, and homemade tomato sauce. As a treat she was fixing cinnamon apples for dessert. She had learned in their first little studio apartment that cutting up apples and putting cinnamon on them in the rice cooker made a perfect little dessert and was something she didn't feel guilty feeding the boys.

The next morning, when her alarm went off at 5:30am like it did every day, she remembered the test she had set on her sink

last night and went to take it. The two lines showed up boldly before the stick was even fully submerged. She sank onto the side of the bathtub and tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. A baby was the last thing she needed right now. And definitely the last thing David needed distracting him. She tried to cut corners where she could, but between the van acting up and the boys just having more needs, their budget was already stressed at the seams. The baby started crying. and she tossed the test into the trash and went to start her day.

At naptime that day, she was excited to see a note from David waiting for her.

Beloved,

I'm so happy to hear that everything is going well on the home front. Weather here is hot as hades, but we're getting by.

I did ask Chaplain Jack about the study, and he brought it up to the guys this morning. We will see if there is any interest. Brett, one of the younger guys, came up to me at mess today asking if I'd be willing to meet with him weekly. I think he's feeling in over his head. He went right from living with his folks and going to high school to boot camp. He seems like a good kid.

I miss you and the boys more than words can say.

I love you with my whole heart,

David

She smiled, glad that he seemed to be doing well. Being deployed always took a lot out of a soldier and she was relieved he seemed in good spirits. The last thing David needed was distractions and news of her pregnancy would definitely distract him. She'd wait a few more weeks before mentioning anything to him.

May 1st

Tori woke up to a quick note in her email.

I should be able to Skype at 8pm your time tonight, so please keep the boys up a bit so we can all talk. I love you with every fiber of my being.

Tori's heart soared that she would actually see and hear her husband that night. It had been weeks since they had been able to video chat. Service over there was slow at best.

D -

Yay! I can't wait to skype tonight. I know the boys will be out of their minds when I tell them.

We had a co-op with some of the homeschool families on base yesterday. It was nice to visit with other adults and let the boys interact with kids their own age. Today we talked about the planets. Even Gideon paid attention.

Your cucumbers are almost ripe for picking. I hope you get back in time to taste some of the crop.

Until tonight...

All my love,

Wifey

After supper that night, she gave the boys baths and got them all ready for bed early, so after their call they could go right to sleep. She was grateful the boys would get to talk with their

dad, but anxiety swirled in her chest at them being off of schedule. She tried to shake it away and put on a brave face as she gathered everyone around the monitor.

“All right, troops. Here’s how it’s going to go—I’m not sure how long Daddy will have to talk with us, and sometimes, the connection makes it hard for him to hear us, so we need to be orderly. Take turns talking and make sure to give Daddy time to answer. I don’t want any roughhousing or foolishness, got it?”

The older boys saluted. “Yes, ma’am!”

Gideon tried to follow suit. “Yeth, Ma’am!”

She smiled at his lopsided salute and toothy grin.

When the computer dinged with the Skype notification, everyone waited with bated breath.

She could have cried when David’s face filled the screen; she felt such intense love, but the boy’s shouts and whoops distracted her enough she was able to keep her composure.

“Shhhh... let Daddy speak.”

The boys settled down, but bounced as they smiled and waved.

“Hello Fahertys! How is everyone? You boys look like you’ve grown three feet since I’ve been gone!”

The boys took turns sharing about frogs, and tests, and other painstakingly descriptive details of early boyhood. David responded in shock and awe, and pride, to everything. Tori wondered if there’d be any time at the end for her to speak with David one-on-one.

But she needn’t have feared. David always took care of her.

“Okay fellows, it’s Mama’s turn now. I love you so much! Joel and Jesse, you two set up the cd player. Gid, you be a big boy and go right to bed, okay?”

The three boys waved and blew kisses and “yes sirred” as they ran up the stairs to their room.

Tori set Isaac on the floor with some toys, he’d be crawling any day, but for now she was grateful he would stay where she put him.

“How are you doing, T? I can’t express how much I miss you.”

She smiled and touched the screen. “I’m good. How are *you*? Any idea when you can come home?”

He grinned. “Well, I might have a little confession to make.”

Her heart beat faster.

“We got news a few days ago that we should be flying out within the week.”

She let out a small squeal. “Are you serious? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

He laughed. “I wanted to see your face when I told you. I knew it would get me through the last few days until I can hold you in my arms again.”

She blushed. “Well, that’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time.”

He nodded. “Me too. Now, are you really doing okay?”

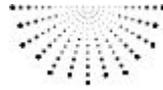
She nodded. “Yes, sir, nothing to report.” Her stomach flipped at her ‘slight’ falsehood, but she kept her face calm and gave him a confident smile.

His eyes squinted slightly, but he said nothing. “Okay, if you say so. Oh crap, my time’s up, hun. I need to go. But I love you and will see you soon.”

“I love you too!” She blew kisses at the screen until it went black.

Days. She would see her husband in days. She couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER TWO



David stepped off the plane and breathed a sigh of relief. It was always an amazing feeling to come home. Even though he wasn't generally in the thick of it, anytime a soldier was deployed there were risks. He couldn't wait to hold Tori and the boys. Scanning the crowd, he let out a whoop of delight when he spied his crew.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" a gaggle of little hands and legs hit him full force and clung on. He lifted all three of them into his arms and kissed their sweaty heads, relishing their energetic voices welcoming him home.

As always, Tori was more reserved, but her eyes shone with adoration and, when he pulled her to himself, her body sagged in relief. He knew she bore a lot when he was away, and it was a relief to hand some of the responsibility back to him. He kissed her hard and then gazed into her eyes. Something was off. She looked haggard. Sick. Her shirt was baggy, making him wonder if she'd been losing weight.

"Babe, wha-" Before he could continue, other members of their close-knit community were welcoming him back, and his boys were talking a mile a minute. *Later*, he promised himself. Later, when they had some time alone, he would dig into what was going on with his wife.

After a perfect dinner of meatloaf, roasted asparagus, and homemade mashed potatoes, he sent the boys into the backyard with popsicles and sat down on the couch, pulling Tori into his lap.

“Hey, Baby Love.”

She snuggled into him. “Hey, Big Love.”

“What’s going on with you? You look ill. Are you fighting something?”

He felt her head. It was clammy, but not overly hot.

“No, I’m okay. I must not have slept great last night. Gideon is getting over an ear infection.”

“When did that start? I don’t recall you mentioning it.”

“Oh, sorry, I knew you were coming back, so it must have seemed unimportant.”

She shifted her weight, and he knew immediately there were other things she was not telling him.

“T... what’s going on, babe?”

“Nothing. I swear. I’m just tired. Let’s get the troops inside to baths, and then get them to bed. I really am tired and would like to make an early night of it.”

She pushed off of his lap before he could really respond, and he decided to let it go until the boys were in bed.

She corralled the kids upstairs to the bath, and David decided to wash up the dishes, but saw she had already done it. “My efficient, little wife.” He also noted that the dishwasher was empty and wondered why she had handwashed them.

A knock at the door interrupted his wonderings.

“Oh hi, Trish! How’s it going?”

Trisha Baxter was the wife of one of his best friends, Pete’s, and also Tori’s midwife. Their children were grown, and they had been a godsend when the Fahertys had moved to base a few years back.

“I’m doing good! I wanted to bring over a casserole to take some of the load off of Tori’s back. That woman works too hard, David Faherty. You should make her sit down once in a while. I tried to get her to let me start a meal sign-up sheet for y’all, but she wouldn’t hear of it. I’m sure bedrest must be killing her.”

He blinked. “Bedrest?”

Trish gave him an odd look. “Well, partial, but yes... You know, so she doesn’t exasperate her condition.”

David pointed to the living room. “Why don’t you come in and sit down.”

Trish’s eyes widened, and she stood her ground on the porch. “David, as her midwife I really can’t tell you anything she hasn’t already divulged. I’m so sorry, I naturally assumed that she had told you everything. Since this is her second pregnancy in such a short amount of time it’s natural she might need a little TLC.”

“Pre... pregnancy?” David looked at Trish, unable to process her words. “And, ‘everything’? There’s more?”

Trish’s mouth dropped open and then clamped shut. “Oh phooey, I really *have* made a mess of things, haven’t I? Why don’t you talk with her tonight. If the two of you want to meet with Pete and I to talk through it all we’d be happy to. We’re free tomorrow evening. Cassie is home from school for the

summer, and I'm sure she would love to watch the boys while we meet."

He nodded absently, and took the casserole. "Well, thank you for stopping by. I'm pretty sure we would love to take you up on your offer. Tori or I will give y'all a call in the morning, okay?"

Trish nodded anxiously and rushed off to the car, appearing to be in a hurry to get out of there. David gave a smile. Pete was his best friend, but also mentor, and they were the only other couple the Fahertys knew in real life who practiced the LDD lifestyle. He knew Pete was often chiding his wife over her propensity towards getting involved in everyone else's lives. If Pete asked him though, he'd explain that this time he didn't think Trish was to blame. It had been a perfectly reasonable assumption to think he'd know his own wife was pregnant.

He went upstairs and helped Tori with the last of the boys' baths, got them into jammies, read to them from the Narnia book they were on, and tucked them into their respective beds.

As Tori started walking downstairs, he pulled her to their bedroom. "Let's chat, love."

She gave him a weary, but sexy smile. "Well, if you insist."

Once in their room, he shut the door and crossed his arms.

She looked wary. "Honey?"

"Trish brought a casserole by."

"Okay... that was sweet of her."

"Yes, it was. She said it was supposed to be helpful considering your 'condition', and that you had told her not to

set up meals to help, so she had to sneak it in. What condition is she talking about, and how come this is the first I'm hearing of it?"

Tori's face went white, well whiter than it already had been.

"Umm, well, funny you should ask. I was going to chat with you about that... soon."

He drummed his fingers on his thigh. "I'm waiting..."

"Well, I guess I'm a little anemic, and they want me to take some iron supplements and maybe... do a little less?"

He stared at her, his heart clenching that she was still not being forthcoming. "A little anemic, huh? And, do a little less? Is that what they're calling it?"

She nodded her head weakly.

"Victoria..."

"Ok, they want me to rest a lot. But I have four boys under six, it's not like I can just put my feet up and eat bon bons."

"And they want you to rest because?"

She stared at the blanket on their bed and shrugged.

"Victoria!"

"Geez, David! If you already know then why are you hassling me? Yes! I am pregnant again. Apparently, something went wrong with my diaphragm."

"How pregnant?"

She bit her lip and squirmed, mumbling something.

"I'm sorry I couldn't catch that, how pregnant, Victoria?"

“Eighteen weeks. We think. I never got my period after Issac, but Trish said I’m measuring about 18 weeks.”

“Eigh-” He knelt on the floor in front of her and lifted her shirt revealing a not insubstantial baby bump. She never gained a lot of weight in her pregnancies, but by this point, it was always obvious she was expecting. He realized the baggy shirt had probably been to hide the bump from him. He grabbed her chin. “Tori, how long have you known?”

“About three months.”

“Thr... three *months*? You’ve known you’re carrying another precious child, and you kept it from me for three months?”

She looked at him with tear-brimmed eyes. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

His gaze hardened, and he released his hold on her chin. He glanced around the room, considering for a moment. They had had this conversation many times over the course of their marriage, but he had never made it a disciplinable offense. But, then again, she had never kept something so huge from him. And lying was definitely taboo. He couldn’t think of a time she’d lied to him, but how would he know? Apparently, she was incredibly adept at only sharing things *she* felt he needed to hear.

“How long were you planning to keep this from me, Victoria Anne?”

She sniffled. “Just until you got back from the special assignment.”

“So, you were going to keep it from me for the whole next month, and then tell me when your pregnancy was more than half over?”

She nodded. “I didn’t want to-”

“Worry me. I know, I got that. And, the bedrest. How were you going to hide that?”

She blushed and looked away.

“You haven’t been resting, have you?”

“Some...”

“No! I don’t want to hear your excuses. Are you at least laying down when the sitter comes?”

She blushed again and refused to look at him.

“Seriously? So, not only have you been lying to me and not taking care of yourself, but you disobeyed me as well?”

Her mouth dropped open. “I didn’t dis—”

“I specifically told you to find someone to help out. I gave you an amount of money per week, to do so. Speaking of which... the money has been going out, so where is it?”

“In a savings fund,” she spoke under her breath. “But, I swear my main motivation wasn’t to deceive you, Dave. I wanted to surprise you with a little nest egg. With the van the-”

She clamped her hand over her mouth.

“With the van what, Victoria?”

She looked like she was going to be sick, and answered barely above a whisper. “The van has been acting up. We keep having to jump start it, and the mechanic said a new battery won’t help; it will cost more than the van is worth to fix it.”

“And, you didn’t tell me because...” He held his hand up before she could respond. “Wait, don’t answer. ‘You didn’t want to worry me’, right? Tori, I swear I don’t know whether

to spank you until you cry or hold you while I cry? When did you stop relying on me to carry your burdens? When did you stop trusting me?"

She began to sob at that. "It's not that I don't trust you. I just feel like I have to be the perfect army wife, and the perfect mom, and the perfect woman, and..."

He pulled her down into his arms and held her while she cried.

Once she had calmed down, they sat on the floor across from each other holding hands. "Now, tell me everything you've been scared of burdening me with, ok?"

She took a deep breath and it all came flooding out. "Well, the pregnancy and anemia. I've been spotting so I was scared we'd lose the baby. Then, the van's issues and the dishwasher's been broken since you left, and I'm so tired of leading the FRG, and Gideon is still wetting the bed at night, and Tyler refuses to do math without a threat of bodily harm, and I'm so tired. Oh, David, I am so tired." By the end she was sobbing again.

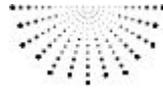
He stroked her back and rocked her slightly, making soft shushing noises. "It's okay, my love, It'll be okay. I'm here now."

He could tell when she finally succumbed to sleep because it was the only time she truly rested all of her weight on him. He kissed her head sadly. "This is the story of our lives, isn't it? You don't want to fully rely on me to bear your burdens. Well, *that* is gonna change, missy."

Lifting her into his arms, he gently tucked her into their bed, and went through the house to turn off lights and make sure all the doors and windows were locked. Daddy was home,

and he was going to make sure his family was safe. Starting with his stubbornly self-sufficient bride.

CHAPTER THREE



The next morning Victoria opened her eyes to the smell of bacon and coffee. Glancing at the clock she gasped! Crap! Eight A.M. She had missed her alarm. She glared at it realizing the little button was set to “off”. She never turned it all the way off which meant that David had changed it. Stretching as she got out of bed, she smiled a little though. It was nice to wake up to breakfast cooking and actually get a full eight hours of sleep. Actually, she must have gotten closer to ten. After taking care of her morning business, she groaned at the mirror. Her belly was definitely getting bigger and she’d need to pull out her larger maternity shirts. She padded out to the kitchen where the boys were sitting while David made bagel sandwiches.

“Morning, sunshine!” He leaned over and kissed her.

She happily kissed him back, and then squinted her eyes at him. “Somebody turned off my alarm, so I was three hours late getting up today. Who do you think would be so naughty, boys?”

The littlest ones looked worried, but Joel grinned. “I bet it was Daddy! Are you gonna discipline *him*, Mama?” Everyone laughed, and David growled.

“Nah, I think I’ll just let him serve me some of this awesome breakfast. I bet you guys are glad to be rescued from oatmeal today, huh?”

The boys all nodded eagerly. Gideon spoke up though. “Oatmeal’s gross.”

Tori’s eyebrows shot up. “Try again. We don’t use that word about food in this house, little man.”

He sighed and glared at her.

“One...”

“Okay! Oatmeal is... not yummy.”

She smiled. “I’ll accept that. But, it’s cheap, and it’s good for you.”

After everyone was served, David said the blessing, and then released them all to dig in.

Tori cut up Isaac’s into bite size pieces and Gid’s into fourths.

She had barely started her sandwich before the two oldest boys were done.

“Daddy, can we please have some more? These are super!”

Before David could answer Tori shook her head. “You know the rules, boys. If you’re still hungry you can have an apple or an orange.”

David gave her a mild look, and then smiled at the boys. “Actually, I made extras just in case you fellows were still hungry. Please, grab me another as well.”

Tori bit her lip, but didn’t say anything.

Fine, you do the budgeting and grocery shopping next time and see how little it stretches. This crew eats us out of house

and home as it is, and if you let them fill up on bacon and bagels, we'll be eating lentils and rice for a week.

She pushed her half-eaten sandwich away.

“After you boys are done eating, please, clear the table, and then come to the school room so we can get started for the day.”

“But, Mama! Daddy’s here! That means it’s like summer!”

“Boys! I don’t want to hear—”

David interjected. “You boys need to listen to your Mama. Me being here doesn’t mean that you don’t show her the respect she deserves. And, we have time for your school work and fun, okay?”

They sighed. “Yes, sir.” Then he finished eating.

Tori set Issac up in the baby corral with some toys and books, Gideon at the arts and crafts table with some playdough, and had the boy’s work books already marked and opened for the day. After everyone was settled, David popped his head into the room.

“Do you have a minute?”

She nodded with a smile. “Yep. This is the more independent part of the morning, so we should have about fifteen. Boys, I’ll be in the living room with Daddy, call me if you need anything, but do not get up, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They really are such good kids. I should tell them that more often. I wonder what David wants. Whoa. He has his “Dommy eyes” on. I haven’t seen that look in a long time.

She giggled, but her butt clenched at the same time.

He sat in the easy chair and patted his knee. “Come here, babe. Let’s talk.”

She sat down warily.

“I understand that you have to do a lot to hold things together here on the home front while I’m away. And, you do an excellent job of it. But, honey, even when I’m away, I’m still in charge. I’ve been abdicating that spot, and I’ve been failing to take care of you. Would you please forgive me?”

She looked at him, shocked. “Umm, sure, but honey, you’ve got enough on your mind when you’re away. You don’t need to be worrying about me and the kids. We’re fine. I’ve got it.”

“That’s the problem, love. You shouldn’t have to ‘got it’. It’s my job as your husband and their father to take care of you all. So, things are going to change around here. You need to rest more and let go of some of the control you have over everything. No one is going to spontaneously combust if you serve the boys hotdogs and chips for dinner, or let them watch an hour of tv while you take a nap, or buy the premade mac and cheese because it’s easier.”

She started to argue, but he put his finger over her lips. “Shh. I’m not done. Before I leave this time, we will find a mother’s helper together, and she will come three afternoons a week to allow you to rest. Today, we are meeting with the Baxters to get some counsel, and Trish is going to explain to me exactly what your bedrest is supposed to look like. And, you’re going to stick to it religiously, Victoria Anne. Is that clear?”

He did not pause for her to answer.

“If we have to ask some of our friends to take the boys on the days the babysitter can’t be here, then we will. You’re going to accept meals and help from the church. It’s what they are there for, and they want to help. Also, we are going to have daily connection time. Where you actually tell me about your day. What struggles you are having, what things you’re proud of, ways you maybe didn’t obey like you should, and maintenance. Obviously, when I am here that’s easier than when I’m away, but it’s going to be a daily thing from here on out. I want us to stay connected in our roles.”

She listened, wide-eyed. Her stomach clenched more with every word he said. He wasn’t wrong. They really had fallen out of practice with their DD lifestyle. “I guess if being the Head of House makes you feel good and happy, I can try, honey, but I don’t need the helper and all. Trish is just being overly cautious. I’m fine.”

He swatted her leg, not hard, but it caused her to jump. “What was that for?”

“I didn’t ask if you want help or if you want to rest. I said that is what is going to happen. You’re running yourself ragged trying to fulfill standards that only you think you have to. I am very seriously considering making you step down from the FRG, and sending the boys to the church school to finish out the year.”

Her eyes widened. “No, David! That won’t be necessary. I’ll take it easy and get help.”

“You’d best. I’m serious, honey, this is your health, and the health of our baby. I’m not putting any of that on the line. Now, you go work with the boys. I’m gonna call Trish and see what time they want us to come over.”

He gave her a peck on the cheek, and she left to go help the boys with their lessons.

She felt simultaneously nervous and excited. It had been a long time since he had shown his dominant side and, as comfortable as she was taking control, she had missed it. She grinned to herself though. At least she was pregnant, and he couldn't spank her.

Tori sat down nervously. She adored the Baxters, but she had a feeling this conversation was going to be mainly focused on how she'd been over-exerting herself. She knew she should slow down some, but with four boys it always seemed like something was getting left undone.

With Cassie watching the boys, it was nice to get a moment to sit without someone needing to be fed, wiped, or disciplined. She leaned her head back, closed her eyes, and sighed.

David came and sat beside her placing his hand on her neck and rubbing. "You doing okay, love? You look beat."

"I'm all right. Just grateful for a moment of peace. I hadn't really thought about it, but since you deployed last time, I haven't even had church to relax because I've been keeping the twins in the service."

David gave her a perplexed look. "Why have you been doing that?"

She blushed slightly and looked away.

Giving her a stern look, his grip on her neck tightened. "Victoria..."

Before she had a chance to respond, the Baxters came in and sat down. Pete chuckled. “Looks like we walked into the middle of something, so let’s start there. What’s going on guys?”

David looked at Tori and she shrugged.

He frowned. “Well, Pete, it seems that my wife has been keeping a lot of things from me. Broken household items and vehicles, medical concerns, a *pregnancy*, and now something having to do with the twins sitting in service at church.”

Trish opened her mouth, but Pete placed a hand on her leg, and she clamped it shut.

“Why don’t you explain to David, Tori?” Pete said kindly.

She shook her head slightly.

“It wasn’t a question, dear.” Pete gave her a mild look and she blushed even deeper.

“Well, I’ll start with saying, I didn’t tell you because it really isn’t a big deal. The Sunday after you left, the boys got into a fight with another little boy about whose Dad was stronger. Not a big deal at all, but their consequence is not being allowed to go back until they apologize to the other boy. They aren’t permitted to fight, and two on one is just cowardice. They refuse to apologize, so they aren’t going back to class.”

Trisha interjected here. “I was the teacher that day, and that consequence wasn’t handed down by us. We had all three boys sit with their parents for the day and were ready to call it even, but it’s very important to Tori that the boys submit.”

David rubbed his temples. “So, not only did you not think to tell me our boys were in a fight, but their ongoing defiance didn’t warrant sharing either?”

Tori shrugged. “I didn’t...”

“I swear, woman, if you say you ‘didn’t want to worry me’ I will throw you over my knee right here, right now.”

She gulped and shook her head. “I should have told you.”

“Darn right you should.” He looked at her angrily, and then sighed looking up at Pete.

“I don’t even know where to start. I feel like our marriage has gotten all topsy turvy, especially the LDD aspect. I just want to set us right again. But, I’m not sure how to do that with the boys, and life, and her being pregnant...”

“Well, before we get into the practical’s, let’s talk about why she is feeling the need to hide all of these things. Tori, do you believe that David loves you and wants the best for you and the boys?”

She stared at him indignantly. “Of course I do! David’s one of the most hardworking, amazing fathers and husbands that I know.”

“Good. I agree. So, why aren’t you sharing your burdens with him?”

“Because I don’t want to do both—” She looked at David guiltily. “Because he works really hard, and I should be able to handle everything on the home front.”

Pete nodded. “So, you feel like it’s your job to protect David from your burdens?”

“Well yeah, I mean, he is out protecting an entire nation. All I do is sit at home with some kids all day. My life isn’t in danger. And, other women do so much more than me and do it so much better than I do.”

Pete tapped his nose. “Ding! Ding! Ding! Ladies and gentlemen, we have a winner. You compare yourself to other women that you feel are doing better than you and try to match their abilities. You aren’t letting David fill his role as your protector and partner in all of this. You’re acting like you’re alone in the fight. Do you pray for him while he is overseas? Send him care packages and letters? Stay up late and get up early to make sure everything is going well over here? You go out of your way to be an amazing partner to him, and yet you deny him the right and privilege to do the same for you. That doesn’t seem fair or loving to me.”

Tori’s eyes brimmed with tears. “I’m just trying to be a good wife, and a good mother, not add to his burdens. I should be able to do it all, and... I can’t. I end every day feeling like a failure.”

David gripped her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. “You are far from a failure, my love. I boast about you to the guys in my unit all the time. How my wife is Superwoman. How she does things I know I could never do and still has a smile at the end of the day. I’m so sorry I’ve abdicated my role and dropped the ball on protecting and taking care of you. But, you need to allow me to do it. “

Tori began crying harder. “I’m so tired. Some days I don’t want to get out of bed, but I know I have to. I go to bed tired. I wake up tired. And now we’re adding another baby to the mix. I can’t do this by myself. I want to. I should be able to. But, I can’t.”

David tried to shush her, the raw emotions were breaking his heart, but Pete shook his head and murmured. “This is good. Let her get it out. This is cathartic.”

David rubbed her back, while Pete and Trisha exchanged wordless glances and nodded. They came and knelt next to the couple placing their hands on their backs and just silently supported them.

“Can we hug you guys? Both of you, but especially you, Tori?”

Tori nodded trying to control her sobs, but the weariness and pain of carrying it all alone for so long came running down her cheeks. She buried her face into David’s chest as Trish and Pete wrapped their arms around the two of them. She cried harder than she could ever remember crying before. The guilt and exhaustion overtaking her. It was humbling, but amazing also to just receive the love everyone was giving to her.

After several moments, Tori took a shuddering breath and whispered sheepishly. “My sleeve can’t handle any more of my tears and snot.”

Trisha chuckled and pulled a box of tissues out of the end table.

After blowing her nose, Tori looked around, eyes rimmed red and swollen, hair disheveled, and spoke with a shaky voice. “Thank you all. So much. I didn’t realize how much I’ve been trying to carry on my own.”

Trish put her arm around the younger woman and squeezed tight. “We never do, dear. I can tell you countless stories from the kids’ growing up years where I was sure someone was going to die by day’s end. And yet, I felt like if I shared that with the other wives or with Pete that I’d be failing my calling somehow. And that’s just not how it works. We were created to need others. Community. The “it takes a village” mentality has a lot going for it.”

Tori nodded and blew her nose on a tissue.

“David? I’m so sorry, honey. I wasn’t trying to take your job away from you. I just wanted to protect you, I guess.”

He kissed her forehead. “I know, honey, but why don’t you let me do the protecting now, okay?”

She nodded and leaned into his embrace. “I can do that.”

Pete squeezed their shoulders. “This is exactly what Trish and I were hoping would happen here tonight. How would you two feel about moving on to the practical side of LDD in the midst of pregnancy, deployment, and young children?”

David nodded eagerly, Tori slightly less so, as they moved to the couch.

“Okay, first off, do you know when your next deployment is set for?”

“It looks like I’ll be stateside for awhile. I have some trips to take within the US, but those should be shorter and less frequent. I expect to be here working in more of an instructor role training others for at least the next two years.”

Tori gave him a surprised look. “Really?”

David grinned. “I had planned to wait and tell you over a special candlelit dinner, but yes. I got the news right before I flew home. That “special trip” I need to take for the next month is to Washington, DC, to finalize my training so I’m fully licensed. They need to make sure I know what I’m doing before I teach others.”

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “I haven’t heard anything so amazing since the day you asked me to be your wife.”

He kissed her back and tweaked her nose.

“Okay, that makes things significantly easier. I actually was privy to some of that, at least the training in DC part, and Trisha and I would like to make an offer/suggestion. We own a townhouse just outside of DC, and our renters just moved out. You guys are welcome to stay there for the month. That way David doesn’t need to be apart from everyone, seeing as he just got back, and it would give you all a change of pace and scenery. And of course, keep the flame burning on your restart to LDD.”

Tori looked at them in shock. “You’d really be willing to let us use your house? We can clean and paint and get it ready for your next renters!”

Pete shook his head. “We have professionals who take care of all of that. If you guys take me up on it, you’re going there to rest, Tori, not work more.”

She blushed and everyone else laughed.

David put his hand on her shoulder. “That is so incredibly kind of you guys, but it doesn’t take into account the rest factor for Tori when I’m at class. At least if we stay down here, we can ask for some help from our local community or hire one of the younger gals to come mother’s help during the week.”

Trish waved her hands. “Oh, we already found the solution for that too! Our old church does weeklong summer camps, and they offer free tuition for active military. That way there is a set part of each day that Tori only has the baby, and seeing as how she doesn’t need full bedrest, she should be just fine as long as she actually rests during those time periods.” She gave Tori a pointed look.

David looked genuinely shocked. “Wow, guys, this is so generous, and out of left field. We are going to need some time

to think about it and get back to y'all—is that okay? When do you need to know by?"

"Take your time. We aren't putting the place back on the market until we get it fixed up either way."

"Now that we've discussed possibly keeping you two in the same house for a good amount of time, let's move on to ways to keep the spark alive." Pete glanced at Tori with a small smile before continuing. "And, maybe figure out some ways to bring the discipline aspect of LDD back in the midst of your pregnancy."

Tori's face flushed red. "We don't have to talk about that, really!"

David put his hand on her leg. "Let him finish, love. I want to hear this. I think we very much do need to talk about it."

Tori bit her lip, but didn't speak again.

"This is something Trish and I have put a lot of time and study into over the last couple of decades. Being married to a midwife, I've always considered the health and well-being of both mother and child to be the most important factor in LDD during pregnancy. The experts say that most ways you would discipline outside of pregnancy are likely safe during pregnancy. But, I know many couples don't feel safe causing serious pain to an expectant mother. There are a variety of options other than applying a paddle to her backside. The traditional; lines, cornertime, restrictions, groundings. But we've also heard some pretty creative ones like the wife not being allowed to be out of her husband's sight, wearing her socks inside out so she remembers her rules every time she feels annoyed at the fabric feeling off, or needing to ask permission for mundane things like getting a drink of water or using the bathroom. I sense from the things you guys have

shared that the core issue here is that Tori has been relying on herself and not looking to you, David, for support or direction. So, my gut is that you two should come up with some ways to ‘force’ her to involve you in her day-to-day life.”

Tori’s stomach clenched and flipped during Pete’s speech. On one hand, it sounded utterly humiliating to have to surrender that much control to David, but it also sounded divine to have so much of David’s attention on her. To not feel so alone.

“And, sex of all types is 100% healthy even with the issues Tori has been having, so feel free to do that! It’s not like you can knock her up.”

Pete squeezed her thigh. “Trish!” But he was laughing and shaking his head.

Before either of the Fahertys could reply, the door to the study flew open.

“Mama! Mama! Mama!” Joel came racing into the room and yelled in a sing-songy voice. “Gid is giving Miss Cassie ‘tude!”

Tori stood to go deal with it, but David gently pushed her back onto the couch. “Joel, did Miss Cassie ask you to come get help?”

Joel shook his head. “No, I just did it on my own. ‘Cause he needs discipline real bad!”

“So, you’re tattling on your brother in the hopes that he will get in trouble?”

Joel looked less sure of his game plan. “Uh... I mean...”

David knelt down to eye level with Joel. “Why don’t you go back and see if you can help encourage Gid to make good

choices. You're his big brother and he looks up to you a lot. And tell Miss Cassie that we are basically done, so if she wants to send anyone in she is welcome to. But, buddy? You're not in charge, and you don't get to decide who needs discipline, ok?"

Joel nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir. I'll go tell Miss Cassie and try to make Gid be good."

He rushed off before any of the adults could explain the difference between "encourage" and "make."

With a laugh, David looked at the older couple. "I think that's probably our signal to get the boys out of Cassie's hair and get them home to bed. Thank you, guys, so much for taking the time to really help us dig down to what's going on. I really appreciate your insight, Pete. You've definitely set me on the right track towards fixing things. Oh, and thanks for the offer of the townhouse. My assumption is that we will do it, but I need to talk it over with Tori."

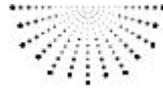
Tori, who had been silently watching her husband just take charge so flawlessly, nodded her agreement. "Yeah, thank y'all so much. It means the world to have friends who will get down in the mess with us."

After gathering the boys, and giving Cassie some cash with their thanks, they loaded up the van and drove the troops home.

All of the boys passed out before they even got back to their place. Tori automatically went to grab Gideon to carry him in, but David pointed to the house. "Bed, baby love. I've got the boys. You've had a busy night and need to rest." She didn't even try to argue. It felt so nice to be taken care of. She smiled at the wording of her thoughts. "Taken care of" sounded an awful lot like "taken in hand" and she felt like

there was going to be a lot of that coming her way as well. By the time she had washed her face and changed into her pajamas, David had tucked the kids in and was just in time to tuck her in as well.

CHAPTER FOUR



After a short discussion, David and Tori decided that spending the early part of the summer in Washington, DC would work well for the family.

One of the families on base was being transferred to Milan and needed a quick buyer for their used, but excellent condition, Honda Pilot, and it was right in their price range.

The boys were ecstatic at the thought of a long vacation, and everyone was excited to see the nation's capital for the first time.

The drive up to Virginia was long, but Tori had to admit the SUV's built in dvd player, A/C, and even ride was nice. And the extra space was amazing. She even compromised with David and allowed food in the car as long as he promised to vacuum it out ASAP. He'd quirked an eyebrow of displeasure when she had stated it as command, but had agreed.

Between potty trips, nursing, and allowing the boys to run around and blow off some steam at each rest stop, they arrived at their home for the next month at 8pm. After a fourteen-hour trip, everyone was ready to explore their new dwelling.

The house was a modest, two-story, three-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath. The downstairs was an open layout, living room, dining room, kitchen. There was a finished basement.

The Baxter's old church had furnished and filled the house with everything a family with small children might need for a summer. Furniture, bedding, dishes, toys, a fridge and cupboard filled with food. Tori's eyes misted when she saw it all. She made a mental note to write an in depth thank you letter the next day.

Because everything was all set it was easy to get the boys to bed quickly.

David pulled Tori onto his lap on the couch downstairs and turned the tv onto a movie channel.

"How are you feeling, baby love?"

"I'm fine," she replied sleepily.

He gave her a look, and she sighed.

"I'm tired and my back hurts, but I'm overwhelmed at the generosity and happy to be here with you."

He kissed her. "Much better."

She cuddled into him, so grateful for his strong arms around her.

The next morning David dropped the oldest three off at church camp on his way to class. The building was huge and the camp seemed incredibly organized. Gideon cried a little at being separated from his brothers, but as soon as he saw the ride on cars in his room, he forgot that he was scared.

Tori didn't know what to do with herself with all of the quiet. Isaac hadn't slept well the night before, so she put him down for an early nap. Trying to obey Trish and David's

orders to rest, she laid down to read. But after fifteen minutes of reading, she felt guilty, got up, and started unpacking.

First, the boys' clothes and toiletries, and then she started on her and David's. Over an hour passed without her even noticing.

She jolted and shrieked when she felt an arm around her waist. "Gah!"

She turned and it was David. "What are you doing? I thought you were in class until four."

He raised an eyebrow as he turned her to face him. "Obviously, or you wouldn't have been unpacking. Didn't we decide that I'd take care of it when I got home tonight?"

"I had a burst of energy. And, why are you home anyways? It's not even noon!" She tried to put the focus back on him.

Both eyebrows raised now, he glared at her. "I got to the classroom and found out that I'm early. There was a snafu, and classes don't start until next week. Now. Back to you, missy. Why were you unpacking instead of resting?"

She bit her lip and looked at her hands.

Tapping the underside of her chin, he spoke firmly, "Victoria, look at me."

Slowly she raised her eyes until they were staring into his.

"Your health and the health of this baby are important. You can't just ignore orders because you don't like them or you haven't seen any evidence to the contrary."

She squirmed. "I know... I just..."

"You just keep placing yourself and our child at risk. I think the only way you're going to take me seriously is if I

prove to you that it's not worth it. I need to ensure that you think twice before defying me and over-exerting yourself again."

Her stomach plummeted. That wasn't what she was trying to do at all, and the tone in his voice indicated that he was done talking with words.

"David, what do you mean? Y-you can't spank me! I'm pregnant!"

"I'm very aware you're pregnant. That's why we are having this discussion, isn't it? You are the one who seems to be forgetting your status, not me. Oh, and I can do whatever I deem fit—I'm the one in charge here, Victoria, not you. You seem to have completely forgotten that, but I think you'll remember very quickly, hands on the dresser."

Numbly, she walked over to the dresser and gripped the edges—staring at David in the mirror that took over the entire back of the piece of furniture. Had he lost his mind? They never did corporal punishment during pregnancy. This was exactly why they'd talked about alternative methods of punishment.

David unbuttoned her denim shorts and lowered them along with her panties.

She clamped her eyes shut. She'd also never watched herself get disciplined before, and she wasn't about to start now.

"Open your eyes, love. I was thrilled when I saw our room had this set up with the vanity dresser. I think it's important for you to watch me while I discipline you. I want you to see how important this is to me. You're my wife, and I care for you

more than anything else in this world. It's imperative that you don't hurt yourself through stubborn pride."

She obeyed and looked at him in the mirror as he spoke. Then watched in complete confusion as he grabbed a tube of lube she had just unpacked out of the drawer in the nightstand by the bed. He also put on one of the medical gloves in their intimacy kit.

She did not ask though, waiting to see where he was going with this.

"Spread." He said as he nudged her legs with his free hand.

She did and watched in the mirror as he squirted a liberal amount of lube on his pointer and middle finger. She gasped when he applied the slippery liquid between her butt cheeks.

She rose to her toes as his finger slid inside her asshole. This was not something he had done before. They had a good sex life when he was home, all her pregnancies were proof of that, but her "backdoor" had always been firmly closed.

"David! Wha... what are you doing?"

His finger went deeper, almost painfully, and he pressed up against her body. "I am reminding you that you are not in charge, Mrs. Faherty. You don't get to just 'decide' what you're going to do with your time and body." He pumped his finger in and out as he spoke causing her to moan involuntarily. "Which isn't even an accurate statement. On our wedding day you gave this body to me, so it's my body. You don't get to decide to disregard the safety and well-being of my body. My wife. My unborn child."

He pulled his finger out and she thought the lesson was over, but then she felt much fuller and realized he now had two fingers up inside her formerly unfingered hole. It was

slightly uncomfortable physically and mortifying emotionally, but also filled her with a sense of safety she hadn't experienced in years. That knowledge to her very core that she was David's wife, and every drop of her being wanted to surrender to him.

"Yes, sir. Yes, David. You're right. I... I wasn't thinking about the baby or, or obeying. I'm s-sorry." As she spoke and he continued his invasion she realized despite the obviously disciplinary nature of this entire ordeal, or maybe even because of that, she was flooding with arousal. It was getting harder and harder to focus on anything, but the deep longing she had for her husband to fill every part of her. Not just her bottom.

Her legs began to shake, and he scooped her up and moved them both to the bed. But instead of laying her down to meet her sexual needs, he sat her on his lap. After dropping the gloves on the floor, he grasped her chin firmly.

His demeanor was the opposite of aroused. Looking sternly into her eyes he spoke with a serious tone. "I'm serious, T. I can't allow you to put yourself at risk anymore. Physically or in any other area. Even if I have to tie you to the bed, you're going to rest. We have a month here in this new place where there's no FRG, no homeschool co-op, no one outside of our family vying for your attention. I need you to take this as seriously as I do."

Tori's feelings of arousal dissipated as he lectured and disappointment landed like lead in her belly. Usually when he scolded, she went into immediate contrition, but right now she just felt mad that he pumped her up, literally, and then just left her hanging.

“Ok, David. Yes, I understand. Rest. Protect the baby. I get it. Since I’m not permitted to unpack, can I just take a nap please?”

A look of uncertainty passed over David’s face. “Tori. What’s wrong? Discipline doesn’t usually make you angry. Am I missing something here?”

Frustrated tears filled her eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s just the pregnancy hormones, but you came home and it has felt like everything’s been about the baby and making sure I’m resting. And, I’m grateful you’re taking charge. I really am, but you’ve barely even tried to kiss me let alone made love to me. And, when you...” she faltered. “Did what you did over there. It made me feel like I used to when we couldn’t keep our hands off of each other. I thought you were going to... we were going to...”

David’s face softened and his confusion cleared. “You want to have sex?”

She gave a shy smile. “I want to have mad horny rabbit sex.” She pointed at her belly. “Like Trish said, it can’t make things worse.”

David laughed loudly. “Well, I can’t argue with you there. I haven’t pushed for sex because I was trying to keep you rested, not rev you up. But, I’d very much like to have ‘mad horny rabbit sex’ with you.”

He wrapped his fist around her hair in a makeshift ponytail and tugged firmly.

She moaned. “Mmm, I’ve definitely missed that.”

Still grasping her hair, he leaned in, capturing her lips in a deep kiss. His tongue filled her mouth, taking away her ability to breathe for a moment.

When she could catch her breath, she whispered in his ear. “I’ve missed that too.”

He grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it over her head, kissing her now exposed skin.

She closed her eyes, moaning happily as his lips gently caressed her arms and shoulders.

David reached around, adeptly unclasping her bra. He brought his mouth to her breasts, suckling first her left nipple and then her right.

Tori could feel milk dripping from her breasts as he sucked and moved to cover them, but David pressed his hand against her chest forcing her to lay down in the bed. He growled as he licked the droplets off. This was another thing they’d never done. Breast play rarely coincided with the months she was breastfeeding. It wasn’t something they had talked about intentionally avoiding, it had just never come up.

Tori felt no shame, only excitement at sharing this with her husband.

His hands and lips trailed down her torso, resting finally on her swollen abdomen.

“The evidence of our lovemaking is the most beautiful thing in the world to me, T. I hope you know that,” he said, voice hoarse with emotion.

She nodded. “You’ve never made me feel undesirable even at my most bloated and uncomfortable.”

He kissed her belly again. “Good, because the visceral reaction I have to seeing you growing our children would impregnate you twenty times over.”

He stood and stripped.

Tori moaned happily. No matter how many times she saw her husband naked, she never ceased to be turned on by his muscular body.

He grabbed her ankles and pulled her to the edge of the bed.

She spread her thighs willingly, and he sank his manhood inside her.

Growling appreciatively, he thrust several times before grabbing her hair and tugging it roughly. “You really are aroused and ready for me, Mrs. Faherty. Maybe we should add playing with your bottom hole to our list of pleasure activities, not punishment.”

Tori could only moan in response. She was so ready for this he could have recited the alphabet, and his voice would have been enough to shoot her into orgasmic ecstasy.

He continued thrusting, and just as she reached her peak, he slapped her once on the side of her thigh and climaxed inside of her. She screamed her pleasure as the pulses of pleasure rolled through her body.

As she came down off her high, she vaguely registered the baby crying in the background. Before she could make a move David kissed her forehead lightly.

“He’s okay. I’ll get dressed and grab him in a second.” He kissed her lips deeply. “You make me the happiest husband on the planet, Tori Anne. Making love to you is always going to be my favorite thing, and whether we’re talking about babies in utero, in their cribs, or in any other circumstances, you, my wife, are always first and foremost on my mind. I might get caught up in the logistics of the day-to-day, but never doubt that my desire is to fuck you silly every minute of the day.”

Tori giggled. David never cussed, so hearing that word both amused and aroused her.

She whispered back. "I love you too, Big Love. With every part of me. Thank you for taking care of me."

He kissed her head once more before pulling on a pair of jeans and going to check on Isaac.

Tori laid back on the bed feeling a weight lift off her shoulders that had been there for as long as she could remember. She really didn't have to bear the weight of the world by herself. Her husband could bear it with her, and if need be, forcibly remove it from her shoulders.

She was safe. He could be the strong one for both of them.

She closed her eyes and rested.

The End

ABOUT DELIA GRACE

Author's note: I spent this entire story itching to get Tori's bottom properly reddened, but every time I tried David refused to spank his pregnant wife. So, please view this as a taste of the discipline to come. I think David and Tori are going to have many more adventures in the future as they navigate taking their relationship from being 50/50 (or more!) long distance to in person all the time. I have a feeling her newfound ability to let go will not last forever. Plus, adding a baby girl (oops! I guess that cats out of the bag!) to their family will shake up their dynamic as well.

I don't have a newsletter or my own fancy website, but if you liked this story and are curious about other things I've written check me out on Amazon.

https://www.amazon.com/Delia-Grace/e/B01M0M7FML/ref=dp_byline_cont_ebooks_1

I've been reading spanking romances since my early 20's (and would have sooner than that, but thought I was the only spanko in the world!), and writing for the last several years. I foray into BDSM and quite a bit of ageplay, but my first love

will always be domestic discipline. And, it was amazing to be able to go back to that for Tori and David's story!

Hugs, Glitter, and SPANKS!

Delia Grace

PS. I love friends, so feel free to add me on Facebook. I don't check my account nearly as often as I should, but if you send me a message I promise to respond!

<https://m.facebook.com/100011737400452/>

ALSO BY DELIA GRACE

The Jackson Tribe

Beautifying Bernadette

Affirming Antoinette

Cherishing Chantoya

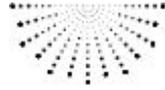
Rawhide Ranch

Violet's Little Valentine's Day

Masters of The Castle

Daddies of the Castle

STEALING SUMMER BY
NICOLINA MARTIN



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

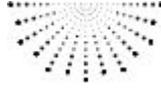
*'I was lucky to get to know Maren early in my author career.
When I took my first stumbling steps into the world of
spanking novels, she was there, always helpful, always kindly
answering all my stupid questions, making me feel less stupid.*

Maren, you deserve all the love.

This is for you.

*Thank you to my wonderful editor Nerine Dorman, and my
lovely beta readers.*

CHAPTER ONE



Stephan

This is not the man I was, but it's the man I've become, and I'm too fucking long gone to change back. I was never a good boy, but I used to have an ounce of decency. After causing the death of someone I considered my almost-sister, I discarded all pretenses. So here I am.

Like a pervy stalker, I sit perched sideways on my bike, my legs crossed at my ankles, a joint between my fingers. I wiggle it and listen to the clacks as the thick silver rings grind against each other. The occasional, slight gusts of wind whirl up the dust before it settles again. I'm hot as hell in my leather jacket, but I expect to hit the road any second, so it stays on.

The school bell rings. An annoying, persistent sound designed to wake the dead.

I pull on the joint, lower it, and wait as I exhale a light-gray cloud of smoke.

Any minute now.

The double front doors slam open, and *she* comes running. The vision, as always, makes my heart skip a beat.

Summer Jones.

She moved here last year. Like me.

Long, dirty-blond hair, micro-braided and adorned with little beads of all colors. Long pink or purple skirts, torn, used-to-be-white Converse that have seen their best days, wide Gypsy blouses that never seem to fit properly. She looks like she stepped out of a thrift store. Between her and her hippie mom, the little family sticks out like fuck.

Summer Jones reminds me of the girl I lost all those years ago.

Savannah Wilder was so young, too young, and too good for me. Even our platonic friendship would have caused an uproar, had people known. Hers was the only true kindness I'd ever felt, non-judgmental and pure. She didn't see me as a fuckup.

After her death, it's all I've had left—being an asshole, loathing the whole world as much as it hates me.

This girl is also young, but perfectly legal. In a world of cynicism and greed, this nature's child is a breath of fresh air. She awakens every protective instinct in me, which is a conundrum since I'm probably the biggest, baddest around.

The last decade, I've fucked and drunk my way across the continent, rarely sleeping at one place more than a few weeks. I've threatened, bribed, or stolen places to rest my head, but I've never owned one.

Until now.

I passed through this little bump on the road on my way north, my Harley and my worn bag with some clothes and a toothbrush my only possessions. I take the odd job here and there and I have money. I never have any use for it, though.

Until now.

I saw her on the first day. The first hour on the first day. Tall and skinny, a little awkward, not even trying to fit in, an outcast, a pariah. How doesn't anyone else *see* what a stunning beauty she is?

No one looks past the surface, and to be honest, the surface *is* a mess. A cute-as-pie mess, but still. She could use a firm hand and some discipline in her life. And she needs to get far away from that mom of hers. I long to see this girl reach her true potential, and that ain't gonna be in this little narrow-minded hell of a town.

I might be a perv for hanging outside a high school dying to get a glimpse of a young woman eleven years my junior, but I can't stay away. Fuck knows I've tried, but I keep returning.

One day, I'll have her. It's fate.

Summer

I can't focus on math for shit. Right outside my window hovers a hummingbird, its wings flapping so fast they're invisible. The long, narrow beak is sometimes a mere dot as the little black pepper eyes seem to stare directly at me. The throat is a deep red, and the back shimmers green. It's a 'Tiny Dynamo', an adorable nickname for the ruby-throated little being.

Indoors, the classroom smells of old books, too much cologne and sweat. In my mind, I instead inhale the fresh scents of earth and leaves.

The bird becomes a blur as I squint and focus my gaze on the road. The man. Again. *Him*. There's no reason to think he's there for me, but still I do. It's my imagination trying to come up with ways to make my life more interesting.

"Miss Jones. Anything in particular you'd care to share with the rest of the class?"

I flinch and look up, disoriented. I'm *not* trekking the barely-there path on the forest floor, the green light from the redwoods' crowns sifting through the foliage high above my head. I flick back a few braids and I tuck them behind my ear as I glance around me. A few of my classmates snigger. My cheeks turn hot, like they do all too often. I always do stupid shit like this, pull the wrong kind of attention to myself when I'd rather have none. Just turned nineteen, I'm an outcast among my one-year younger peers. Homeschooled until I was fourteen, by a mother barely able to manage her own self, I was severely behind in all subjects when I finally set foot in a public school. Except English. I wasn't behind in English. I read constantly. It helps.

They had to push me back a year. I was, and still am, mortified.

Outcast. Freak. Everyone sees me, but no one *sees* me. I just want to be left alone, sit with a thermos of hot chocolate, a book, and let the cool mind of nature calm my racing thoughts.

As soon as the bell rings, I dart up, throw the math book, pen, and paper into my dark green Fjallraven backpack, and make a beeline for the exit. My braids whip around my head, and right outside the door I stop for a moment to collect them and wrap a scrunchie around them, then I run. Fast. My sneaker-clad feet make no noise against the stone floor.

Once outside, I dash to my rusty old bike, hop on it, and head for the outskirts of the vast national park. There's no need to lock the bike. No one would dream of being seen with it, and still, I prefer it to our car, which is in even worse shape. Of course, it is. Mom and I. Dirt poor, living hand to mouth. That's us.

I pedal fast. The chain rattles ominously. One day it'll hop off on a downward slope somewhere, and I'll catapult to my death.

Across the street, where I take a sharp turn right, by a little clearing at the edge of the forest, I see *him* again. I never get a clear sight, but something about him draws me in mercilessly. He rides a Harley, has light brown unkempt hair that rests on his shoulders, a black leather jacket, worn, dirty blue jeans, and cowboy boots.

Sometimes, I see him in town. From the way he composes himself, that languid, controlled posture, how he moves and dresses, I'm guessing he's in his early thirties.

He always manages to hide most of his face with his hair. It's infuriating because he's the most exciting thing I've seen in my whole life, and a huge pull in me grows with each day.

He's new around here. Showed up a few weeks after Mom and I moved here. The whole town was abuzz for a month, rumors flying. Grateful to have the townspeople off *our* backs so soon, I listened with great interest, sneaking among the shelves of the supermarket, until I realized no one knew anything.

I don't think he's a biker. Not like being associated with a chapter. Mom used to hang in those. I recognize the type. He's a loner. Like me.

It makes the pull even worse.

I don't know where he lives. Not exactly. I've tailed him, but with him riding a motorcycle, and me a bike, I always lose him.

School's finally over. For real. I'll never sit in a classroom again for as long as I live.

The first few weeks I feel free, as if the world lies by my feet, ready for me to explore. I spend all day, early morning until late evening, in the forest. I have a few sandwiches and a bottle of water. I bring books. We can't afford them, but we have several awesome neighbors who lend them to me. I read all genres: romance, sci-fi, thrillers, the classics. Old books. New books. It doesn't matter. I have a vivid imagination, and for a few hours every day, I experience adventures way beyond what I'll ever see myself. Mid-day, I go to my favorite clearing with a view over the valley, smoke a joint out of Mom's stash, and allow myself to become one with nature. One day, I want to work out here as a ranger. That's my grown-up plan for later. My only plan now is to chill.

Chill, and stalk the alluring male specimen with the motorcycle. He doesn't fit in and like with any strange creature that passes my way, I'm dying to learn more. I am so close to cracking the mystery of where he lives, and one day I'll find out.

One day I hope is today.

He's cruising down the main street, and the sight makes my heart jolt. I haven't seen him since I quit school. It's early morning and barely anyone else is in sight. I have a loaf of

bread and some juice in a bag, and I am heading home. I curse the fact that I can't tag him. Disappointment courses through me, but it is what it is. Some other day. It *will* happen.

It happens the next morning. It's as if fate has finally had it with me and my mopey self.

He blazes past me faster than any speed limit. No helmet on. Jeans and T-shirt. If he crashes, he'll be a pile of minced meat. Crazy mad. It awakens that thrill in me that's reserved for him, and him alone.

I don't know if he's leaving for some errand or if he's on his way home, but I pedal faster to the woods, to the road I *know* leads to wherever he disappears. I hope he's coming home soon, but in either case, I've got everything I need. I can wait. Hiding my bike and myself behind some bushes by the side of the road, I sit on a small rock, pull up a smashed ham-and-cheese sandwich, unwrap it, and dig in.

I haven't read more than ten pages when I hear the roar of an engine, a loud murmur I know oh so well. I drop the sandwich and throw myself on the damp ferns, trying to quell my gasps even though he can hardly hear them above his motorcycle's roar.

One moment he's approaching, the next all I'm left with is a cloud of dust. *Now!* I throw myself on my bike, and I ride.

The road splits in two, but the trace of dust in the still air betrays him. My insides jitter with the anticipation of looming victory. The road splits again. The engine noise is long gone, but not the stirred dirt.

I skid to a halt when I reach a cabin almost hidden in the foliage. I must look closely to make sure I'm not dreaming it up. Bike tossed by the side of the road, hidden of course, I take

the route through the trees, making sure to stay low. Something glimmers. Chrome. *Yes, yes, yes. Gotcha.*

I can't tell if my heart is beating when I sneak up close, making sure to stay out of sight from any windows. A loud clack makes me freeze, then another, and another. It echoes in the vast forest. It seems to come from the other side of the house, and it certainly sounds like someone chopping wood. I *have* to see this. I have to see *him!*

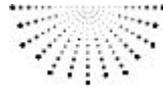
Still no chance to see his freaking face. It's infuriating, but my god! The rest... Man, he looks good. Throwing thick log after thick log on the chopping block cut from a tree trunk, he then splits them in one powerful arc with his ax. From my hiding spot I, at least, get a clear view of everything else. He's naked from the waist up, lean, but his muscles play beneath his skin as he moves. His dirty blue jeans hang low, and an alluring V-shape formed by strong hips disappears beneath the waistline. My mind nearly flips when my starved teen hormones wreak havoc with my nether regions. Those strong, capable hands roving my flesh, holding me tightly, holding me down and... My imagination always ends there, because I'm not entirely sure what happens after.

Disappointment courses through me as he buries the ax blade in the block, wipes sweat off his forehead, and throws back his long hair before he disappears inside the house. After a few moments, when nothing else happens, I leave. Now that I know his secret place, I can come here and get better views later, figure him out. See his damn *face*.

On elbows and knees, I back through the underbrush until I'm sure he won't see me. I'm just about to stand when the front door slams. A few moments later, his bike roars to life. I'm on the wrong side of the house, but it's obvious he's

leaving. My heart slams as I listen to the fading engine sound, I don't even have to think it over. Of course, I'm going to check out his place more... thoroughly.

CHAPTER TWO



Stephan

As I'm driving down the road, I unexpectedly see something glinting. A beam of sun hits a chrome surface in the shadows under some bushes. I know this place like my own pocket, and there's nothing here that's not rocks, trees, and moss. I halt, turn off the engine and kick down the support to go to investigate. Once I push apart the twigs, I see a bike I'd recognize anywhere.

Hers.

She is fucking close.

Too close... for *her* own good.

I spin around and look down the road, toward my cabin.
Oh, you bad girl.

Keys pocketed, I let the bike stay. I'll move quietly. I need to see how far she has taken this.

Thrill sizzles through me as I realize she's been as aware of me as I've been of her. She stalked me to my *home*.

I hurry back with long steps as I wonder how many times she's been here already without me noticing.

At the cabin everything appears undisturbed, and I hesitate. Am I wrong? Then I think of how easily she moves in the forest, never leaving traces, the undergrowth seemingly untouched. Of course, she'll be just as discreet, illegally entering someone else's home. How she doesn't possess a better sense of self-preservation is beyond me, but I'll take it.

There is only one door. The windows sit high on the walls at the sides and back of the house. She won't escape.

The porch boards creak beneath my body weight. I hesitate and hold my breath while I listen. The next moment, I jolt as music suddenly comes on inside. A slow, sexy blues, a lonesome guitar sliding the scales, almost weeping of loneliness and lost opportunities. My life in a song.

Fuck. She's got some nerve, but it makes this a whole lot easier. I pull open the door and glide in, closing and locking it behind me as sweet-hot adrenaline trickles through my chest, moving lower to settle raw arousal in my loins. Suddenly, the music stops. It's silent. So silent I think she's heard me, then there's a slight thud and she begins to hum. I'm not sure if I should be amused or annoyed, or fucking pissed, even. This chick is snooping through my private property while happily humming as if nothing's wrong. Who taught this girl right from wrong? Oh, I know. No one. I wouldn't expect anything else from her hare-brained mom, and then living sheltered, moving from state to state. No wonder she's more wild than tame.

Which gives me an irresistible idea.

I don't give a fuck about the stuff inside. Some clothes, a few books, a few utensils for cooking. The actual valuable things I have—bank stuff, memorabilia, and so on—lie in a

safe back in L.A. And I haven't even thought about those in years.

But she doesn't know that.

I reach behind me, unlock and open the door slightly, then slam it shut again, making sure to lock it. The humming stops. I grin as I, as noisily as I can, pull off my boots and toss them aside. Leather jacket hung up, I then saunter inside to search for my nosy little rascal.

A quick overview of the living room indicates no one. I kneel and check under the couch. Nothing. Kitchen is tiny, and there's no hiding space inside the cupboards. This leaves closets, bathroom, and bedroom. My smirk spreads as I find no one in neither closets nor bathroom. I head to the bedroom, excitement threading through me. She's trapped herself completely.

It's my turn to hum, but I only do it for the effect, to temporarily make her think she's safe.

Then I look under the bed, grinning on the inside while I put my most stern expression on my face. Her eyes widen and she gives out a little squeak.

"Who the hell are you?"

I reach for her, but she scrambles back and appears on the other side.

"Please. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Now, how can you *not* mean breaking into a man's house?"

She blushes. "I..."

"I?"

“I’m...”

“I’m?” I repeat, the taunt dripping. “Do you know what I do to little girls who break and enter?”

She shakes her head, mute.

“Come here.” I crook a finger and beckon her to me.”

“No.”

“Where else do you think you’re going?”

“Just... Let me go. I’ll never do it again.”

She sounds out of breath. I almost pity her for what I’m about to do. Almost. Because I’ve got her. I’ll capture her and put my hands on her, and there’s nothing she can do. I can’t help the hard-on that fights the restraint of my pants.

“Come *here*.” My voice is steely now.

Her gaze darts between me and the door. Oh yes, little bunny. Try to run. Even better.

Then she dashes past the foot of the bed and tries to dodge me. I let her reach the door, then spin around and grab her by her waist, pushing her up against the unyielding surface that opens inward. She never stood a chance.

She squirms and whimpers. “No! Please, sir. Let me go. I won’t—I’ll—”

“Oh, I know,” I say. “Now, tell me you’re sorry.” I press my whole body against her backside, my erection against her tight butt. She must feel it.

“S-sorry.”

“What do I do to disobedient little girls?”

She's silent. Her heart thuds so hard I feel it, and her breaths are bird quick.

I shake her for emphasis. "What. Do. I. *Do*?"

"Please! Just let me go. I'll never bother you again."

"Oh, bunny. You already bother me. You've bothered me for a long, long time. You don't know half of it."

Silence. A loud swallow. "What?"

I spin her around and shove her toward the bed. She screams and tries to break free. The vision, the sound, makes me even harder. "Call me sir."

"S-sir," she whimpers, still struggling to get out of my grip.

I lean over her and put my mouth to her ear. "I will punish you. I will not touch you sexually. Do you hear me? You have every reason to be afraid, but not for that. Tell me you understand."

She relaxes slightly, exhales shakily. "I understand."

"Sir."

"S-sir."

"Stop stuttering." I stand and smack her butt.

She gasps. "Ow!"

"Good girl. Don't move while I deliver nine more."

"W-what? No!"

I smack her again. "Stop stuttering!"

"Oookay."

"Nine more, brace yourself."

“Eight,” she cries. “Eight. You already—”

“That was for the repeated stuttering.”

She whimpers again, then exhales. I feel her defeat and smile. Oh, she’ll be mine. Not now, but soon.

I slap her butt, harder this time, then harder yet. At six slaps, she cries out. At eight, she begs me to stop. At nine, her whimper is mixed with a sob.

I let my hand rest on her deliciously firm ass. I long so much to see it reddened, and to feel its heat from the spanking, but all in due time.

“Stand up and face me.”

She scrambles up and turns, raising her gaze to meet mine. Tears glitter in her eyelashes, and her lower lip pouts. I wipe her eyes with the pad of my thumb, then put it to her lush lip and stroke it. “Good girl.”

Her nostrils flare, and her expression is one of defiance.

I tsk. “I will let you go now. Run along. Think of me when you put your aching butt on the saddle. You will not touch yourself to the memory of me. You will ache, and you will wish for my hands on you again. Tomorrow, noon, I expect you here again for your second lesson.”

She widens her blue-as-the-early-morning-sky eyes again. “What?” A scoff. “Not happening.”

I hold her gaze and say nothing. She will, and we both know it.

Summer

He steps to the side, moves over to the door and unlocks it, then holds out his arm. “Go now.”

I hesitate, thinking he’ll grab me again. My butt burns, competing with my cheeks. Both body parts must be beet red.

“Go, or I’ll hand you ten more. Lesson number one was not to invade the home of a stranger. Lesson number two begins now.”

“What is that?” I half-whisper.

“Obey me.”

I squeak and dart toward the door, pull it open, then run.

I don’t stop running until I reach my bike. I hop on and try to force the scorching embarrassment out of my mind, but every push on the pedals makes my butt sting, and the rubbing of my nethers against the saddle makes me ache, arousal blooming like a flower in early spring, opening me. *I’m not going back. I’m not going back. I’m not going back. Oh my god. I’m going to be there at noon tomorrow for my next lesson.*

Legs like jelly, I hop off the bike at the first crossroad, lead it up a little along the way until I’m out of sight from *anyone* who might pass by, then sink down on a stone. I shoot up from the stinging in my butt and sit on the soft moss instead. It’s cool and damp and soothes my behind’s heated skin. I scramble to my knees, pull up the skirt and sit my now mere panty-clad bottom back on the moss.

I sigh with relief. After all, I came away relatively unscathed from an encounter that could have gone *much* worse. Much, much worse. I don’t even need to verbalize the things a man can do to a woman that *didn’t* happen. *That*

would have been devastating. I don't even know how anyone comes back from that.

But this... the spanking, the stern voice, the manhandling of me as if I'm nothing but a featherlight doll. I burn hotter than the sun from the memory.

And his face. My god, I finally got to see him, and not only a glimpse, but up close. He's perfect. He could be a model, the bad-boy vibe model. A straight nose—strong somehow, a squared jaw dusted with a dark stubble, dark heavy eyebrows, and eyes the color of the deepest forest green, shifting in gray and black, with specks of blue. I don't know how to describe them adequately, and I already know I need to see them again.

That night I can't look Mom in the eyes. I grab the dinner plate, ramen noodles with over-cooked bouquets of broccoli, sprinkled with salt and pepper, and run to my room, hiding away in my shame. I try to tell myself I did nothing wrong, but I try vocalizing that sentiment to Mom in my mind and end up with nothing but 'breaking and entering'. Yeah, I'll keep this to myself for now.

First chew, Mom knocks.

"Honey?"

"*Yesh*, Mom," I shout and swallow the food as I squirm, the memory of his slaps still sizzling in me.

"Can I come in?"

"*No!*"

She's silent then asks, "Something wrong? Do you need to talk? You know you can talk to me about everything."

Oh no, I *really* can't. Not after today. She's guaranteed not to understand. Unless... and ugh, not gonna think about that!

"It's nothing. I'm just tired."

More silence follows. Mom isn't stupid, but she's also not one to pry. "Will you come out later? We can watch a rerun of *America's Funniest Home Vids* together. It's coming on soon."

It's my turn to be silent. I have no idea what to answer. She gives me an olive branch, even though we're not at war, her and I. She doesn't even know of the raging fight inside me.

"Summer?"

I don't waaant to. "Okay. I'll be out in a bit. I'm... gonna read a little."

I feel her sigh through the door. She thinks I'm *such* an incurable introvert. She's right. Except, she hates it, I love it. I'm afraid we're leaving again, now that I'm finally out of school. I don't want to, for so many reasons. If we keep on moving, I'll never find a job I like. And now... the biker, the wood chopper, the man with the hands of steel, firm against my soft, innocent skin.

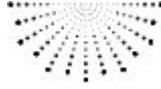
Mmmph.

My appetite is gone.

Plate pushed aside, I go to join my mom in front of some mind-numbing TV show that feels like it dumbs me down, and all the while my mind is somewhere else.

When I'm finally alone in bed, I put my hands between my legs, cup my mound, put a finger to my clit, then I remember what he said. No touching myself. I pull back my hand, assaulted by a slew of emotions I can't even begin to sort. What will happen tomorrow?

CHAPTER THREE



Stephan

That night I open a bottle of whisky—a twenty-year-old Laphroaig. It cost a fortune. It's one of my few indulgences. The others are a life free of demands, open plains, and avoiding people. I have money stowed away, and some shit I inherited—stuff I'll never have much use for with the kind of life I've lived the past ten-fifteen years.

Usually, I drink cheaper shit. I was saving this if I ever had a reason to celebrate.

With my palm still tingling from the meeting between my callused hand and her ass, I thought I did. I've been giddy all afternoon, but the sun sank and darkness set in along with a chill penetrating all the way to my bones. The temporary light within has been replaced by the usual gutting feeling of being a despicable orc, something that destroys everything it touches.

So, the opened, exclusive bottle moves from celebration to comfort to the usual need for numbing my regrets, for a few moments outside myself and my fucked-up mind.

What am I doing? I'm gonna ruin this girl, too. I clench my fists, trying to abolish her remnants. Her fright, reasonable as it was when I caught her intruding, her absolute terror when

she, for a moment thought I would take her by force... rape her, then... her eyes alight with the same needs I have. The same, but the opposite.

I've been an ass my whole life. A wayward kid, loved by no one. A troubled teen, already too ruined, toeing the line of the abyss. And then I threw myself into it. I've treated every woman as an object of my desires, made them bend to my will. I've fought every man who even looked at me funny.

I'm a devil with no remorse, and I'll ruin her.

She truly doesn't deserve it. Even I feel it—a tiny sliver of conscience surfacing in the last few gulps of the smoky amber liquid.

I lurch to my feet and throw the bottle against the wall. The glass is too thick to break, the quality too great. It pisses me off. I stagger across the room, the walls tilting enough I must support myself against them as I fetch the bottle and slam it against the brick surface of the fireplace. It clunks loudly at the impact but remains whole.

"Fuck it!" I roar and toss it as far as I can.

In the hallway, I fall as I fight to pull on my boots. Scrambling up, collecting arms and legs, I slam open the door and make my way to my bike. I'm out. I'm off. She won't come here tomorrow, and I shouldn't have told her to. In the unlikely event she does, I'll be long gone. I put the keys to the lock, then look at my empty palms only to realize I don't have them.

The way back to the house feels like double the distance, but I finally get the bike started with a roar that will echo through the vast forest for a long time even though I can't hear it. The headlight plays erratically at the road, the trees beside

the road, then back at the road. It's dizzying. The crossroad doesn't make sense, and I've no idea where the fuck I am. I choose anyway. The road gets bumpier and narrower and suddenly I'm thrown off the bike. It lands a few feet away from me. I gasp, trying to catch my breath that was knocked out of me, then crawl to it and turn it off before I'm overcome with bone deep lethargy. I have no reason to get up. Fuck it all. Fuck it all to hell.

My last conscious thought is an image of *her*, regret cutting through me.

I wake, but I might as well be dead. I'm so cold my teeth chatter uncontrollably, and my hangover is epic. Despite my wish to disappear off the face of the earth, my desire to see her again, feel her, her heart beating, her gasps when I touch her, feel her beneath me as I make her mine—is much stronger.

So, I make my way back home. I clean up—the cabin and myself—and then I wait. It's close to noon.

She will come. And if she doesn't...

I'm not someone to reject, and she'll learn it.

Summer

I've barely slept, and by noon I've already been out for six hours. I got up long before Mom, avoiding all questions. She has the uncanny habit of seeing right through me. I guess we have lived together, just the two of us, way too long.

I still haven't decided to go to him, but my bike has taken me to the last bend from where I get the first glimpse of his house. My mouth is parched, and my heart slams. I park the bike by the side of the road and hesitate. Then I take a step. And stop. My legs shake. Every other step I stop, overcome by the instinct to run the other way.

Finally, I stand by his door, my hand clenched. From inside comes music. Southern country, dirty and raw, filled with emotion. I raise my hand and the door swings open even before I knock.

He fills the whole entrance with his dark, looming presence. It's as if the sun winks out, or perhaps that is because I have stepped under the roof of his porch.

"Come in, bunny," he rumbles. He looks less put together than yesterday. Given he has the general appearance of a mildly civilized caveman, that says a lot. The feral, wolf-like glint in his eyes evokes a sucking feeling in my stomach, trepidation, anticipation.

"I'm... crazy," I gasp. "I shouldn't be here."

"And still you are. Step inside."

I swallow and take a step forward. My legs shake.

He leans in and puts his cheek to mine, his mouth to my ear. "You're exactly where you're supposed to be."

His hot breath on my skin sends shivers down my spine. My panties dampen in an instant, and even more so when he lays an arm around my shoulders and pulls me inside.

"Lesson number two continues," he says. "What was it?" The door slams shut behind me and the lock clicks closed.

I spin around in time to see him pocket the key. He holds my gaze as if challenging me to protest. I won't give him the satisfaction. I did come here voluntarily after all.

“Ehm... to... obey you?”

He smiles darkly. “And have you?”

“Yes.” I bury my teeth in my lower lip. “Or...”

“Yes?”

I swallow hard. “I touched myself.”

“Thinking of my hand on your butt?”

My nethers swell with the heat that spreads between my legs. “Mmm.”

“Go put your hands on the table.” He tilts his head toward it. “I'm going to pull up your skirt, pull down your panties and bare your skin. Then I will deliver ten to warm you up, ten to punish you for your transgression, and ten to remember the lesson. After, I will put your clothes back on.”

“I... I can't take that many.”

“That renders thirty more tomorrow.”

I whimper and spin around, then head to the table. My panties are already soaked, and I ache for his touch. What is this sorcery? I'm throwing myself at a stranger, albeit exciting, all hard surfaces and with the perfect combination of honey and spice in his smoldering eyes. Eyes that have followed me around for months and months.

He wants something I have. I want something he offers. It doesn't sound complicated at all, putting it that way.

“Yes, please,” I whisper, then I bend forward.

His large palm strokes along my back, then slower over my butt. Suddenly, he pulls up my skirt and snatches down my panties until they fall to my ankles. His exhale is erratic and heavy, then the first slap lands. Not too hard. This is fine.

The intensity increases. At seven, I bite down on my lip and fight the increasing pain. At ten he pauses.

“What were those for?” he asks.

“Warmup,” I gasp.

“Are you going to obey me?”

“Yes,” I blurt out without hesitation.

He inhales. His exhalation sounds as affected as I feel. “Does it make you hot, bunny? Horny?”

I promised to obey him. I feel that includes honesty. “It does,” I whisper.

“Do you want my hand between your legs?”

Good god. “Yes.”

A warm palm slides up along the inside of my thigh, a barely there touch on my labia, on my clit. I jerk forward, suddenly afraid of the unknown. I’ve never, ever...

“Shhh,” he says. “Just the touch. Nothing more.”

I nod and swallow hard as I resume the position. His fingers, more demanding this time, gathering the flowing moisture, spreading it over my most private, sensitive area. I almost explode from the unbelievable sensation his caresses evoke. I wiggle my hips and push back on his hand. I want to feel him. *More.* More fingers. Touch me, I beg in my mind. *Please.*

“Do you remember the next ten slaps?” He keeps stroking. Up, down, drawing circles around my clit. He does it like I do it, and despite all that is new and scary, I feel the release coming closer with each moment.

“No, what?” I mewl.

He instantly removes his hand, and I sag in desperate frustration, the pending release escaping me. Then slap number eleven lands, making me straighten my legs and moan.

Number twelve.

“Why am I spanking your delicious butt?”

I try to think through the haze of desire and uproar. “Punish me,” I gasp as he keeps spanking me, making me impossibly hotter and needier.

“Good girl.” At ten, he pauses. “And the last ten?”

“T-to make me remember, but—”

“But?”

“I’m too— You make me—”

“Yes?”

“*Excited.* I can barely remember my own name.”

My tormentor chuckles. Then he gives me ten more rapid slaps, the last one hitting between my legs, making my nethers explode in pain.

I shoot forward and fall on his couch, my hands between my legs. “God!” My pussy and butt burn like floods of lava, and I rock back and forth, trying to take back control over my fragmented emotions.

“Now, how do you feel?” He picks up a throw blanket and wraps it around me, then lifts me with ease and cradles me in

his arms.

As he sits, I tentatively lay my head against his chest and snuggle in. He smells fresh, of soap scented with bergamot. His heart beats as rapidly as mine.

“Hot.” I whisper. “And cold. I feel everything.”

He kisses the top of my head, and I all but melt in his strong arms.

“I’m Summer Jones,” I say.

His smile is a vision that makes my heart lurch.

“I know.”

I hesitate, then I blurt out, “I’m a virgin.”

“I know that too.”

“You do? How?”

“I know everything, little one. Everything about you is innocence and inexperience. It’s beautiful. Do you know my name?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Stephan. Kirby.”

I peer up at him, and he pulls me tighter. I feel oddly warm and safe. “Stephan?” I taste the sound, letting it hiss over my tongue and lips. “Like Steven?”

“I’m of German descent. Stephan.”

“Oh. Have you visited?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet. I have relatives there, but I don’t expect... Never mind. Maybe one day. Who knows.”

What isn’t he saying? Why does he live alone? I see someone who has been deeply wounded, and it scares me,

because I'm pulled to wounded, pulled to nurturing. Most of the time, it's plants. On occasion, Mom. Sometimes, someone who's lived with us until they got back on their feet. I tend to give my every ounce of energy. It will be my demise one day unless I learn to conserve it.

"I've never been abroad." A pinch of envy nips at my chest.

"But you've traveled."

"I have but... you can't possibly know that." From state to state. My whole life. Mom isn't one to settle down. A year here, a year there. I've learnt a lot about geography and psychology, about surviving on nothing, about fixing broken cars, seeking temporary shelter from the cold and the rain, about finding the good people among a sea of broken and even dangerous. I've learned that I hate the damp heat in Florida as much as the bone-numbing cold in Colorado. I've learned that I love mangroves, the Mississippi delta, and redwood forests.

Yeah, I've traveled, but never for the pure fun of it.

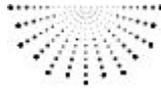
"I recognize a fellow vagabond, Summer."

My heart aches, for him as much as for myself. I do, too.

And that's part of this big great pull I feel. The dangerous, all-consuming turning-my-life-on-its-head pull. He's a true adventurer. I'm one, too, or so I consider my restless soul. I want to see, be, learn, experience. I want to hop on that bike of his, wrap my arms around his waist, lean my cheek against his back, and inhale the rich scent of leather.

And I'm dreaming up ridiculous things about a man I don't know.

CHAPTER FOUR



Stephan

She arrives the next day, like I commanded her. She's flustered, and filled with nervous energy, sweaty as summer progresses and the days get hotter. She's been out trekking for an eternity. I woke up an hour ago. I put her in the shower. She comes out with nothing but a towel, and the sight makes my balls ache.

Her third lesson is to not tease a sex-deprived monster.

When she leaves, I'm literally in pain from needing a release so bad, and by the look on her face, *her* worst pain isn't the one on her ass cheeks.

Her fourth lesson is to always eat a nutritious breakfast before she heads out. From that day forward, she always tells me what she ate.

Her fifth lesson is to dress more sensibly for long days in the forest.

“You don’t get to decide what I wear!” Her cheeks blossom with her indignation.

I move in on her and back her up against a wall. “You have promised to obey me, Miss Jones.”

“Like... yeh, but—”

I put my mouth to her ear and a palm loosely on her throat. “Is this your limit? The hill you want to die on? Because I can promise you will find more worthy battles.” I move my hand down her chest to cup her breast, then further down and push it between her legs. My little bunny whimpers and grinds against me.

The electricity between us, the pull, increases each day. When I touch her, caress her to the brink of release, she turns from an ethereal angel to a horny slut. Horny for me.

I’m used to experienced women. I’m used to taking what I want with no hesitation.

I have no hesitation with Summer, either, but this game is different. This is slow, torturous seduction until she begs me to take her, to break her in, to mark her in every way possible. I want her to never be able to compare any other man to her first lover.

Then I need to let her go when the summer ends. I can’t be her man. She deserves so much better.

And why the fuck does that make my insides churn?

“Is it?” I ask.

“Stephan, please...” Her voice is guttural, filled with need.

“Please what?”

She tries to pull up her long skirt. I slap away her hand, grab her wrists, then spin her around to face the wall.

“Ten more for disobedience.”

Her answer is a muffled incomprehensible noise that rises to a moan as I deliver on my promise.

Then I pull up her skirt, yank her back, bend her over, and put my hand where she wants it the most. She shudders and lets out a whimper. My bunny is soaked, her pussy swollen. She is so ripe for the taking.

But not yet.

I’ve come to love the seduction, the painful tease.

Her sixth lesson isn’t spanking.

I dig through the contents of her green backpack to find a sandwich, a thermos with lukewarm chocolate, and several worn paperbacks, all cheap romances and thrillers.

“Is this all you read?” I say as I put back her stuff.

She places her hands on her hips. “What about it?”

I narrow my eyes. Again, with the bratty answers. “It’s trash.”

“I read other books, too. They’re too heavy to bring.”

I drop the backpack. “Go sit on the couch.”

She doesn’t move, confusion written on her face. I give her a stern look, and she springs to action.

On my bookshelf are a few classics. I don't carry many items, moving around like I do. These, I've bought since moving here. I pick out *Lord of the Flies* and hand it to her.

“Read this today. Tomorrow, you will analyze it. That will be the lessons for today and tomorrow.”

Her disappointed look makes me burst out in a laugh. “Now, go.”

She scrambles to her feet, glares at me, grabs the book, snatches up her backpack, and storms out the door without a word.

I let her go early, but I have things to do today. Things I've never done for another human being.

I've never heard the words ‘I love you’ aimed at me. The closest thing I ever got was when little Savannah Wilder threw her arms around me, sighed, and told me I was the best.

When I lost her, I lost myself. I was in the dark for a long time—the kind of dark few return from. I was always predestined to be a fuck-up, and I lived the myth until nine months ago.

Summer caught my eye. At first, it was her wide smile, showing too much teeth, a little gummy, and the dimples. The dimples. It felt like someone whacked me at the back of my knees as the memories from twelve years ago rushed back. I almost folded.

That was when I knew I had to stick around. I wanted to know the color of her eyes—hazel, what her voice sounded like—light and with a sexy rasp on occasion, an undefined accent, her name, everything.

I was shocked to learn she was in high school, and equally pleased when I realized she was a year older than the yahoos

in her class.

Summer Jones isn't Savannah Wilder. But also, more importantly, Savannah Wilder isn't Summer Jones. The more I followed her around, the more I saw the differences, and now I don't even know what made me think they were so alike.

It's as if Savannah, on her cloud in Heaven, had had it with my moping and threw Summer in my path, casting a spell so I'd stop and *look*.

Well, I did. And now I can't have enough.

Summer

The summer gets hotter, and the moist air in the dense, intense forest feels like breathing under water.

I've never been outside this much in my life before. I'm trekking. A whole lot. It's my only outlet for all this frustration. I walk, and I walk, and I walk. I walk deeper into the woods than I think anyone around here has ever been.

And I read.

He has me reading one book after another. Some bore me to death, but I don't dare to skim them since he has me retelling them while he lazily strokes every little patch of my skin, my every crevice and ridge.

I'm lying on his couch, a book in my hand, a hand that can't stop shaking because he fiddles between my legs, so, so close to pushing his fingers inside me, but still he never does, and it's a slow, torturous path to my early demise.

He's a *man*, and what a man he is. *How* does he restrain himself with me? He's nothing like I thought he would be.

A horrible thought strikes me, and my heart sinks from the gutting disappointment. He's getting his somewhere else. Of course, he is. He's just playing me and never intends to progress past this feverish, unbearable state.

I throw the book at him, making him jerk hard and stop his caresses. My pussy *weeps* with need for more, and screw it, I'm gonna get it. He *is* a man after all, and men have urges.

"What was that for? Keep reading." He picks the book up from the floor and holds it up for me to take it back.

"Shut up." I pull up my knees, moving away from him, then get to my feet. I hold his gaze as I grab the hem of my T-shirt—my more 'sensible' garment for long days in the woods—and yank it up and over my head.

I don't wear a bra.

His eyes widen, and he sits still as a statue. Only his chest rises and falls. I pull down my skirt—a skirt I put on against his orders, but pants are *so* restricting I just can't with them—and let it fall to the floor. Without hesitation I then allow the last little piece of fabric to fall, too. I toss my braids to one side and stand straight and proud.

He wants me. I know it. No matter if he goes elsewhere, he wants *me*, and oh, how I want him.

"Take me," I say. "Take me, or I'm not coming here again. I won't play your stupid games no more."

I twitch and back a step as he darts to his feet and moves in on me. His hands are clenched into fists, his eyes roam my body, and when he towers over me, a guttural hum in his chest, I don't feel so cocky anymore. I *see* him. I see the beast in

him, the one he's protected me from. I've awakened it, and it can't be put down now. I poked it, and now it's ride or die.

Possibly both.

"You don't know what you're asking," he growls. He looks positively feral.

"I'm not going anywhere." I shake with fearful apprehension, but I *am* doing this.

"Get on the table, bunny." He nods at the sofa table next to us. "Sit on the edge, spread your legs for me. Let's see how ready you really are."

His voice is deeper, huskier, and the damp heat between my legs increases tenfold.

I move over and sit, slowly, slowly spreading my legs wide, displaying my pussy, my every virginal crevice for him to see. I inhale, taking in his unabashedly hungry eyes, let my gaze travel to his sizable bulge, always hidden in jeans, then toss my head back and jut out my chest. My braids fall over my shoulders, the weight of them a whispering caress, sensual, primitive. My nipples tighten and oh, how they tingle.

I close my eyes when I feel his hands on my thighs. He spreads them wider, and then something soft and hot touches my already over-sensitized clit. I gasp, then whimper as his tongue turns into a soft-hard spear and he begins to devour me.

When he adds a finger that he slowly pushes inside me, his first intrusion ever, I can't hold it together anymore. My nethers quiver, on the verge of an eruption of cosmic proportions.

"I'm gonna come," I moan.

He's never let me. Not in all this time. I'll take the punishment because the wave has already been set in motion.

"Come for me, bunny," he says. As if it needed to be said.

I explode. I scream. I thrash on his tongue as I cry out his name and god. I might be cursing, too. I lose it completely.

Then he pushes another finger inside me, and there's no resistance. I'm wide open, and I'm so ready. Thrusting, he keeps eating me, and when he adds a third finger, I come again.

"Please," I weep. "Please, take me. I need to feel you, see you. I need you, Stephan. I need you in me."

He stands, takes a fistful of my hair, and pulls me to him, his other hand still pumping my tight channel. "There's no turning back," he growls. "I'll make you mine, and you'll stay mine forever."

"Yes!" I cry. "I want you. I want everything. Take me. Take me away. I've never been more ready." I'll tell him anything he wants to hear. I need him so bad.

He removes his hand and pulls me by my hair until I stand before him, then he lets go, grabs my hands, and places them on his belt.

"Undress me, bunny. Touch me. Show me how ready you are."

My hands shake when I pop open belt and buttons, when, to my surprise, I uncover a dark bush of hair and his thick, hard cock. No underwear. It's indecent... vulgar, and it fits his persona perfectly.

I swallow hard and glance between it and his face.

"Put your hand on me."

Exhaling shakily, I finger the hot silky skin. His pants still trap him partially but he yanks them down and his erection springs free—the source of all this mystery that is sex.

“Wrap your hand around the base and move up and down.” His voice, guttural, makes me dare, because he sounds like he needs me as badly as I need him.

I touch again, curl my fingers to circle him, then stroke. He emits a beastly growl, then grabs my hair again and puts his other hand between my legs, pushing inside.

“I’m taking you. All of you. Here.”

He thrusts his fingers inside me, more than being. He widens me for him. It stings, but it’s good, too.

“First time.” He grunts. “But not last. Enough!”

Effortlessly, he lifts me, one hand still in me, the other around my waist. A few steps through the little room, into the bedroom, and I’m thrown on my back on the bed, him following suit. He catches a nipple between his teeth, making me yelp, then bites and licks a path along my throat. He buries a hand in my hair, then I feel the too-thick head of his cock at my entrance. I panic then. It’s too thick. Too, too thick. He begins to push, holding my gaze.

I open my mouth to beg him to take it slowly. He knows already.

“I am,” he says. “Too long. You don’t even know how fucking much I’m holding back.” His arms, caging me, tremble.

“Then don’t,” I whisper. “Don’t hold back.”

His eyes glint with danger. Danger and death. With the ruthlessness I have sensed so many times, then he breaks me

as he thrusts the rest of the way.

I scream. He puts a hand on my mouth. I thought I was ready. I wasn't.

He doesn't move. "Breathe, Summer. Breathe."

I inhale with effort. Exhale. Then again. He bends to nip at my breasts, one first, then the other. I forget that brief, mad pain, and then he moves again.

Faster.

Faster.

Harder.

He's not a gentle man. He is what he is. I knew it, but I didn't understand the full extent of it.

Harder. He holds me down. The pain slowly makes way for something else. A rhythmic throbbing, a deep purr that builds. I wrap my legs around his waist and meet his thrusts, match them.

"Fuck, Summer." His pace increases. He tenses, then he pulls out and spills floods of hot seed all over my stomach and belly before he falls on top of me and catches my mouth with his in our first kiss.

He battles my tongue with his, sucks on my lips, devours my mouth. Tears stream down my cheeks. I sob. I'm so overwhelmed with emotion. It was... insane. Painful and good at the same time.

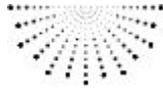
Pushing away, releasing me, he licks at my tears, then moves down between my legs. His tongue on my tender flesh, a finger or two in my aching channel, he eats me as if I'm the first meal of a starving caveman.

It doesn't take long before I come apart again. This time in raw, unabashed pleasure.

I scream uncontrollably. I think I scream his name.

I want him to be mine forever. I want to keep and be kept. I want this simple life. I will never need anything else.

CHAPTER FIVE



Stephan

The more time I spend with her, the less I'm able to let go. The summer is drawing to an end. The days get shorter and cooler, and I'm nowhere near leaving.

She shows me her forest. I take her on rides.

We sit in comfortable silence and read.

And we fuck like animals.

When we're not together, I stalk my bunny. I can't follow her in the woods. She moves in silence, delicate as a shy deer. I'm as gentle as a grizzly. She would notice me in an instant.

In town however, I move like one with the shadows.

Shaded is what I am now, looking down at a particularly grisly and dank little backyard, the vision representing everything I'm running from. I've been running my whole life.

Running and lately, thinking about what got me here.

I have one answer.

Parents.

I never had any. The woman who gave birth to the screaming, frightened infant that was me, lived on Valium, Xanax, you name it. I was born with substances coursing through my bloodstream. They fucked me up for life. I have never been able to settle down, always looking for the next kick, and the next. I've used and abused, but found it limiting rather than freeing, so eventually I got rid of the dependence and the money drain. Now it's me, my bike, the road, and no ties. It's been me. Now I'm not so sure it's the only thing I need anymore.

Mother was there, but never quite there.

I can't blame her. I barely remember her.

The man who donated his sperm, whose hands so often found the belt and beat the living daylight out of me, pummeled her to death when I was five.

He still lives, as far as I know. Put away for life. I've never visited, never answered any of his letters, not even when they got pathetic and pleading for forgiveness.

I have none to give.

Wrangled through the foster system, I learned one thing. I like to be in control. Absolute control. Being dependent is lethal.

I had more brain than I ever let anyone know. School was a breeze. I had a bunch of friends and life was almost good for a little while.

Until I got Savannah Wilder shot.

Murdered by my last foster dad. The circle closed. I'm doomed to bring death and misery.

Parents.

At the moment, one parent in particular.

I take in the sight of the scrawny forty-year-old woman, a scarf wrapped around a mess of hay-blonde hair, a wide peasant blouse, and a long purple skirt. She has a bucket by her feet and hangs white laundry in the backyard of the apartment building where they live. A rental. I could see that as living free, able to hit the road any time, which has been their life. But it's limiting, too, and I've begun to feel it. If that woman down there had any sense, she'd have given Summer a stable upbringing and not let her roam and immerse in the wayward existence she has now. The slight breeze brings with it fragmented tunes from something she's singing.

She's a loser nobody, and she'll hold my precious Summer back.

Summer, like little Savannah, is a delight to talk to. Eager to know about the world, interested, going places.

If life lets her.

I make a promise then and there to take Summer Jones with me, out of this dump. I'll steal her away, if needed. She doesn't see the situation as clearly. She will be suffocated if she stays with the mother. I can't allow that to happen.

Summer will blossom under my care. I'll give her everything I lacked. Safety. Education. Money. A nice home. Adventures to last us a lifetime.

I turn and make my way off the roof. After kicking up the stand, I turn on the engine. My bike roars to life between my legs. Riding it is almost as good as sex. Almost.

I think of my little flower. My virginal girl. Former. Sex with her is like nothing I've felt before.

It's just... more. More, and fucking amazing. She's so easy to please, and so eager to learn, like with everything she faces.

I'll cherish her, I'll take her, I'll save her.

If I ever believed in Heaven, she is it.

Summer

We dozed off after an hour outside. I've been awake a while. He just woke. Our inner clocks are... different.

I'm hot and happy, snuggling in the space between his strong arm and his chest. He smells woodsy, a little bit of smoke from a fire, cedarwood, and bergamot. He smells like *him*.

"You gotta leave your mom out of the equation, bunny."

I stretch lazily, sated, free, happy. "What do you mean?"

He shifts to his side and perches his head in his hand. "She's holding you back. You can't stay here. Not for her. I'm offering you the world. I'll give you everything I have, and more. You have so much potential, and I'm not gonna let you throw it away."

I sit up, my heart pounding a little harder. He sits, too.

"Stephan... what do you mean? I'll make do. I've never had much, and I'm not asking for anything?" I look at the man before me, taking in his naked glory, the tats that cover chest and arms. The comforter covers his legs, and I can't see his back, but I know by heart the huge tattoos in elaborate patterns of old Norse myths, of wolves—very fitting to his persona—of roses with thorns, skulls, and crosses. He's got homages to

every religion I know about. Eastern Asian, Native American, Roman, and Greek, Christian, Muslim, African and South American tribes.

“We’ll talk about it later.” His voice leaves no room for objection.

For the first time since we met, worry pinches me that his excitingly dominant persona reaches way past the bedroom. That he’ll try to control me in every aspect of my life. I’m not sure how that would ever work out. I’m an unfettered spirit. Free of any attempts at discipline from my only parent, I’ve always made up my own rules. Would he take it away? Would he take my choice? On the other hand, I know with my whole heart and soul that we belong, that he would enrich my life beyond anything I’d ever be able to experience on my own.

The conflict makes my brain hurt. I’m sure we can work something out. Pushing it out of my mind, I decide to think about something else. I stroke his arm, across a beautifully adorned cross that penetrates a cranium.

“Tell me about this.”

He doesn’t even look. “Religion is murder.”

“Christianity?”

“All of them.”

I shuffle to the side so I can see him from another angle, then touch the elephant with six arms on the back of his shoulder. His muscles ripple beneath his skin. The electricity between us sends a thrill trickling through my chest and belly to settle between my legs.

“Look closer,” he says, his voice huskier.

I do. The creature's face is twisted and the eyes glow like a devil's. "Evil, too?"

"Like me."

He moves fast like lightning. In the next moment, I squeal as I'm thrown on my belly on the bed, pinned beneath him.

He rips off my panties. "I told you to sleep naked with me. You will always sleep naked."

His voice is an animalistic growl, as if he's manifested the huge wolf that covers most of his back. The sound booms through me, making me instantly wet.

A large palm between my shoulder blades, his other hand descends on my butt.

I jerk from the sudden sting.

"Count for me, bunny."

"One," I gasp.

Smack. Hard.

"Two!"

At the next slap, I squeal again and gasp out a three. I'm soaked, desperate for his hand somewhere else, for his cock to push inside, for his punishing pace when he takes me.

"How many?" I whimper.

"Ten." He strikes again.

"Four!"

"And ten more for questioning me."

"*Five! God!*"

"No god here, little one."

“Six! *Please!*”

I already burn hot, and God or no God, but Stephan delivers, and it’s not only my butt that burns when I count the ten.

He stops then and strokes down my butt, in between my ass cheeks, fingers my labia and my aching clit. Wordlessly, I beg him for more, squirming, arching, spreading my legs for him.

He hears my silent prayer and slips a finger inside my tight channel. I moan shamelessly into the pillow. More. Please.

“Such a horny little bunny, so needy for me.”

He strokes in and out. I get wetter, impossibly hot, every patch of skin wanting his touch, his embrace, whether it be hard or tender.

I whimper in disappointment when he pulls out.

“Get up. Stand and give your ass to me. Forearms on the mattress. Say ‘please, Master, give me ten more.’”

I scramble up, chewing on my lip as I fight the instinct to try to run and hide instead. My butt cheeks sting badly already. I don’t know how I can take ten more.

I take up the position, my heart in my throat. Then I chicken out, and the primitive side of my brain takes over. I dart up and throw myself toward the door opening. The door stands ajar, and I shove it open and dash toward the bathroom. If I can lock myself inside, we can negotiate this. Ten more of his hard spansks... I...

He catches me right outside and pushes me up against the wall, face first, his hard thigh between my trembling legs, his forearm on the back of my neck, hard enough I won’t be able

to run again. The position is the same as when he caught me the first day. This will hurt.

“Bunnies run,” he whispers in my ear, “but they’re no match to wolves.”

I jerk as he smacks my butt again. “Count!” he growls. “Count, my bunny.” His hand is faster this time. Nine more rapid smacks. I count as I whimper, almost out of breath.

The last one delivered, he spins me around, lifts me, my back against the wall, his hands under my aching butt, and pushes inside in one rough thrust.

I cry out in surprise but accommodate fast. I rock up on every hard instroke, pinned between his chest and the wall.

“This is your final punishment for trying to escape me.” He grunts. “You will not come today.”

“No,” I moan. “Please.” I’m already getting close, the rubbing of the base of his cock against my clit combined with the stretching of my channel overbearing.

He catches my nipple between his lips and pulls it in, sucking hard. My eyes roll back, and I tense as my release inches nearer.

Stephan turns and pulls out, then throws me on the bed. With a few strokes of his hand his cock twitches and hot seed spurts out to cover my chest.

It’s his ultimate demonstration of his ownership. I can’t help myself. I put my hands between my legs to get myself off. He’s on me with a growl that shoots a bolt of fear through me.

“No,” he says.

So, I don’t. I can’t.

These games we play. They terrify me and they exhilarate me. I've never belonged more, never felt so adored, and accepted for *me*.

And still...

After, when we're dressed and sit with a meal of red meat with lots of black pepper, and a mix of black beans and corn fried in chili and butter, his earlier words ring ominously in my ears.

My braids hang in my face when I look at the plate, and I raise my gaze to study him from behind the cover.

Stephan Kirby is everything my mother should have warned me about, had she had an ounce of self-preservation. Instead, it's me who's been caring for her throughout most of my life. I never had a dad. At least not a biological one. I've had a ton of dads if you count all the other men in our lives. They were all bad-boy exciting. Tats, MC, weed, booze, rock n roll. Mom is a serial monogamist and a hopeless romantic. It was always her and me against the world. She likes to garden, and I've inherited my love for everything that grows from her. She's never really lived with a garden of her own, though, which breaks my heart. She's a fragile creative soul who can never keep a job, laughs a little too loudly, would give her last cent to a friend in need and then go hungry herself. We did that sometimes.

Seeing Stephan, falling for him so hard, I think the world would end if I don't see him again, and again, frightens me. Have I inherited my mom's flightiness? Will I, too, pass from one tall, hot, tattooed biker to the next?

My insides tell me it's this one or no one. I may be young, but I have an old soul, and I feel it down to my core.

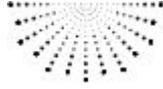
When you know, you know.

It's not the prettiest of pictures people see when they think of Gracie Jones, aka my mother, but they don't know her. She has given me everything, and it's my turn to take care of her.

Stephan will understand.

We'll talk, and I'll make him see things my way. He's the same kind of person in so many ways, as me and Mom. He'll grow to love her.

CHAPTER SIX



Stephan

A week has passed since our short but uncomfortable conversation in my bed. The one about me taking her away from this dump. We've both been slightly off, dancing around each other, not touching the topic again. But I haven't forgotten, and neither has she, it seems.

I caress a braid off her cheek and tuck it into the bun in her neck. "Something wrong?"

She shakes her head so emphatically the braid comes loose again.

She's lying. I should spank her the rest of the night for that, but I'm not in the mood for games of any kind. This whole thing has taken a more serious turn than I anticipated. I fully intended to play with her for a few weeks, then leave—mainly to protect her from the monster inside me, but something's been holding me back.

I feel shit I never felt before.

A lot of shit.

Worst thing is... it isn't shit at all. It's fucking awesome, and I don't know what to do with it.

The only thing I do know is I *am* taking her with me when I leave, and that's gonna be fucking soon because I've been itching to get back on the road for a while now.

But she's going with me. If she objects, it's because she doesn't know what's best for her. She'll come around when the whole big world lies before her, when she realizes we can go anywhere, be whoever we want to be.

Summer turns over on her back and pulls the comforter with her, bundling up like a burrito, looking her usual adorable self. "Tell me something about yourself."

I pull her to me, bury my nose in her hair, and inhale the lavender scent, reveling in the peace I feel when we're together. Peace I don't deserve.

Peace that can be destroyed with the flick of a finger.

With a click of a gun...

"Did I ever tell you what made me stay here?"

She shakes her head. "Nope."

"There was a girl."

"Mm-hmm."

"Another girl."

"Hey!"

She tries to get up, but I hold her tight. "No need to feel threatened, bunny. This was a long, long time ago. Another life."

Summer props herself up on her elbows and holds my gaze. Her eyes, innocent and naïve, and still somehow wiser

than her years, shine with curiosity. “Not threatened, just teasing you.”

I tut. Teasing earns her spanks. She’s piling them up on purpose. “Savannah Wilder was everything I wasn’t. She was smart, funny, and kind to everyone. And she liked *me*. Even *I* didn’t like me, but she did.”

“She was your girl.”

I shake my head. “Yes, but no. She was my friend. And I got her killed.”

Summer twitches. “Oh. How?”

I stroke her cheek and grit my teeth against the onslaught of both joy and despair at the same time. Joy for being here, with Summer. Joy for the memories of the good old days. Despair for everything else.

“A long string of bad decisions, my foster dad with a shotgun, a bunch of stupid kids out for his booze. And most stupid of all...” I gesture to myself.

She frowns, her expressive eyes as always filled with emotion.

“She was the most compassionate human being I’d ever met. I lost her. I was in the dark for a very long time. Then came you. Except *we’re* not only friends... are we?”

“Did you love her?”

She sounds nothing but honestly curious. I shrug. “I don’t know what love is. We were friends.”

Summer stiffens slightly. “So, what about all this made you stay here? Do you love *me*?”

My mind flips from the realization she asked *that*. How the fuck do I even answer? One moment stretches into two.

“Of course, I do, bunny.”

I hold her gaze, watching as the light in it dulls. An unexpected ache flares up. I’ve touched her soul, and she’s touched mine. I feel it down to my blackened core.

So why the fuck can’t I tell her I love her?

I try it in my head.

I love y—

Even thinking it seems impossible. I have no natural connection to the word. There is this deep black void in me, a self-destructive vein. It ruins everything I touch. Even love.

Especially love.

“She led me to *you*,” I say. “It all took me to the moment I saw you. I’m taking you *with* me. I’ve never wanted to hang with anyone more than a few hours until you. Isn’t that answer enough?”

Pursing her lips, she then shuffles free from the comforter. “I need to pee.”

I study her heart-shaped naked ass until she disappears. The unease won’t let me go, and I’m not even sure why it’s there to begin with.

I dart out of bed and go to pour myself a glass of whisky, then pace back and forth until Summer reappears. I want to fix it, but I don’t know what’s fucking broken, and I don’t know why I allow her to make me feel shit like this.

She all but twists her hands as she sits back on the bed. I sit, too, tilt my head back and drain the glass. She looks

worried, afraid even, and I have a feeling it's got something to do with yours truly. I get that a lot from people. A tiny part of me had hoped I'd never see it in her eyes.

Now I do.

I wait. She needs to get whatever it is off her chest, and I'm in no hurry because whatever waits for me on the other side of this conversation might not be something I care to discover.

"A-about my mom."

"What did I tell you about stuttering?"

Her mouth falls open, and she widens her eyes, then she purses her lips, anger instead of concern flitting through her beautiful blues. "About Mom."

"Yes?"

"I'm not leaving her."

Yeah... fuck that. She is.

"You're not gonna live at home for the rest of your life."

"Of course not. I... I just need to make sure she's in a good place before I'm off. Physically and mentally."

"That's fucking bullshit, and it's not your responsibility. Gracie's a forty-year-old who refuses to grow up. She's made a victim out of you, forced you to live a life you were never made for. She made *you* the adult. That's abuse."

"You don't know anything!"

I stand, red-hot rage flooding me. "I know fucking everything. I know she's holding you back. Keeps you away from life. She's smothering you, Summer."

"What've you got against Mom?"

“It’s not your mom in particular. It’s parents.” I shrug.

She darts to her feet. “You don’t know her! You’ve never cared enough to get to know her! You’ve never even *met* her!”

I scoff. I’ve studied that woman more than Summer will ever know, and I’ve drawn my conclusions. “I don’t do domestics. Not my thing.”

“Not even for me?”

“For *you*, yeah, but not for her. She’s poisoned you. How can’t you see it?”

“You’re a piece of shit! You know that? I hate you!”

I put my hand on her arm. She slaps it away. “Don’t touch me!”

Snaking my hand around her waist I pull her to me and crush my mouth against hers as I let my other hand wander, caressing down to cup her breast, tweak her nipple until she gasps and buckles, then down to bunch up her skirt and put my hand between her legs.

My cock strains against my jeans. She pants, and her neck flushes as it always does when she’s turned on.

“Stephan,” she says weakly between sexy moans, “we need to talk.”

Absolutely not, I think as I drag her up from bed, hoist her up against the wall, undo the buttons of my jeans and push inside her in one hard thrust. I don’t want to talk. Talking will lead us straight back to the rabbit hole.

She squeals sweetly, then accommodates as I pump her pussy harder than ever before. Fisting her hair, I pull back her head and bite down on her throat, eliciting something between a cry and a moan from her parted lips.

My hand under her butt finds her tight hole between her ass cheeks. Untouched. For now. Not forever. I gather slick juices from her stretched channel then push a finger inside, pumping both her holes.

“Come for me, bunny.”

“I hate you,” she sobs, but she’s so horny it doesn’t take more than another breath before she comes apart, her pussy and ass spasming around me. She still gasps and quivers when I lift her off me and force her to her knees. Pushing my cock in her mouth I come in the next instant, spurting deep inside. Never broke her in there before.

Neither.

Maybe I shouldn’t have done that while riled up, but as with most in life, it’s too late now.

Come spills down on her sweater as I pull out. She stands, rejecting my hand, then wipes her mouth while her eyes blaze. Not with the same exhilaration I’m used to.

I push down the pitiful pinch in my chest. I hold out my hand again. “Come, bunny. I’ll help you clean up in the shower and then choose a set of new clothes. Back home, you’ll pack your stuff. It’s time to hit the road. I’ll pick you up tomorrow. Wait for me at noon by the corner down your street. Tell Gracie whatever you want, but you’re coming.”

For months, I’ve conditioned her to obey me. I don’t expect anything else now.

“No.”

My insides freeze in shock, then the chill is replaced by heat and anger. “No *what?*”

“I’m not going.” Her hands on her hips, her face flushed, my come on her sweater, she’s a vision of defeat and unexpected strength in one.

I’m on her in a flash, my hands on either side of her head, pushing her back up against the wall.

“The *fuck*? I am taking you with me. Not gonna let you out of my sight for the rest of our lives. *That’s* how much I feel. Since you asked. Pack. Your. Fucking. Stuff! This isn’t the time or place to—”

A deep, shaky sob, then she ducks under my arm and runs. She doesn’t stop to put on shoes or a jacket. The front door slams open, and then the house is suddenly dead quiet.

“What the fuck? *Summer!*” I roar.

I dart out of bed, drag up my jeans, make a brief stop to pull on my boots, and then I’m out.

I catch sight of her back, her purple sweater easy to distinguish in between the trees. She has already covered quite some distance on her quick, light feet. Setting off in her direction, I shout her name again. It echoes forever between the faraway mountains.

“*Bunny*, don’t run!”

I’m faster, but she’s more used to the terrain, and she disappears further and further. I stop when I lose sight of her but know that I can still find my own way back. She won’t get lost here, knowing this place like her own pocket, but I will.

Making my way back home, my steps heavier with each moment, I grab the bottle of whisky from before, some cheap Grant’s, sink down on the porch and wait.

She’ll run it out of her system. Then she’ll be back.

The bottle drained, the sun gone, I realize she won't. I stand. My eyes fall on her dark green backpack that lies behind me on the hallway floor, and the hurt, the fear of losing her, strikes me hard. It's as if I'm being gutted alive.

I can't leave her out there. It's cold. There are animals. She can stumble and hurt herself. She might know the woods, but without light she's in trouble. I grab two jackets—one for her and one for me—find a flashlight, stuff her shoes in her backpack that I hoist on my back, then I take off. I leave all the lights on in my house, hoping it will help guide us back.

The shadows are deeper in the dancing beam from the flashlight. There are sniffles and snarls, twigs that crack and leaves that rattle, right outside the periphery of the light. I shout her name as I delve deeper into the woods.

Nothing.

Nothing, nothing, and more nothing.

Finally, I'm forced to turn around. Back at the house, I hope against all hopes that she'll be there.

Nothing.

I throw the backpack and extra jacket into the hallway. They land haphazardly on the floor. Slamming the door shut, I then hop on my bike and drive all the way to town. Her mom's at home, the lights are on in both rooms. Climbing the fire escape on the building opposite theirs, I get a good look of their place. I wait for a long time. Not a lot happens. She eats, does the dishes, and watches TV. No Summer.

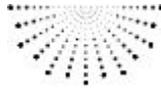
The concern turns to worry, turns into fear. I've felt this exactly once before: the ground disappearing beneath my feet. *She* died. Summer won't.

Watching her mom, I hear Summer's words on repeat. About caring for her mom. About me liking her if I gave her a chance. About not leaving until she's ready.

They love each other. It's a kind of love I don't know shit about. Instead, I lashed out, and I scared her away. Everything I feared would happen has happened, and whose fault is it?

Mine.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Summer

My heart pumps in pace with my legs. I jump over roots, dash through the foliage, dodging trees. I run from him, from myself, from the pain in my chest.

Mom's never held me back or tried to tell me what I can or can't do, but *he* does. He's not who I thought he was. All the wild, broken men who have passed through my life flick through my mind as fragmented memories. Mom's lovers. I thought Stephan was different. I *knew* he was different. I was wrong.

So, so wrong.

I gasp out a sob. Then the next. Soon my every intake of air is a cry of pain. When my legs give out, and I can't take another step, I curl up on the sunny side of a thick tree trunk. Not a lot of light reaches ground level, but the south-west side is slightly warmer. My feet sting, and when I study them, they're bloody from a million little cuts.

I hug myself and rest my cheek against the tree. Listening to the breeze, the leaves, and all the little pitter-patter of the forest animals, my eyelids get heavier, and my mind calmer.

I jerk awake. It's dark, and I'm numbingly cold. I didn't intend to spend the night in the forest, far away from civilization. That was stupid. That was really stupid. I should've just hopped on my bike and gone home.

No, because he would have caught you in an instant.

My heart stutters when I realize I'm not alone. Something warm, something *alive* rests against my back, and a rank stench surrounds me, a smell of wilderness, of animal. I don't dare to move, and I'm not even sure I breathe. I lie awake a long time, wondering if it'll eat me when it wakes up. It's not large enough to be a bear, maybe it's a bobcat, possibly a wolf, but less likely. In either case, it helps me keep the worst of the chill at bay.

When I wake again, I'm alone. There are a few gray hairs along my side, contrasting with the deep purple sweater. A wolf, then. They don't typically attack a grown person. Maybe it thought I was a pup? Maybe it felt how cold and lonely I was.

Am.

I shiver, and it's not only the cold.

I've been touched by an angel. Something watched over me tonight.

It's wondrous, but so is a flower growing out of a tiny seed, ethereal mist hovering in the air over a swamp. So is...

Love.

It's the things I can't touch that get to me, that make my head spin. I like simplicity. I need to be rooted. Who understands these things? Love. Death. Life. I think most people just say they do.

I pat the ground beneath me, then the tree.

“Thank you.” I say it to my tree. I say it to the wolf and to all living things.

Standing on stiff legs, I take in the gray surroundings. The sun isn't up yet but has already brightened the sky. The tree crowns are so massive that very little light filters through, but it gives me a sense of direction, and I take off. I walk for hours on an empty stomach. With my naked feet against the dewy moss, I can't seem to get warm no matter how fast I move. All in all, I'm miserable, and that's only the physical pain.

Knowing what I must do when I get home hurts more.

The town hasn't woken yet, and when I imagine what I look like, jogging barefoot on the sidewalk, I'm grateful for that. I am filled with emotion; hurt and exhilaration; longing for him; and an absolute fear that he'll take me away despite my protests.

“Mom!” I shout, my voice so hoarse it's no more than a rasp. I run through the apartment and find her sleeping. Her mouth is open, and she snores lightly. I dart to her side and shake her until she mumbles that she's awake.

“Sit up. Open your eyes.”

She groans but does what I say. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“We have to go. We *really* have to go, Mom. Pack your things, the necessities. I want us to be out of here within an hour.”

Scanning me, taking in my appearance, she frowns and stands, pulling me into a hug. “What happened, baby? Where've you been?”

“I’ll explain later. Remember when we ran from Rocheport? This is that situation, but on steroids. We gotta hit the road again, Momma.”

Jim Hansen. One of mom’s suitors. He proposed. Mom will never tie herself to one man. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. We left.

She steps back and holds me at an arm’s length as her face becomes sympathetic. “Oh, sweetie. Let me get you a change of clothes, and make you breakfast while you take a shower.”

I itch to leave, but she’s right. “And pack, Mom.”

She nods. “I’ve wanted to move on for a while, anyway.”

Flooded by relief, I spin around to aim for the bathroom, then my eyes fall on the phone, our only phone. A landline. I’ve never had reason to call Stephan, but I still know his number by heart.

I long to hear his voice. I don’t want to call him and wake the beast. I’m afraid of his fury after what I did last night.

But it’s the decent thing to do, and at least one of us can be decent today.

I also need to buy us time.

He answers with an incoherent mumble after five signals.

“It’s me,” I whisper.

He’s silent. Then, “You’re alive.” His voice is flat.

“Yes.”

“Did you get home last night?”

“No.”

“Did you stay the whole fucking night in the forest?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have *any* idea how stupid that was? You could have died out there. I was gonna call the cops on you, arrange a search party. The whole hero effort. I don’t *do* hero shit. You’re fucking insane, Summer.”

“I’m sorry.” My voice sounds broken. Not like my own.

“I *am* glad to hear your voice.”

“I’m glad to hear yours, too... and Stephan. I’ve had time to think. I want to go. If you’ll still have me.”

He’s silent for a few beats, then he exhales loudly. “*Fuck* yes. Good girl. *My* good girl!”

My insides twist into a tight knot of pain. I’m not a good girl. I’m about to be a really shitty girl. To him. I’ll lie, and I’ll deceive. It breaks my heart to hurt him.

“Noon, then?” I ask.

“Noon, baby. Dress for a long bike ride. Shower, long and hot, eat, pack a bag, I’ll bring your Fjallraven, it’s enough.”

“Okay. Th-thanks.”

“And that’s ten slaps for stuttering, baby. You know it. You don’t need to be timid and shy. You’re a rockstar, and together we’ll conquer the world. I’ll be there at noon. And bunny... I’m glad you’re okay. Don’t *ever* pull a stunt like that on me again.”

“I won’t.”

I can say it because there won’t be a next time.

We say our goodbyes ‘for now’. He doesn’t know my goodbye is forever.

Despite everything, I ache. I'm leaving a friend, a lover, a deep sense of belonging. I'm leaving a promise of more, of what we could have become. Doubt sets in again. Why am I leaving? We *can* work this out. I'm sure.

But I'm not.

Because he's dangerous and controlling. Because he refuses to listen to what you want. Refuses to let you take things at your pace.

Because he can't say he loves you.

He doesn't love you, Summer.

If he'd been a little patient. If he'd bothered to come home with me, got to know *all* of me and my little family of two, then things would have been very different.

If he'd loved me.

He thinks he can just steal me away from everything. What am I supposed to be? His convenient mistress?

Even as I think it, I know there's more. I know he feels for me. At least he's possessive. I guess that's a feeling.

I twitch into action. Shower. Eat. Pack up. I'll miss my backpack, but I have to realize it's lost to me.

Supposedly, we have six hours. I want to be out of here in two. I don't trust that he won't come sooner and wrestle me away.

Stephan

At noon I roll up at the corner of her street, expecting her to stand there waiting.

She isn't.

I turn off the engine, but remain straddled, pull my fingers through my windblown hair, and lean my forearms on the handlebar. Two kids kick a ball between them on the other sidewalk. The day is sunny, and the air feels clean and easy to breathe. It was one hell of a night, but it's gonna be a good day.

I'll pamper her, make sure she's all right, then I'll teach her to *never* run again.

If she ever comes out. I frown and glance at my wristwatch. Ten past. I scan the façade and look at the two windows that belong to their apartment. No movement. Well, every window is closed against the frigid air, so that's not off in itself. It's just that... they seem so dead.

Having waited a few more minutes, I kick down the support, pocket the key, and get off the bike. I'm loath to get up there and confront the mom, but I stand by my decision. I'll have my woman on the back of my bike, her arms around my chest, and I'll have her now before I lose even more of my patience. She's like an untamed horse, I think as I stomp up the stairs to the second floor, like the wild animals she loves so much.

She's no bunny. She's a wolf, like me. Her clothing is a sheep's, but her soul isn't. She's strong-willed and independent.

I stop for a moment, struck by the realization. I'm trying to push her into a mold I've decided will fit her needs. The long night of true fear of losing her has cleared my head. She's kind of crazy, but so am I, and she's my kind of crazy. I *need* her with me. Now and forever. If what I feel isn't love, then nothing is.

I sprint up the last few steps and knock on their door.

It's silent. Ominously so.

I knock again. Harder. The noise echoes in the stairwell.

Nothing.

I raise my hand to slam my fist against the thin door, then a horrible thought strikes me, and I try the handle.

It's unlocked. The door swings open. I race inside, call her name, and look through the place. Nothing. There is furniture, but no personal belongings. Spinning around, I take the stairs in a few steps and dart along the street, around the far corner to a little parking lot.

Their rusty old Ford is gone.

She's gone.

I refuse to accept what I'm seeing. She wouldn't...

She would. She did.

I try to think about where they'd go, what her kind of places are. North? South? No larger cities. Not a chance.

I jog back up to their apartment again to look for any kind of clue, lead in my stomach, my insides a knot of conflicting emotions of longing, despair, and anger.

I'll spank that girl so hard when I have her to myself again.

If.

There's absolutely nothing to go on. I must face the fact that I fucked up. They probably have hours on me, and they could've headed anywhere. It's *them*, after all.

"Fuck!" I kick the kitchen table. Then again, and again.
"*Fuck!*"

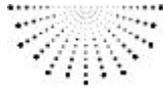
I know exactly three ways of solving a conflict: my fists, a fuck, or hit the road.

I don't intend to beat my bunny to a pulp if I ever even find her again. Fucking her didn't solve shit.

I slam the door closed, head down the stairs, turn on the engine, and then I'm off. Fuck this town. Fuck this life. I'll drink until I forget it ever existed.

I know from hard-earned experience the hole in my chest will stay forever, and my heart looks like it's been target practice on a fucking shooting ranch.

CHAPTER 8



Summer

Mom drives. I ride shotgun while watching the vast forest as we pass it. Mile after mile. It never seems to end. I'll miss it sorely. We've never stayed this long at one place. I might have always had a nomad soul, but this year has made me change my mind. I could have settled down here. After all this exploring, it feels as if I have every twig, every root, every leaf ingrained into my being.

It's not why I have to blink away tears, though. With every mile I put between Stephan and me, the pain grows. I could have stayed with him. We had something beautiful, something real. At least I thought so until the bubble burst.

A movement in the periphery of my vision catches my attention, and I turn my head. A large gray dog-like animal runs along the tree line. *A wolf*. My heart lurches. The memory of feeling a warm, breathing being tightly pressed against my back during the night is still vivid.

Our eyes meet, and his yellow gaze seems both kind and dangerous at the same time. Then he stops. I throw myself at the window to catch the last sight of him.

It's as if the redwood forest and all its creatures bid me farewell.

I see Stephan before me. He's the wolf. The wolf is him. He's predatory, dangerous, a force of nature. I'm soft where he is hard. I'm gentle where he is rough. I give, he takes. I have a tiny loving family where he was irreparably hurt by his.

I have so much love to give where he has none.

And still we were a beautiful match. Our comfortable silence. His genuine interest when I told him about the forest and all its life. His eagerness to teach me about the world, about countries and literature, music, and food. The serenity of simply being in his presence.

I choke down the grief and turn to Mom, covering her hand with mine.

She gives me a glance. "Are you all right, honey?"

Her kind voice breaks my heart, and the dam bursts. "No," I choke out. "I'm not."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yes." I want to ingrain the memories firmly into my soul. I want to tell her everything.

Almost.

"We met when I broke into his house. Well, technically it isn't a break-in when it's unlocked, right?"

"Right," she says. "Those are the rules."

I smile through the tears. She's so silly.

I tell her all I know about him. The sad, the grit, the lust for life and experiences. I tell her how my heart opened more

and more until I wanted nothing else than to follow him to the end of the world.

I tell her about the end.

“Oh, baby Summer, I can take care of myself.”

She’s so sweet, but that’s simply not true. She needs me in her life. Possibly forever, and that’s okay. She has my back, too. Emotionally more than practically perhaps.

“I know you can, Mom.”

Tiny white lies never hurt anyone.

We sleep at a seedy motel two towns down, then we keep driving. We don’t have a goal. We’ll find something and make do.

The second night, the motel is nice, even though it’s cheap. We eat and watch the news, then we sit in silence. Mom knits. I read one of Stephan’s books that he lent me. I couldn’t leave it behind.

We both nearly fly through the roof when a series of bangs thud on the door. My first instinct is to grab Mom and hide in the bathroom. Then I’m thinking someone who’s here with ill intent would hardly knock.

I open my mouth to ask who it is, but I never get that far.

“*Summer!*”

The booming voice, closer to a feral growl than something that comes from a man, slices through the silence. I stumble, then stop flat. My heart jolts in both instant fear and joy, making the eternally aching furnace in my chest flare up to new heights of pain.

I'd recognize that voice anywhere, anytime. Forty years from now, I'd still immediately know it's him.

Stephan

I burn asphalt. I drink, and I rage. The first night I sleep under a bridge, my head on her green backpack. The night air is frigid. I freeze, I feel filthy, and extremely uncomfortable. I've grown used to a bed, a roof over my head, and a warm, trusting woman in my arms. I've gone soft.

Thinking about little Summer with barely any clothes, sleeping the whole night in the deep dark woods because I was a *stupid fucking dick* makes me stay put and freeze. I deserve every goosebump, every bruise and cut.

Two days later and four towns down, I drive past a little motel. A glance along the parking lot, for no reason at all—or perhaps because I'm unconsciously searching for her in every street corner—has me skidding to a stop. The wheels screech, and the bike jerks like a wild horse.

A sun-bleached pale green 1964 Ford Galaxie, the corners of the doors rusty, a side mirror tilted, stands parked at the far end.

I'd recognize that car anywhere.

Revving the engine, I make a U-turn and burn into the lot. Seeing no one, I park outside reception, barge inside, and slam my hand on the bell.

A short girl, a little plump, chewing a gum and looking utterly bored, emerges from a backroom where a TV is blaring.

“My wife and daughter arrived a little while ago,” I say and put on my best smile, hoping I don’t look too much like a bum. “Gracie and Summer Jones.”

She looks dazzled, then she steps into her professional role in the next moment. “Ehhh, they asked for a room for two.”

“They thought I was coming tomorrow when we’ll hit the road again and wanted to save the money. We’re going to Colorado. Experience some snow. Got a new job over there.”

The girl doesn’t look persuaded. She puts her hand on the phone. “I’ll call them to make sure.”

I put my hands on hers, then I lean in and grab the book, flipping it around, quickly catching the room number.

14.

“Hey!”

She lifts the receiver. I pull it out of her hands so hard the cord tears from the phone.

“Dick! I’ll call the *cops!*” she screams.

I shrug and head out. I should have at least ten minutes. If that’s not enough, then nothing is.

I move along the façade until I spot the door, then I slam my palm against it.

Summer

“Stephan?” My voice is shaky.

Mom throws down her knitting project—a ginormous scarf in all colors she’s been working on since before last Christmas—stands and moves in between me and the door, then she opens it without hesitation. I step forward enough to catch her expression when she sees the man before us. I understand. I feel the same, seeing him again. As if he takes over the whole world with his presence.

“What do—” she begins.

He doesn’t let her finish. Pushing the door open all the way, he steps in, and cuts off our only escape route. He looks impossibly wild— he’s clearly slept rough. There’s my wolf again. A wolf with a dark green Fjallraven in his hand. The sight does me in. Our eyes meet, and all I want is to throw my arms around him. I need to feel him again. He looks back to my mom, but his attention is on me.

“With all respect, Gracie Jones, I’m here to talk to your daughter.”

“I know who you are, Stephan Kirby. I’m not leaving her alone with you.”

Stephan sticks his hand in his pocket, retrieves the keys to his bike, and tosses them on the bed. He then shrugs off his jacket and throws it the same way. “I’ve got ten minutes before the cops get here. Let me talk to Summer alone. I promise you’ll get her back, Mrs. Jones.”

I fetch his jacket and my own, but leave the keys on the bed, then I step forward. “It’s all right, Mom.”

She nods. “I trust *you*. Not him.”

“I deserve that,” he says to my surprise.

I kiss Mom on the cheek, toss the jacket to Stephan, and put my hand on his strong arm. “We better hurry, then.”

He grabs my waist and pulls me to him. Mom closes the door while eyeing us suspiciously. I fully understand, but I also know something has changed.

My heart is in my throat, aching, swelling. My whole body wants to unite with his and never let go. “What did you do? Cops?”

“I got a little rough when I got your room number.”

“Tell me you didn’t hurt them.”

“No, bunny, I didn’t hurt anyone. A phone took a hit, and I was probably a bit scary.”

“Nothing surprising, then.”

He laughs, pulls me around the corner to the back of the house, then pushes me up against the wall and puts his nose to my neck. “I missed you,” he murmurs.

“You need to get talking.” My voice is unsteady, my pussy already responding. I want to climb up in his arms, but he’s got like one thousand apologies to do first.

“I was an ass.”

“Yes, you were.”

“I love you, Summer Jones. I love you with all my heart, and all my soul, and you’ll never know how miserable I am that I made you hurt. It’ll never happen again. Of course, we’ll care for your mom. I won’t take you from what you love, who you love, no matter how much I still want to steal you away.”

I lack words to describe the turmoil in my chest. Flabbergasted, joy, a scream, want. I can't move.

"Y-you can't expect me to... I... I was afraid, and cold, and you hurt me!"

He rests his forehead against mine. "What have we said about stuttering?"

"Hey!"

He laughs and strokes my cheek. "I'll let this one slide. And bunny, I'll never give you reason to run again." He takes my hand and puts my palm over his heart. "Feel it."

I clutch his shirt, then smack his chest. "You were so stupid!"

"You sure made me see it."

He gets down on one knee before me, the vision making my heart stop before it starts tap dancing, robbing me of my breath. Holding up my backpack as if it's a ring, he inhales shakily.

"Marry me. Make me the happiest man on earth, even though I'll never deserve it, and I'll spend my life making you the happiest woman in existence."

I accept my Fjallraven. The tears that have fallen the whole night and the whole day return, dripping down my cheeks.

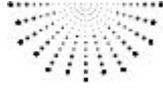
Stephan is still on his knee, and that's how the cops find him.

He doesn't put up a fight, and as they lead him away, I shout, "Yes. I have a ton of conditions, but yes."

Right before they disappear, I add, "I love you back!"

He turns his head, his features transforming as a wide smile spreads on his face.

EPILOGUE



Summer

Stephan gets away with a fine and paying for damage.

We all turn our vehicles around and head the other direction.

Home.

That's two days of driving and one night in a motel.

We get a separate room for Mom.

"Say it again," I say as he closes the door behind us.

Stephan drops our bags on the floor and moves in on me. I back up with a squeal. Up against the wall. He follows suit, his palms flat against the wall on either side of my head, his arms trapping me, his body flush against mine.

"I love you," he growls.

His bulge presses against my belly, sending heat trickling from everywhere he touches me, down to between my legs, to where I have longed to feel him again.

He steps away, and I sag in disappointment.

"I have something I need to do first. Come." He takes my hand and opens the door, then pulls me with him before he closes and locks it.

I have no idea what he's up to when he knocks on Mom's door.

It's only eight in the evening. She looks like she just woken. In all fairness, we've been on the road all day.

"Yes?" She hugs me, then Stephan. "Come inside."

"Mrs. Jones. I'd be honored to have your blessing to marry Summer."

Mom's jaw almost hits the floor, then she squeals and claps her hands together before her face goes serious. She pokes him in the chest.

"You better do right by Summer, or I'll come for you."

He smiles then, respect and appreciation written on his face. "I believe we're on the same page, Mrs. Jones. You have my word."

"Call me, Gracie," she says.

And right there, he's won her over.

It turns out Stephan has money. Shockingly much. Inheritance plus years and years of hard labor and never barely spending a dime.

He asks where I want to live. I don't hesitate.

"In the cabin."

"But we could find—"

"Did I stutter?"

His jaw drops, then he barks out a laugh. "God damnit, woman. No, you most definitely didn't."

Mom lives with us until late that winter when we find her a small house. With a garden, a greenhouse, a fireplace, and a porch with a swing. Everything she's always loved.

When she doesn't poke around planting things, she sits on the porch and knits. It's a new scarf. It's getting damn long, too.

I've never seen my mom so content before, and I have a feeling that the carpenter who's been helping her fix up things might have increased his range and moved on to some... plumbing work.

In a clearing by a cliff, with a view of a huge valley, we say our vows.

A few of Stephan's friends are present, as well as a few of Mom's and mine, all arriving from different parts of the country, and a priest who refuses to stand with his back to the drop.

And, funnily enough, the town carpenter.

My dress cost thirty bucks. It's a loosely fitted, light pink and knee-length nineteen twenties dress I found in a thrift store. Mom redid my braids. They are filled with pink and gold beads and glitter as they whip around my face in the early spring wind. I'm covered in goosebumps, but I'll be hot soon enough.

Stephan wears jeans and his black leather jacket. He asked if I wanted him to dress up, but I wanted him to be exactly the man I've come to know.

It takes a moment, then the warm jacket hangs around my shoulders instead.

Afterward, he takes me home. To our home. The place I've come to love.

"It's been too long since I had you all to myself," he murmurs, his lips against the sensitive skin on my neck, while he undoes one button after the other along my back. "I still haven't punished you properly for your stint last fall."

"No, you—" I squirm and try to get away.

Stephan grabs both my wrists and pushes my arms up, backing me against the wall. He tsks. "You're my wife now, and I expect my wife to behave." He spins me around and bends me forward, then pushes up the dress and pulls down my panties to bare my bottom. "I expect my wife to happily accept her punishment when she has misbehaved. When she hasn't been treating herself right. When she has stayed out for too long, gotten cold, hasn't eaten properly, hasn't read her daily dose, hasn't taken her vitamins."

He slaps my butt. Once. Then cups my pussy. "I expect my wife to please me, and to expect me to please her."

He smacks me again.

"I expect my wife to always call me out on my bullshit."

Smack.

His hand moves in between my legs again. I quiver with need, but he's far from done.

"I expect my wife to always expect the best from her husband, for him to always look to her needs before his own, to always better himself, learn from his mistakes, and fucking never let her or her loved ones down again."

“Gotcha,” I whisper. “I’ll let her know.”

Stephan laughs. “Good girl.”

I wiggle my butt. “Baby, how many have I earned?”

“I’m a high school dropout, I can’t count that fucking far. We’ll begin with ten, then take it from there.”

“You’re not a dropou—” I lose my breath as he delivers the first ten in rapid succession.

“Bunny.”

“Yes.”

“I love you, and I love your little gasps, but you gotta count for me, girl, or I’ll have to start over.” His palm connects with my bottom again.

“Eleven!” I squeal, then I cry out in surprise when I’m lifted, carried across the room, and thrown on the bed.

Stephan towers over me, God-like, wolf-like. *Mine*. He pulls his T-shirt over his head, displaying his chiseled upper body and all the intricate tattoos, then pulls off his jeans.

Watching him get naked, I squirm out of my dress and kick off the cowboy boots I had matched it with, then I beckon him to come closer.

He lets his gaze roam my body, then he’s on me in the next instant. “Twelve can wait. I can’t.”

Spreading my legs, he positions himself, holds for a moment until our eyes are locked, then he’s inside me in one thrust, mumbling words of love and eternity, of never letting go and of making up for the past.

I don’t need that many words.

“I love you, Stephan Kirby. I’m here now.”

It's us. It will always be us. Fate brought us here, or perhaps someone *was* looking out for us. We'll never know, but we'll treasure this gift forever. Together.

THE END

ABOUT NICOLINA MARTIN

NICOLINA MARTIN lives with her daughters, her kitties, and her dust bunnies, in a little house on the Swedish west coast. She escapes the long, dark winter nights by writing hot romance with morally gray heroes, strong heroines, and all the feels.

ALSO BY NICOLINA MARTIN

Want to read more? Of course you do. **Stealing Summer** is a complimentary bonus novella to the West Coast Doms series. I'm a big ol' tease, I know.

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Pure filth...

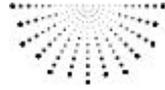
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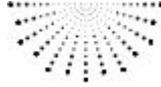


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CHAPTER ONE



Alaina Rowen closed and locked the front door with one hand while the other went to the waistband of her skirt. It had been a long day with little to show for it, other than her birthday and a three-day holiday weekend with absolutely no plans. She put the mail and her purse on the four-drawer antique dresser halfway down the wide hall that made up the center of her historical home.

The plain-brown boxed package sent a shiver of excitement through her as she released the hairband holding the end of her waist-length braid secure. She unbraided the length of caramel gold hair as she kicked off the sensible low-heeled black pumps she wore with nude knee-high stockings. She stripped off the hose next, tossing them down on top of the pumps as she wiggled her toes. How she hated stockings. She much preferred going without, but her father frowned on her wearing shoes without hose.

Looking in the mirror that hung over the hallway dresser she frowned at her reflection. “Alaina old girl, you have allowed yourself to be squeezed into a small, sad box. Unless you kick the walls down soon you will die an old maid working for your father in a job you hate. A father who didn’t even remember your birthday. He probably thinks you’re still

a virgin too. If he only knew that behind closed doors, you're a slut."

Less than a minute later, she tossed her calf-length skirt and jewel-neck silk blouse over the banister. She unhooked the ice blue corset she wore underneath and added it to the pile.

Wearing only the matching silk thong, she reached for the 10-foot ceiling and pushed upon her toes in a full body stretch. After counting to ten, she dropped back to her heels, then bent to brush her palms over her blood red toenails. Stretching her muscles and tendons did nothing to ease the hungering ache that ran from nipples to cunt. The ache she felt each day as she worked up insurances proposals, filled out forms, and dealt with clients as her father's right-hand woman in the family's insurance agency. Being prim, proper, and efficient was a façade, but a well-constructed one that no one ever looked past to the woman behind it.

After flipping through the mail, which consisted of a birthday card from her dentist and one from a cousin, the cable bill, and two postcards advertising pizza, she turned her attention to the package in a plain brown box.

Using her grandfather's letter opener, Alaina cut the paper tape to open the box. Licking her lips in anticipation, she sorted through the packing slip and strips of packing paper to pull out her purchase—a neon green, realistic-looking and feeling vibrator. Her eyes widened and her cunt dampened in preparation. With fingers that trembled with excitement, she opened the plastic bag and pulled out the imitation cock with its supplied batteries. After installing them, she twisted the base and smiled as it hummed to life.

Turning it off again and carrying it with her, Alaina padded to the kitchen. She pulled two bottles of beer from the

refrigerator and headed to the patio behind the house.

Tall thick bushes shielded her yard from the neighbors' view, so she didn't have to worry about putting clothes back on. At this time of the evening, no one would be boating on the Neuse River that ran behind her property. New Bern, North Carolina, was growing, but still maintained its Southern charm, including rolling up the sidewalks at sunset. Warm late spring air caressed her skin, causing her nipples to bead and her cunt to dampen further. She set one beer on the café table on the patio, then carried the vibrator and second beer with her.

“Happy birthday, Alaina.”

She opened the beer with a twist of her wrist. Walking to the edge of the patio, she lifted the beer, toasting the river and the darkening blue sky overhead.

“Thank you, God for blessing me with another year. My birthday wish is for a good man to replace this...” She held up the vibrator and waved it over her head.

Gray Woolphe adjusted the focus on the telescope until he was able to read the lips of the nearly naked woman across the river. “My birthday wish is for a good man to replace this.”

“Oooo, she got herself a new toy,” he said. Reaching down, he adjusted his cock to a more comfortable position.

Knowing what was to come, he opened the buttons of his khaki cargo shorts. They dropped onto the floor of the porch outside his bedroom, and he stepped out of them. His Marine green briefs and t-shirt advertising a Colorado ski resort

followed. He had come to look forward to this evening ritual since the first time he had witnessed it on his first day back home the week before.

That first evening he had been standing at the kitchen sink when he caught sight of what he thought was a naked woman across the river. He grabbed his mother's bird-watching binoculars and confirmed the woman was indeed naked, though they did little to clarify his view.

The next day, he had dug his telescope out, setting it up outside the guest bedroom he was using on the third floor. The telescope greatly improved his view. Only once had he wondered if he could be arrested for long distance peeping. That thought slid away when she orgasmed, and Gray focused on his own self-pleasure. That night he'd prolonged his ejaculation to her second orgasm before she disappeared back into her house.

She had been late getting home tonight. When she appeared on the patio in nothing but a tiny bit of pale blue covering her crotch, his cock stiffened, reminding him it had been too long since he had enjoyed the intimate attentions of a woman.

Settling into the folding canvas director's chair he had brought up from downstairs, Gray took a long drink from his beer before focusing his entire attention on the captivating view through the telescope's eyepiece.

After making her birthday wish, Alaina drank half of the beer in her hand. Then she set the bottle on the pedestal marking the top of the three wide steps that led down to the lawn.

Turning the vibrator to its lowest setting, she brushed it over one nipple, and then the other. She closed her eyes and let the vibrations shiver through her. She then traced a line down the center of her chest to the apex of her thighs. With her free hand, she pulled the thong to one side. Using two fingers to separate the outer lips covering her clit, she touched the vibrator to the straining knot of nerves.

She did not linger. It would not take much to reach her orgasm, but it was too soon for the first of what she hoped would be many, many birthday orgasms. One for every one of her thirty years would not be possible, but maybe a half-dozen orgasms would relax her enough to sleep without the sex dreams that had haunted her for weeks.

It would take the whole weekend to prepare herself for another year of living the dual existence of prim and proper Southern belle outside the house, and sex-starved slut behind closed doors.

She dragged the tip of the vibrator from clit to cunt and back again. On the third pass, she pushed just the head of the fake cock inside and held it there, closing her eyes as the thrumming set her nerves to shivering. Her need for an orgasm grew. Her body demanded completion, but she fought to hold it off. Pulling the imitation cock out, she slid it over her clit.

When she reached her cunt again, she slid the cock halfway in, eased it out until only the head remained in her, then shoved it all the way in. Taking a deep breath to prepare, she twisted the speed control base.

Shivers radiated from her center all the way out to her fingers and toes. Bringing her legs together to hold the vibrator in place, she threw her head back and soundlessly cried out to the full moon overhead as her orgasm rolled through her.

CHAPTER TWO



Across the river, Gray's hand flashed up and down the length of his hard, thick cock one last time as his balls clenched and his seed shot from his cock. He groaned as his body locked up for nearly a minute before he relaxed.

He returned his attention to the woman who was becoming the center of his daydreams and nightly midnight dreams. A Cherokee healer by training since he could walk, Gray saw a woman in pain who called to his spirit almost as loud as her knockout body called to him.

The wild streak he kept hidden from the world broke free from the iron control he had learned at the Naval Academy. Pulling on his shorts, he made a snap decision. No one should be alone on their birthday, especially not a sexy woman who appeared to hate clothes and seemed so alone and in pain.

In his bedroom, he grabbed a clean T-shirt from the dresser and shoved his feet into battered sneakers. At the hall door, he turned back for the brand-new box of condoms still in his suitcase.

Cal Roberts, his best friend and wingman, had given him the box of condoms as a "welcome back to the world" gift when they had returned from their latest six-month tour in the Middle East two weeks before.

Gray raced down the stairs but hesitated at the first-floor landing. Driving the bridges across the Neuse and Trent Rivers then weaving back through town would take too long. Turning to the kitchen, he grabbed the boat keys off the pegboard by the back door. Once outside, he ran to the dock where he slipped the dock lines on his parents' speedboat before starting the engine.

The engine had barely started when he pushed the throttle forward and pointed the boat's bow across the river. As he flew across the water, he pinpointed her yard and was pleased to see a dock extending into the river. Easing the throttle forward another notch, he tried to come up with a plausible, sane, rational explanation for what was about to happen.

As her hips pumped back and forth against the still thrumming vibrator, Alaina began to twist her nipples, building to a second orgasm nearly as strong as the first. Once she floated down from the second, she turned off the vibrator, but left it in place. After chugging the rest of her beer, she staggered to the chair beside the patio table. Sitting, she gasped silently as her bare ass and back touched the cold metal. Only then did she pull out the vibrator.

As she caught her breath, a boat motor broke the silence. Scanning what she could see of the river, Alaina tracked the sound to a speedboat heading across the water at a fast clip. Not just across the river but straight toward her.

Had someone seen her? Standing, Alaina staggered toward the house on legs that were wobbly from her sexercise. She tripped entering the back door, but with some fancy footwork, regained her balance before falling to the floor. She only had a

minute to pull on her t-shirt and skirt before heading back down the hall.

By the time she returned to the patio, the man had secured his boat to her dock. Stopping in the middle of the patio, she watched him approach with long, unhurried steps. She wondered what she could say to send him away.

Today was her birthday, and she had plans to spend the weekend in as few clothes as possible in hopes of taming the urges that were growing more demanding by the day. Dressed only in her skirt and t-shirt, she worked to shift mental gears to be the competent, efficient Alaina Rowen who was always, always in control.

She moved to the top of the three wide stairs that led to the yard. Not sure what to do with her hands, she crossed them over her chest, but that pushed her unbound breasts up and together. Dropping her arms to her sides, she clenched her fists as she studied the stranger in her yard.

He was tall, broad, and good looking with honey brown skin, though she could not tell if it was his natural coloring or not. His hair was cut in the high and tight style of the Marines, but she could not tell if the strands were black or dark brown. Sharp cheekbones, a prominent nose, and a strong jaw seemed sculpted out of stone.

Khaki shorts hung on his hips and ended at his knees. His black t-shirt advertised that he got his crabs from Dirty Dick's Crab House. As he returned her blatant inspection, his eyes glowed silver. This was the kind of man she dreamt about each evening, her dark sex-craving side reminded her.

He looked healthy and in shape, but in a stark, hungry way that made her wonder if he'd had a home-cooked meal recently. His predatory expression made her wonder at his

intentions as he continued toward her, not stopping until he reached the bottom of the steps.

“This is private property,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” he agreed with a smile that reminded her of a wolf on the hunt, as he closed the last few feet between them.

“Who are you?”

He stopped with only inches separating them. “I’m the answer to your birthday wish.”

He wrapped one arm around her waist, then cupped her jaw in the palm of his other hand. Lifting her face, his lips brushed over hers once before settling in for an extended stay.

Alaina lifted her hands, intending to push him away, but when the tip of his tongue traced across her lower lip, she inched her arms around his back instead. Her sensible side balked while her bad girl side jumped up and down screaming “Yippee!”

Giving over to her naughty side, Alaina parted her lips in invitation. She hugged him tighter as she shifted against the long, thick bulge pressing into her belly. She tasted beer on his tongue, and when she took a breath, she smelled laundry detergent, clean male, and a citrusy, woodsy cologne.

Her hands stroked their way down his back into the top of his shorts. They then moved lower and caressed the mounds of his ass. The hand cupping her jaw drifted down to palm her breast with a familiarity that made her pussy clench.

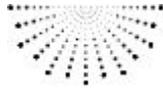
When he finally broke the kiss, they were both breathing hard. Alaina stared up at him in shock when she realized where her hands were. She swallowed, but her mind was a blank.

“Happy birthday.” He smiled down at her with eyes that glowed silver in the growing darkness.

“Oh my.” She gasped, pulling her hands free of his shorts.
“Oh my.”

The two sides of her personality warred, whispering conflicting advice on how to survive the next few minutes. Taking a step back, then another, she wasn't sure where she was going, but she needed to put enough distance between them so she could think. She needed to decide whether to slap him for kissing her or apologize for groping him.

CHAPTER THREE



Gray felt as stunned as the time in high school when he'd been hit by a line drive during the championship baseball game. All at once he understood what his grandfather had told him about love finding you when least expected. Too bad the woman looked at him with an expression of fear and horror mixed with fascination as she slowly backed away.

He matched her step for step.

“What’s your name?” Maybe attempting a normal conversation would help his brain climb out of his shorts.

“Alaina Rowen.”

“I’m Gray Woolphe. W, two Os, L, P, H, E. Some Indian agent’s idea of a joke a hundred and fifty years ago or so.” He smiled, hoping he looked friendly and not as horny as he felt.

“You’ve been watching me.” Her words weren’t a question, but a statement of fact.

Gray nodded. “I saw you wish yourself a happy birthday, then wish for a man to replace your toy. I thought I would make your wish come true. I’m not a masher or an ax murderer or anything like that. I’m a pilot for the Marines. I’ve been deployed overseas for the past six months, but I’ve been reassigned to Cherry Point starting next week.”

She nodded but took yet another step backward. When her calf connected with a chair seat, she lost her balance. She landed hard in the chair, her gaze still on his.

She looked stunned. She looked fearful. She looked as if she wanted to rip his clothes off and have him for dinner. Gray strode forward and settled into the other chair.

Alaina relaxed marginally as he told her about himself. Being a Marine meant he was healthy and employed.

“Would you like a beer?” All at once the manners her mother had drilled into her since Alaina could walk kicked in.

“A beer would be good.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

She was not surprised when Gray stood as she pushed up from her chair. She hurried into the house and retrieved another beer from the refrigerator. When she returned to the patio, he was right where she had left him, though he was staring at the table.

She followed the direction of his gaze. When she realized it was her neon green vibrator, she groaned with embarrassment. Stepping forward, she held out the beer bottle without a word.

“Thanks.”

Gray lifted his gaze from the still-glistening vibrator as he accepted the beer. He waited until she sat down before sitting

himself. Looking across the table, he took in her glowing pink cheeks, then studied the rest of her. Clothes covered her from neckline to bare feet, though erect nipples poked against her shirt. Blood-red polish colored her toenails while her fingernails were bare. “Why do you cover up such a knockout body? You should never wear clothes.”

She made a face before answering. “I work for my father, and I don’t think he would approve of me working naked.”

“You don’t like your job.”

Alaina raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Why do you think that?”

Gray drank his beer as he stared into her eyes. She was scared. Not of him, but of herself, of the wildness inside her, of letting go and unleashing the wild woman she hid behind long skirts and proper manners. “I can see it in your eyes.”

“No, I don’t like my job. But I can’t do what I really want to.”

“Why not?”

His question stopped her for a moment. Why not? Because to do what she really wanted took a faith in herself and her dreams that her father had erased from her with endless lectures throughout her life about being practical. Following her dreams also meant fighting with the historical society, and then renovating the second floor of the family’s hundred and fifty-year-old house.

She had inherited the family home from her grandmother five years before and had received a check every month from

her mother's estate. She had been saving that money to pay for the renovations. It wouldn't take much work to prepare her grandmother's suite. Then she could use that rent to help pay for the renovations to the rest of the house.

With a sigh, she admitted, "I guess I'm scared."

"What is it you want to do instead of working for your father?"

"I've thought about renovating this house, turning the upstairs into three two-room suites so I could rent them out and take care of people. I'd also like to sell some of the quilts I design and make."

"A bed and breakfast? That's a lot of work for one person, isn't it?"

"Not a bed and breakfast. I'm thinking more along the lines of the old-time boarding houses they showed in old movies. A place where people rent a suite long term and come together for meals. A place where we would care about one another. Like an extended family. I could even offer breakfast and dinner, family style. Problem is, I'm not sure the historical society would approve some of the changes I want to make since this place is on the historical registry."

"I see only one drawback to your idea."

"Oh?"

"If you're renting rooms to people, you won't be able to run around naked."

"Mmmm, yes, well, I don't normally run around naked. It's just that..." Alaina trailed off. She wasn't sure how to explain the hunger, the urges, the need for something more than what she had now.

“I know what you mean. It’s an itch you need to scratch?”

“Something like that.”

She could not tell what Gray was thinking as he studied her intently.

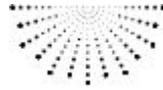
“I know you don’t know me, but I’d like to help. You’ll have to trust me. Do you think you could do that?”

Narrowing her eyes, she studied him for a moment. “As strange as it seems, I feel like I can trust you.”

“Good. Take off your clothes.”

Taking a deep breath at the request, she threw caution, good sense, and her father’s expectations, dictates, and standards out the window. Gray was sex on a stick hot and she was horny. With a grin, she said, “I will if you will.”

CHAPTER FOUR



“Same time, piece for piece?”

Alaina hesitated for only a moment before nodding. She pushed to her feet at the same time Gray stood up.

She released the button on her skirt as Gray pulled his t-shirt over his head. She stepped out of the skirt, then kicked it aside as his shirt hit the ground.

Seconds later, they were both naked.

“Wow,” she breathed.

It had been a long time since she had seen a naked man in the flesh. Especially one like Gray who was as impressive without clothes as he had been with them. His skin glowed with an even golden honey tone, though his hips and thighs were a few shades lighter than his face and arms. His cock proved even longer and thicker than her green imitation one.

“I know this is crazy, but I need you. Right here, right now,” Alaina said as her legs turned to rubber. She sank to her knees, which put Gray’s cock in tasting range. Before she could take it in, he stepped back out of reach.

She whined as she looked up at him. He shook his head with a naughty grin that had her pussy clench in response. “It’s your birthday. You come first.”

Alaina nodded, feeling that this man could be trusted. She had nothing to base her decision on except gut instinct. He helped her to her feet then over to the chair she had occupied earlier.

Gray knelt on the pile of clothes at her feet and smiled up at her. Setting a hand on each of her knees, he pushed them apart while sliding his palms up the inside of her thighs.

“Oooo.”

She squirmed as his fingers brushed over her sex. His touch reawakened the hunger that had ebbed only slightly during the past few minutes.

“Mmmm.” He breathed, leaning forward. His tongue replaced his fingers at the entrance to her pussy.

His lips were hot, his tongue rough against her flesh. She felt an orgasmic tidal wave preparing to roll over her. Gray seemed to sense it and pulled back. He pulled her from the chair and settled her on his lap with her thighs straddling him. “Still trust me?”

Alaina nodded. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and shimmied, so her nipples dragged across his chest, causing them both to catch their breath as electricity shot from breast to chest to groins.

“Hang on, sweetheart, I think we’re in for a helluva ride.” With that, Gray shifted her to trace the head of his cock down her centerline, from clit to her opening. Then he lowered her until she sheathed him in a tight, slick fit as if they had been made for one another.

“Oh my.” Alaina gasped.

“I agree.”

He kissed her as he slid his hands under her ass. He began to lift and lower her, setting a slow rocking rhythm.

The slow pace did not last long as their need and hunger rocketed out of control. Alaina moved faster, arching her torso, and throwing her head back as she rode her birthday stallion. Gray kept her from falling back as he rose to meet her every down stroke. Taking a nipple into his mouth, he sent them both closer to the cliff's edge until they fell over the fringe of the known world. Together. Their mingled cries of completion startled a pair of ducks who flew away, squawking their displeasure.

Alaina drifted for a few minutes. When the fog cleared, she felt Gray below her, around her, and deep inside her. For the first time in as long as she could remember, Alaina felt a soul-deep peace and contentment.

“How soon do you think you’ll have a suite available to rent?” Gray asked, once he could form words again.

“I need to clean out my grandmother’s suite and paint it, then it would be ready. The others will take months. Why?”

“I have an idea that would mean less work, less time, and more money, if you’re interested.”

“Really? What?”

“Rent me your grandmother’s suite, but only if it looks out onto the river.”

“It does. But I thought you had a house in Bridgeton.”

“I’m house-sitting for my mother and stepfather. They’re on a cruise, and I needed a place to stay until I find an

apartment of my own. As to doing renovations, you wouldn't have to do anything else to those other rooms, if you don't want to."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sure a lot of Marines would line up to rent those rooms as climate-controlled storage while they are deployed. All you'd really have to do is clear the rooms out and put locking knobs on the doors. You could charge almost as much for a single room as you could for the suite, but without the hassles of having people underfoot. You could make more money because you could rent each of the four bedrooms as individual storage units. That would also leave you more time for other pursuits." Gray brushed her hair back from her face. "And you could run around naked anytime you wanted."

Alaina stared at his chest as she turned over his suggestion. Rent out the upstairs bedrooms for storage. It would be a perfect solution. It also meant she wouldn't have to get the historical society's approval for anything.

"Are you sure you want to rent the suite? You haven't even seen it yet."

"Yes, I want the suite. I also want to do a makeover on your in-public wardrobe."

Alaina smiled. "You won't dress me in stripper clothes, will you?"

"No, though that could be an interesting sight."

"I'll do it but only if you'll dress like one too."

Gray frowned but knew he had found the woman he'd been looking for. The woman who would give him a run for his money. The only thing he had to figure out was how to erect some sort of screen along the water to keep river traffic

from seeing too much while they played naked games in the backyard.

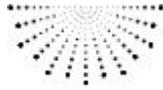
“Behind closed doors. The corps would not approve of me walking the streets naked.”

Alaina brushed a kiss on one cheek, then the other before tracing his lips with her tongue. “Thanks, Gray.”

“For what?”

“For making today a birthday I will never forget.”

CHAPTER FIVE



“Why do you hide your sexy body under all these frumpy clothes?”

They had just finished spectacular “It’s Saturday morning and we’re still alive” sex, and her defenses were down.

Turning only her head, she sighed. His silver eyes glowed with contentment in the early morning sunlight as he stared at her with an intense gaze. Even if she tried to deflect, she could tell he wouldn’t let her.

Taking a deep breath, Alaina decided to share the reality she’d lived in. “My clothes aren’t frumpy, they’re... they’re... okay, they are frumpy, but as a member of one of the oldest and most respected families in New Bern, I’m held to a higher standard.”

Without any real believable explanation, she lapsed into the speech she had received at least once a week since her sixth birthday party when she and Jimmy Ray Macklin had snuck away to make mud pies in the vacant lot next door.

Gray snorted as he lifted his upper body on his elbow to lean over her, so they were nose to nose. “That’s quite a load of shit you’re shoveling there, darlin’. Do you really believe it?”

“Excuse me?” Alaina tried to get offended but couldn’t since she didn’t believe it herself.

“Bullshit. A heaping pile. I think you dress that way because you’re scared.”

“Scared? Of what?”

She wanted to run from this man who was exposing her to painful truths, but she was too boneless to do anything more than lay here. She had been ignoring the truth since her eighteenth birthday. That was when her father had steamrolled her into training to be his assistant, which meant she worked, lived, and dressed as he dictated. At least in public. Behind closed doors she did what she wanted.

“I think you’re scared of your father’s disappointment. Of what might happen if you let loose the woman you’re hiding under all those clothes. I also know you’d really like to let loose the sexy, sassy person you keep hidden in this house. The one who runs around her back yard in scanty G-strings and plays with vibrating toys.”

Alaina couldn’t argue with him. He was right. Fear ruled her life. “But how do I know how far to let go?” she whispered.

Gray smiled down at her with a sexy, predatory smile that sent chills rippling through her. That smile reignited the hungry need he had satisfied less than ten minutes before. He laid a big, warm palm in the center of her belly, his fingers fanning up toward her chest.

To Alaina, the feel of his skin on hers was the ultimate aphrodisiac. It did not matter where he touched her. Intertwining their fingers or rubbing the pad of his thumb back and forth across her palm sent shivers through her. Her hips

began to shift in silent invitation as Gray leaned over and licked at the nipple closest to him. Alaina felt his cock twitch against her hip as he suckled, teased, and played with both breasts.

“Do you trust me?” His words were a deep growl as he spoke with her plump breast still in his mouth.

“Yes.”

“Will you let me help you?”

“Uh-huh.” She rapidly lost the ability for speech as an orgasm began building in her core.

Gray sat up, then leaned over her. “If I do something you don’t like, or that hurts too bad, I want you to say red as your safe word. You say red and everything stops, then we talk about what’s wrong. Understand?”

Alaina nodded. “I understand. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to give you your birthday spanking.”

Alaina blinked even as her pussy clenched. “But my birthday was yesterday.”

Gray shrugged and gave her a sly smile. “But I didn’t know you well enough to give it to you yesterday. So you’ll get it today. It will help focus and center you as well as help you grow into your new, bolder persona.”

Alaina thought about that for a moment before shrugging. “Okay, I guess.”

“Good girl,” Gray said as he shifted to sit on the side of the bed. “Come lay yourself across my lap and we’ll get this out of the way.”

She hesitated a moment, before pushing off the sheet and following his command. She had never had a boyfriend take control like this before and had to admit she liked it.

Stretching over his lap, she hoped she wasn't too heavy. But the hard, thick length pressing into her hip told her he didn't mind.

"I won't be too hard on you since this is supposed to be more fun than punishment," he stated as he rubbed a large, warm hand over the globes of her ass, warming up the skin.

"Thank you?"

"You're welcome," he said as his hand disappeared for a moment before slapping down on her left cheek. The slight pain barely registered before a matching slap landed on her right cheek and then the center of her ass.

"Relax, baby, and it won't hurt so much," he soothed as he continued to pepper her ass with slaps. Left, right, center.

Though she tried, it was nearly impossible to relax as he continued spanking, spreading the smacks from the top of her ass to the tops of her thighs. It only took a few before tears filled her eyes. And a few more before they spilled over, and she began to cry. Something about the pain in her ass cut the cord on all the emotions she had tucked away over the years.

Soon she was sobbing into the bed, no longer trying to count the strokes Gray was laying on her ass. It wasn't until a hand stroked up and down her spine that she realized her birthday spanking was over. The fact that she was still crying like a baby had her entire body burn with embarrassment. She wondered if he would mind if she ran to the bathroom and locked herself in.

“Shh, baby. Cry it out. Release all that tension, anger, and everything else. Everything is fine,” Gray assured her as he shifted them so they were once again lying on the bed, her head on his chest.

Unable to help herself, she did as he said, letting go of all the yucky feelings she had locked away. By the time her crying slowed and eventually stopped, she felt so light she thought she was floating.

“Feel better?” he asked once she was hiccupping and sniffing in the aftermath of the emotional storm her spanking had dragged her through.

“I think so,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

He kissed her forehead and reached for the box of tissues on the nightstand. After cleaning her up, he sat up and rolled off the bed. “Time to get up, shower, and dress.”

“What? Why?”

“We’re going shopping.”

“Shopping? For what?”

“Your new wardrobe,” he declared, leaning over the bed and kissing her again before heading out of the room. “You have twenty minutes.”

It was closer to thirty minutes later before Alaina descended the stairs. She wore a pink t-shirt and denim skirt that ended just above her ankles.

Gray, dressed once more, shook his head. “Don’t you own anything that shows your knees?”

Alaina looked down at herself. “All my skirts are like this. I don’t own any shorts.”

“Well, then it’s time for an alteration.” Gray looked around and found the scissors Alaina used to open the mail on the dresser.

When Alaina opened her mouth to protest, Gray touched a finger to her lips. “You agreed to do things my way today.”

He waited for her to nod before kneeling behind her. He ran one hand from her waistband to her ass, giving the sweet mounds a squeeze and a pat before continuing down her thigh. “Is this the back of your knee?” He poked her leg with two fingers.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Hold still.”

He cut into the skirt several inches above her knee.

She twisted and wiggled when the scissors brushed the back of her thigh. “What are you doing?”

“Stop wiggling and turn left.” He swatted her left cheek.

Alaina straightened and turned left as he commanded. Once he finished, Gray helped her step out of the circle of material on the floor. He smiled in approval before raising her hand over her head and slowly twirling her around. “What are you wearing under your shirt?”

Alaina had to think a moment and swallow before saying, “An off-white camisole and bra.”

He nodded. “Take off your t-shirt.”

“Take off my t-shirt?”

Gray nodded and crossed his arms, waiting patiently. “Take it off or I’ll cut it off and then you won’t be able to wear it again.”

She pulled the shirt over her head and handed it to him without a word.

“Much better.”

He nodded his approval and laid the scissors back on the dresser. The skirt now ended several inches above the top of her knees, showing off a pair of gorgeous legs. The camisole was sexy enough on its own, but he had a feeling she would balk at giving up her bra.

Lacing their fingers together, Gray led her out the back door and to the dock where his boat waited. After climbing into it, he easily lifted her onboard. In minutes, they were flying across the river towards the dock behind his mother’s house. After securing the lines, he helped her out and led the way into the house.

“Stay here, and I’ll be back in ten minutes,” he promised, brushing a kiss on her lips.

Before she could say a word, he was gone, climbing the stairs three at a time. Alaina looked around, amazed at the simplicity and beauty of the house. The great room encompassed the living room, dining room, and kitchen. The end wall’s focal point was a stone fireplace, flanked by bookshelves that displayed sculpture and pictures as well as an impressive collection of books. The pictures pulled at Alaina, and she found most were of Gray. As a young boy riding a horse, as an older teenager at what looked to be a rodeo. In a Marine

officer's dress uniform with a pretty blonde woman wearing a floor-length black gown. Before she could explore further, Gray thundered down the stairs, this time wearing a yellow polo shirt and black shorts.

"Still trust me?" he asked as he took her hand and guided her down the staircase to a door that led to the garage beneath the raised house.

"Yes," she answered softly.

He led her to a burgundy Jeep Wrangler with no doors or top. Alaina smiled when she saw it. She had always wanted a Jeep like this, but her father outlawed such a vehicle, stating they were too dangerous.

Before she could climb in, Gray stopped her with a gentle touch on her arm. "Give me your panties."

She swallowed hard but reached up under her skirt and pulled off her thong, then handed it over. She watched wide-eyed as Gray sniffed with an appreciative growl before tucking them in his pocket. He then covered the seat with a bright orange beach towel before lifting her and setting her down.

"Pull up the back of your skirt. You don't want to get it wet," he said with a sexy grin.

Once she settled, he ran a hand up her leg and under her skirt, stopping just inches from her already wet pussy. He hummed softly before tracing his hand back down her thigh. Pulling back, he adjusted his cock before rounding the Jeep and climbing in the driver's seat.

"Gray, I need my purse."

"Not today you don't. I've got your ID, in case you get carded. Put on your seatbelt."

Though Alaina wanted to argue, she bit her bottom lip instead. Gray leaned over and kissed her as he reached across her body for her seatbelt. “Stop thinking so hard. Relax, and let me spoil you.”

As he drove the winding roads toward the highway, Alaina stiffened as the breeze pushed up between her legs and under her skirt. As Gray turned the Jeep onto the highway, Alaina closed her legs and tried to tuck her skirt down around her thighs.

“No, darlin’. Don’t do that. Open your legs. Let the wind caress you.”

He laid a hand on her left thigh and pulled it toward him until her legs were wide apart and her skirt barely covered her sex. He kept his hand there, running it up and down the inside of her thigh. His pinkie brushed her open, wet nether lips, sending her arousal higher, but he moved away before she could peak.

“Gray, I’m...” Alaina broke off, unable to admit she was on the verge of orgasm.

“Horny?”

“God yes.”

Looking over at her with eyes that glowed silver, he smiled. “Touch yourself. Take yourself to paradise.”

Alaina paused, not sure if she could do as he requested. Yes, she had masturbated before. She’d used her fingers and the variety of imitation cocks she had collected. But she had always been alone before. No other man she had been involved with had ever made such a request. And not while in an open moving car, exposed to the world.

“I can’t,” she whispered. She was so close, and he denied her that touch to push her over the cliff.

“Why is your first response to any challenge, I can’t? You are a beautiful woman, and you can do anything you set your mind to. Now, repeat after me. I can.”

Alaina watched as the bulge between Gray’s legs grew. She squirmed and arched under his dark stare, feeling hot, horny, and exposed.

Her hands clenched in her lap as she said softly, “I can.”

“Again.”

“I can.” She spoke in a normal tone, but the confidence wasn’t behind the words.

“Louder.”

“I can.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“I can,” she screamed.

“Yes, you can. Now, do it.”

Looking at him, Alaina uncurled both hands. Lifting them to her chest, she took hold of her tits and massaged them through the silk camisole. Her hips shifted, fucking air until her right hand trailed down her body. She faltered for a moment when it reached the apex of her thighs. When Gray looked at her and nodded, she took a deep breath and slid a single finger between her lower lips.

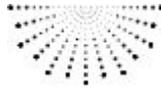
As soon as she circled the knot of skin and nerves, she felt her entire body tense. She pressed her finger on her clit, circling and flicking until every part of her clenched. She screamed as her body convulsed with pleasure.

It took a few minutes to recover enough to open her eyes and look up at Gray.

“See, I knew you could do it,” he praised with a wide grin.

“Mmmm,” she responded, collapsing against her seat and closing her eyes to recover.

CHAPTER SIX



“Alaina, you need to pull your skirt down,” was the next thing she heard. Opening her eyes, she looked around and found they were slowing down for a traffic light. Looking around, she was surprised they were stopped at a stoplight on the edge of Greenville.

Alaina tried to discreetly pull her skirt down, but it was difficult. Her movement caught the eye of a woman in the sedan next to them. She stared in wide-eyed amazement as Alaina pushed her butt up from the seat and slid the skirt down and under her ass. The light turned green, and Gray drove on as the woman rolled her window down.

He drove to the mall, parking in the first empty space they came to. After helping her out, he laced their fingers together and headed across the parking lot.

“Gray?”

“Yes, darlin’?”

“I need to visit the restroom and clean up.”

“Not yet. I like the idea that you’re shopping for sexy clothes while your body is still wet with your juices.” He held the door open for her, running his hand over her ass when she passed him.

“Gray! Behave!” She turned to scold him.

“Now where’s the fun in that?”

He pulled her close, lowered his head, and kissed her until the fight drained out of her. Then he released her, wrapped one arm around her shoulders, and guided her inside the building.

Three hours later, Alaina carried yet another armload of clothes toward yet another changing room. She had never enjoyed shopping before, but Gray made it fun. Especially when he slipped into the dressing room with her. He had returned her panties at the first store. With every clothing change, he caressed and fondled and drove her hunger for him higher and higher.

She tortured him right back, shimmying her full breasts in his face and wiggling her butt as she pulled on shirts or jeans. She also cupped her hand over his distended zipper at every opportunity. She knew by his strained expression as he slipped into the changing room with her that his restraint had reached its limit.

He waited until she’d tried on all the clothes, and they’d decided to keep two suits for work, and a flirty black summer dress that showed enough skin to make Gray’s eyes glow silver. As she reached for her denim skirt, he stopped her.

“Come here.”

She swaggered across the small space separating them. He helped her kneel between his splayed thighs. Bending forward, he kissed her like a man on the edge.

“I thought I could hold it together until we got home, but you are just so damn sexy. I need you.” He spoke softly against the side of her neck as his hands caressed her body.

When he tried to lift her into his lap, she leaned back, breaking his hold. With a smile, she reached for the waistband of his shorts. A flick of the button and a tug on the zipper and she slid her hands beneath shorts and boxers. When he raised his hips, she eased both to his ankles. At the same time, he stripped off his shirt and tossed it to the floor. She traced her way up the inside of his legs. The closer she got to his cock, the slower she moved, until she stopped with her fingers an inch from her goal.

“Oh baby, touch me,” he ordered in a whisper.

Alaina smiled as she looked up at him. “Touch yourself. Take yourself to paradise,” she whispered. She then kissed his balls and licked his cock from root to tip. Tempted to pull away, the taste of his musky, salty precum changed her mind. “Never mind. I’m too hungry for a taste.”

Parting her lips, she sucked him deep inside her warm, wet mouth. He then reached out to thread fingers through her hair. His other hand reached for her chest, playing with a taunt and needy nipple.

He did not attempt to stop her or guide her actions. He just held on, as if she grounded him. Alaina took him deeper and deeper, smiling when his cock twitched and jerked. Knowing he was allowing her to lead helped her admit that, though she had known him less than twenty-four hours, she loved him.

That realization made her want to please him even more. She worked her mouth up and down his shaft sucking and swallowing on his length, determined to drive him wild.

“Baby, let go. I’m going to come.” Gray dropped his hand from her hair to her shoulder. She refused to release him. Instead, she increased her suction and took him even deeper, her nose brushing his belly.

A moment later, just as she felt the first spurts of his juices enter her throat, she reached down and touched one finger to her clit. The orgasm that had been gathering between her legs rolled through her as Gray's seed pulsed down her throat.

Once his cock began to soften, she licked him clean before leaning back. "Feel better?"

He groaned as he pulled her onto his lap. "That was amazing. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She shook her head as she rubbed her silk-clad upper body against his bare chest.

"Are we finished shopping yet? I think you've bought me more clothes today than my entire wardrobe had before..."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. "I want to buy you some more pretty panties." He ran one hand down her body before the other cupped between her sticky thighs.

"Why?"

Before he could answer a sharp knock interrupted them. "Miss? Are you all right in there?"

Alaina looked at Gray with wide eyes before smiling. "Um, yes, I'm fine, thank you."

"You've been in there a long time." The voice sounded skeptical.

"Yes, we'll ... I'll be out in a few more minutes." Alaina stood and reached for her skirt as Gray redressed.

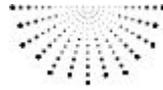
The salesclerk frowned when Gray followed Alaina from the changing room, but the sale kept her from scolding them about their nearly public sexcapades.

“Are you sure you don’t want to buy new panties?” Gray asked as they walked past the Victoria’s Secret shop on their way to the parking lot.

“Yes, I’m sure. I want to go home, take a bath, and spend the rest of the weekend naked with my favorite Marine.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Alaina woke Tuesday morning to warm, hard fingers gently massaging her breast. She moaned when the hand moved to the other one. Gray then began to lay a trail of kisses down her neck and across her shoulder. She angled her head to give him access as he kissed and licked his way back to her ear.

“How about we just stay here and enjoy each other for about a month?” Gray’s sleep-deepened voice sent shivers of renewed lust through her.

How could she still need him? They’d not been more than two rooms apart since Friday. They had spent more time in bed than out and should be exhausted or sated or dead. As her pussy dampened, she felt Gray’s shaft press into her ass.

“Mmmm, that would be wonderful, but I have to go to work today.” She opened her eyes and stared at the digital clock on the nightstand, “in an hour.” Her mind went blank as Gray’s hand eased down her body to slide between her thighs.

Rolling to her back, she spread her legs as she pulled him over her. Without hesitation, he slid deep into her pussy. Fireworks began as soon as she lifted her legs to wrap around his back.

“Oh God,” she moaned. “Faster. Harder. Please!” she begged, lifting her hips in counterpoint to his slow, easy

thrusting.

It only took a dozen strokes for her to peak. He slowed his pace further but continued moving until she began the climb again. This time, he stroked her clit as he increased his speed until they flew over the edge together, their cries harmonizing.

He rolled them so they lay facing one another as they came down from the clouds. “You are so beautiful. I am so glad I found you,” he whispered as he gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ve been looking for you for so long.”

Eyes closed, Alaina heard him, and her heart clenched, but she didn’t respond. No one ever called her beautiful and for just a moment she doubted him. His words triggered an earthquake in her psyche, causing her to question everything she knew about herself. Knowing she would cry if she stayed here, she eased away and rolled from the bed. “I have to get ready for work.”

She crossed the room, hurrying to the bathroom as the first tears fell.

“Alaina? Baby, what’s wrong?” Gray asked, following her into the bathroom.

“Nothing.” She climbed into the tub and turned on the water. She didn’t wait for it to heat up before flipping on the shower, then squeaked in surprise when ice-cold water drenched her.

Gray shocked her when he climbed into the tub with her. When she tried to keep her back to him, he forced her to turn around. He frowned when he saw her stricken expression. “Alaina, what’s happened? What did I say? Talk to me, baby.”

“I’m not beautiful. I’m not special. I’m not anything. I’m just a woman who wears frumpy clothes, and who doesn’t

have enough backbone to quit the job she hates. I'm just a giant, spineless chicken." With those admissions, the last of the strong façade Alaina wore for the world shattered.

Gray pulled her into his chest, forcing her to lean against him as she released the hurt. As she let go of all the emotion she had hidden for so long, he silently swore he would do anything in his power to make her happy. He had fallen in love with her and knew she was the woman he would spend the rest of his life with.

"Oh baby, don't cry. It's going to be all right, I promise. You ARE beautiful. You ARE special. I'm just sorry no one else has ever seen it. Actually, I'm not. I like the fact that you're mine. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not letting you go," he murmured, rubbing her back as he tried to console her.

It took a while before Alaina stopped crying, but finally, she calmed. He continued holding her as she recovered, her forehead resting against the center of his chest.

"Gray?"

"Yes, baby?"

She sighed and nestled even closer into his chest. "Nothing, just Gray."

"Okay."

She felt him kiss the top of her head before he slowly eased back. He reached for the soap and washcloth and gently

washed her before swiping at his own body. It wasn't a shower like they'd shared Saturday where he had ended up sitting on the bottom of the tub with her riding his cock. This was a time of caring.

She allowed him to bathe her, then dry her. She even allowed him to choose her clothes. A pink bustier and a lacy pink G-string under her new gray suit. The jacket showed off her curves and the skirt ended mid-thigh, showing off her well-formed legs.

When he saw her pull out black ballet slippers, he made a face. "Tonight, we'll go shopping for shoes. That sexy outfit needs heels."

With a smile Alaina reached into the back of the closet and pulled out a shoe box. "Like these?" Opening the top, she slipped on black pumps. The heel was tall enough to look sexy, but not so high that she wouldn't be comfortable wearing them all day.

"Oh, yeah, darlin'. Exactly like those." He stepped closer and kissed her lightly but stepped away before lust carried them away.

Twenty minutes later, after coffee and toast for breakfast, Alaina paused at the front door. "I'm scared, Gray. How can I go out there looking like this?"

Gray laid his hands on her shoulders and looked deep into her green eyes. "You are beautiful, sexy, strong, and smart. And I love you. Now, go out there and show the world."

Gray's declaration of love still echoed through her head when Alaina walked into the office, five minutes late. For someone who was always fifteen minutes early, this was a momentous occasion.

"You're late," her father called from his office.

"Sorry," she apologized as she went about opening her office and preparing for the day.

"Bring me my schedule for the week and Hep Anderson's file."

Alaina picked up the printout of the week her father demanded each Monday morning. She also picked up several letters that needed his signature and a pad to take notes on. Her father was old school and refused to depend on technology any more than absolutely necessary. He left that for her to learn and manage.

With everything piled together, she walked into his office. After sliding the client file he had requested and his copy of the week's schedule in front of him, she took her seat, carefully balancing the pad and letters on her knees while wondering if she could cross her legs without exposing anything.

"What the hell are you wearing?" Her father slammed down the phone and glared at her.

"A suit. I bought it this weekend."

"It's too short. Take it back. And put on a proper shirt. I can see your underwear," he ordered as he opened the file and began to flip through the papers inside.

"No." Gray's voice echoed through her thoughts, giving her the courage to do what she should have done years before.

“Excuse me?” He scowled at her.

“This is a perfectly acceptable suit, and I’m not going to take it back.”

Her father glared at her for another moment, then looked down at the paperwork before him. “Get out of my office, and don’t come back until you’re dressed appropriately.”

“Are you firing me?” She placed the paperwork she held on the corner of his desk before standing.

“If that’s what it takes. You are a member of...”

“Yes, I know, a member of one of the most respected families in New Bern and as such am held to a higher standard. Guess what, Dad. I don’t care. I’ve worked here because you demanded it. I dressed the way I did because I didn’t know how to fight you. I am a certified financial planner, and you still treat me like I’m nineteen years old and just walked in the door. I finally realized this weekend that no matter what I do it will never be good enough. I’m sorry, but I give up. Good-bye, Dad.”

Before he could respond, Alaina walked out of his office. Retrieving her purse and the few personal items he had allowed her to have in the office, she walked out.

Her heart pounded as she climbed into her car and drove away. She made it home with no recollection of the drive. After turning off the car, she began to shake. She’d done it. She’d quit her job. What would she do now?

“Oh my God,” she whispered as the car door opened.

“Alaina?” Gray knelt and touched her face. His fingers felt warm against her skin.

“Oh my God,” she repeated.

“What happened? You’ve only been gone thirty minutes. Are you alright?”

She blinked before turning her head to look at him. Into those silver eyes that could turn her on with a glance. “Gray Woolphe, I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.”

Gray reached in and unhooked her seatbelt before helping her from the car. Once she was on her feet, she looked at him and smiled.

“My father hated my new suit. He told me to change into my old clothes. I said no. He threatened to fire me.”

When she didn’t say anything further, Gray lifted one hand and brushed a kiss on her palm. “And?”

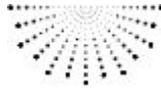
“I told him I liked my new suit, hated my job, and I quit. What am I going to do now?”

Gray smiled at the note of amazement in her voice. “Why don’t we go inside, you can take off your new suit, and we’ll talk about it? Together, we can think of something.”

Alaina laughed at his comically overdone leer as she turned toward the house. “That sounds like a very good idea. If nothing else, I can always get a job with one of the other agencies in town.”

“No way.” Gray opened the front door for her, then followed her inside, closing and locking the door behind them. “From now on, you’re only doing things you love.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



A month later, the Mozart ringtone pulled Alaina from sleep at the same moment her alarm beeped. She rolled over and turned off the alarm before picking up her cell phone.

Swiping the screen, she lifted it to her ear. “Good morning.”

“Are you naked?”

The dark sexy voice, more than the question, sent a shiver of lust through her. Her nipples beaded and juices pooled between her lower lips instantly.

“Not totally,” she whispered.

“Why not?”

“My boyfriend’s gone, and the bed is cold without him sleeping beside me.”

She grinned as he groaned. Gray had only been gone for three days, but these phone calls were becoming torture. Sex talk to start and end each day made her miss him even more. She couldn’t wait until Friday when he would return home.

“What are you wearing?”

“A black thong and the *Pirate Wench* tank top my super-hunky boyfriend bought me at the beach last weekend.”

Alaina slid her free hand across her chest to tweak her stone-hard nipples through the soft cotton fabric. It amazed her she could get so horny just by Gray talking to her.

“What are you wearing?” she asked, though she knew the answer.

“A smile and a hard-on that could pound holes in concrete.”

His dark, deep voice sent a shiver through her. She slid her hand down her body to rub a finger between her puffy lower lips.

“Sounds painful. Stroke it for me.”

“Strip first.”

Dropping the phone to the pillow, she pushed off the thong, then stripped off the top, tossing them both toward the hamper. Picking up the phone, she laid back before whispering, “I’m naked.”

“Are you wet?” Gray’s voice deepened even further.

Alaina hesitated before answering.

She had come a long way in her confidence since Gray had roared into her life on her thirtieth birthday, but without his silver eyes gazing at her, she found herself backsliding into the socially repressed woman she had been before. The woman who hid her sexuality beneath ankle-length skirts and Southern propriety.

“Touch yourself, sweetheart. Tell me how your pussy feels.” Gray’s voice softened, yet his words were a directive she could not, would not, fight.

Since that first day, her body had been his to control, body and soul. His dominant personality fit her submissive one

perfectly. In the weeks they had been together, he had helped her discover her inner sex goddess.

Running one hand down her body, Alaina traced her lower lips then slid two fingers into her wet, open entrance.

“Talk to me, baby. How does your pretty pussy feel?”

“Hot, wet. I wish you were here to fill me. I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too, baby. I’ll be home the day after tomorrow, and we’ll play naked games all weekend.”

“Can’t wait,” Alaina murmured.

“Is your birthday toy nearby?”

“Uh-huh.”

Alaina opened the nightstand and pulled out the neon green vibrator. It was this little sex toy that had brought them together in the first place. Her birthday present to herself would always hold a special place in her heart, but she had not used it since that first afternoon. She hadn’t needed to. Gray fulfilled all her sexual fantasies and pushed her boundaries in the most delicious ways.

“Slide it in, but don’t turn it on.”

She smiled as she thrust the imitation phallus deep into her body. “Mmmm, Gray...”

“Feel good?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay baby, do as I say. Move it in and out. In. Out. In. Out.”

“That feels so good, but I need to go faster.”

She began to speed up, lust dictating her pace. Gray's groan in her ear told her he was close as well. Her hand moved faster and faster until Alaina felt her orgasm gathering.

"I need, I'm going, oh God, Gray!" She could not wait for him.

Slamming the vibrator deep into her body once, twice, and then again, she screamed as completion rolled through her.

In his hotel room, Gray's hand tightened around his cock, traveling up and down the length once more. As Alaina cried out her completion in his ear, his cock erupted, covering his hand and belly with his seed. Taking several deep breaths, his heart hurt when Alaina's crying penetrated the haze that fogged his brain.

"Shhhh, baby. I'll be home as soon as I can," he murmured. "You are so sexy when you come. It makes me explode every time."

Her crying slowed and stopped as he continued to talk. He wished he could be there in person, to wrap himself around her, laying skin to skin and just breathe her in. But duty called and, as a United States Marine, he had to answer.

Since meeting Alaina, his focus, his vision for the future, had shifted. She had become so important to him in such a short period of time. He now understood how his grandparents had met and married within days, then remained together for the rest of their lives.

He wanted that with Alaina, but she still had so many walls around her that needed to be taken down or blasted

through. He was just the man for the job, and today, it was time to expand another one.

“What are your plans for today, sweetheart?”

“I’m going to work on the quilt for Mrs. Jennings. I finished cutting everything out yesterday, and today, I’ll start sewing. Why?”

“I left a present for you in the nightstand by the bed in my suite. I want you to put it in and wear it until I call tonight. Will you do that for me?” Gray’s cock began to harden at the thought of Alaina spending the day wearing his gift.

“Yes, I will.”

“And wear that pirate top and those red boy shorts with it.”

“Okay Gray.”

“I love you.”

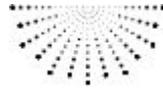
“Love you, too. Talk to you tonight?”

“You know it, baby. Oh, and Alaina?”

“Yes, Gray?”

“You are not allowed to come until we talk tonight.”

CHAPTER NINE



After hanging up, Alaina climbed out of bed and pulled the pirate wench shirt back on. She was tempted to stay in bed, but that would only frustrate her. Since coming into her life, Gray had become an integral part of her orgasms, and she didn't want to come without him with her, even if it was just listening on the other end of the phone.

Opening her underwear drawer, she found the bright red boy shorts he wanted her to wear. Spending the day wearing only one of Gray's t-shirts and her panties, or nothing at all, had become the norm in the past weeks.

Pulling on the boy shorts, she grinned and did a little happy dance. Working from home without being covered from neckline to ankles was so freeing.

Padding from her bedroom, she headed to the suite of rooms down the hall Gray insisted on renting even though he spent every night he wasn't working in her bed. Opening the drawer of the nightstand, she paused. It was empty, except for her present. She knew it was her present because it had a yellow ribbon tied around it.

"Oh, Gray," she whispered. "I don't know if I can do this without you."

Picking up the small purple butt plug, Alaina stared at it. Then she noticed a small tube of lube still in the drawer. Carrying them both, she headed back to her room. She grabbed her phone and called the last number in her log.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s a pretty purple.”

“Did you put it in already?”

Alaina remained silent, tears filling her eyes. “I’m afraid. Can’t we wait and do this when you come home?”

“Oh, sweetheart, don’t be afraid. You can do this. I want you to put it in and wear it today. For me. Remember, you said you would do anything I asked so we can expand your horizons and push your boundaries.”

“Yes, I remember.” Alaina picked up the plug. It seemed to grow as she held it.

“Now, what do you say?”

“I can do this.”

“What?”

“I CAN do this.”

“That’s my girl. Now, talk to me. Tell me what you’re doing. Tell me how it feels.” Gray’s voice deepened, growing harsh.

“I’m holding the plug. It seems a lot bigger than it did a minute ago. I’m not sure it will fit.” Alaina opened the lube and spread some over the tip of the plug.

“It was the smallest one I could find. When I get home, you’ll wear a bigger one and a bigger one after that. It won’t

be long before I'll be able to slide my hard cock into your sweet ass and take us both to heaven.”

Alaina began breathing high in her chest as she spread lube down over the sides of the plug. She'd read articles about how to use a butt plug, and there was always an emphasis on using plenty of lubricant.

“I've got it lubed up, Gray.”

“Take off your panties, then kneel on the bed. Spread that sexy ass and smear some of that lube around your sweet back hole.”

Hitting the loudspeaker on the cell, she laid it on the bed. After pushing off the boy shorts, she knelt on the mattress and spread her legs wide. Bending forward, she used one hand to part the cheeks of her ass before smearing the lube on her fingers around her tiny hole. Then she positioned the plug.

“Alaina? Sweetheart? Talk to me.”

“I'm kneeling on the bed. I'm pushing it in. Oh. Oh God, it's not going to fit.”

“Keep pushing, baby. Push it all the way in.” Gray's voice deepened.

This was the voice that dominated her. The voice that pushed her to try things that were beyond her comfort zone, her realm of experience. The voice that sent shivers through her and made her pussy drip just by asking her to dare try something new.

Today's challenge pushed her the farthest yet. Her breathing fast and shallow, Alaina pushed the plug harder. Closing her eyes, she moaned as the thickest part of the plug passed through her tight rings of muscle. A moment later, the shafter narrowed and the plug was in place.

“It’s in, Gray. I did it.” She panted. Sweat coated her body, but she’d done it.

“How does it feel?”

“I feel full, and I’m getting horny. Can I come again?”

“No, baby. No coming until tonight. Then we’ll come together, I promise.” Gray chuckled in her ear. “Now get off the bed, put your panties on, and go wash your hands. I’ll talk to you tonight.”

“If I live that long,” Alaina muttered after he’d already hung up.

She slowly moved off the bed before reaching for her panties. The burning in her ass eased, but the full, naughty, sexy sensation remained with her. She went to the bathroom and washed her hands, then returned and made the bed. By the time she headed downstairs for breakfast, her panties were soaked.

It was going to be a long day.

Gray slid his phone in his pocket and glanced at his watch. Did he have enough time? Not really, but as aroused as he felt, it would only take a few minutes.

He headed to the bathroom unzipping his uniform trousers and pushed them along with his boxers out of the way. Fisting his cock, he stopped and stared hard at himself in the mirror.

He’d gained back a few needed pounds since returning from Iraq the month before, but was still a lean, mean Marine, his expression tight from being away from Alaina. Phone sex

was fine, but he needed to feel her arms around him, her soft skin rubbing against his as they loved on each other.

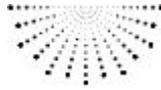
How could he justify getting himself off while denying her pleasure?

“You can’t do this. She’s going to be horny all day. Suck it up, get yourself under control, and get your ass to work. The faster you finish up here, the sooner you can go home to your woman.”

It took several deep breaths and plunging his rock-hard shaft into a sink full of icy cold water to calm it enough to close his trousers without fear of ripping the zipper apart.

It was going to be a long day.

CHAPTER TEN



By the time the sun went down that evening, Alaina could barely walk. Wearing the butt plug had shot her focus to hell.

Sitting to sew pressed the plug even deeper into her ass. Every time she moved, the plug shifted, sending arrows of electric need through her entire body. Five minutes after sitting down, Alaina stood, panting, and straining to control her body's reactions. By the time the sun set, she had taken three cold showers and ate every bite of chocolate in the house. Her nipples hurt from being hard all day, and her thighs were coated with her fluids.

After a lonely dinner of chicken salad and steamed vegetables, Alaina locked up the house and retreated to her suite of rooms on the second floor. She tried to read, but the erotic romance she had started before Gray left just made her think horny thoughts. She flipped through channels on television, but nothing held her attention for more than a few seconds.

Finally, she couldn't stand the sexual frustration any longer. She stripped off her clothes and headed to the shower. Turning on the warm water, she adjusted the shower head before directing the pulsating stream to the apex of her thighs.

She had never outright defied Gray in his dominant games before, but there was no way she could wait until he called. She needed relief NOW.

At the first touch of warm water against her clit, she came. Every muscle in her body tightened, and she screamed even as she doubled over in ecstasy.

As soon as the first orgasm retreated, she removed the plug. The empty feeling made her hungry for more, so she slid two fingers into her cunt.

It took three orgasms before body and mind relaxed enough to think past the lust. By then, the shower had grown cold. After cleaning the plug, she climbed from the shower and dried off, feeling almost as good as she had the afternoon before Gray had left for his trip. Naked, she crawled into bed and closed her eyes.

He would be disappointed when she told him what she'd done, but her boundaries had been pushed enough for one day.

Reaching for his pillow, she curled around it and fell headfirst into sleep.

Gray was surprised to find the house dark when he parked his Jeep behind Alaina's sedan in the circular drive. They normally didn't go to bed for another hour. Had something happened to Alaina?

Letting himself in, he made sure all the doors were locked before carrying his suitcase upstairs. He quickly unpacked and hung up his uniforms, then left the rest to be dealt with in the morning. Right now, he needed to find his woman.

Pausing in the doorway of her bedroom, he smiled. Alaina was curled up on her side of the bed with the covers pulled to her chin. She looked so peaceful and relaxed. But how could she be? How could she sleep with the plug still inside her?

Stepping into the bathroom for a towel in preparation for what was to come, he found his answer. The small purple plug lay on the counter by the sink.

His smile faded as he took a hand towel down from the drying rack. She'd worn it, but for how long? Until she'd hung up the phone? Or longer? His cock jerked at the thought of how to handle her disobedience.

He never wanted to hurt her, to cause her pain. That wasn't his scene, but as a dominating, alpha male, Marine Corps pilot, he craved being in control. With Alaina, that control came with the understanding that she could always say no, but she would at least try things his way.

Carrying the plug, lube, and small towel, he headed to bed. It was time for his welcome home party.

Alaina woke to warm hands tracing patterns across the bare skin of her shoulders. Taking a breath, she smiled as Gray's scent wrapped around her.

“Gray,” she breathed.

“Hello, baby. Were you a good girl today?” Gray curled around her.

“What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be home until tomorrow night.”

Alaina shifted back to press against him. She reached an arm behind her to wrap around his waist, hugging him as best she could. She had missed him so much.

“We finished up this afternoon, so I hurried home to my woman.”

She relaxed as he cupped her breasts and brushed his thumbs over her nipples. He kissed his way from shoulder to earlobe. “Were you good today? How’s that plug feel in your sweet ass?”

Her relaxed muscles stiffened as she remembered. She wasn’t wearing the plug. How would Gray take that news? She’d never openly defied him before.

“It felt strange. Good, but different. It distracted me so much I couldn’t do anything today because I was so horny.”

“Mmmm, that good, huh?” Gray nibbled on her ear, tracing the curve with his tongue.

“It was good for a while, but then it got to be too much. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t read. I couldn’t even sew. I’m sorry, Gray, I had to take it out. Please don’t hate me.”

Her tears surprised her as she moved away from him. She curled into a tighter ball, pulling her legs into her chest, and wrapping her arms around them.

“Shhhh, sweetheart, it’s okay. I could never hate you. I love you too much. I just wish you’d called me, so we could talk it out, but it’s all right.”

His gentle, understanding tone made her misery worse. He shifted behind her, pulling her to lay on her back, then loosened her hold on her legs and straightened her body out to lay full against his.

“Shhhh, baby, stop crying. You’re going to make yourself sick.” He rubbed one palm from tits to clit and back again in a gentle soothing circle. “I should have known all day would be too much for your first time. I’m sorry, baby.” He brushed away her tears and cuddled her until she stopped crying.

“I am sorry, Gray. I thought I could do it.”

“When did you take it out?”

Alaina turned her head to look at the clock on the nightstand before turning back. “About two hours ago. I also came three times in the shower once I took it out,” she admitted in a guilty whisper.

Gray stared at his woman, stunned by her answer. She’d left the plug in all day. She had done what he asked of her, putting in his gift and keeping it in all day. That knowledge sent another pulse of arousal to his shaft, sending his lust level to a new, painful height.

“Baby, you did well by keeping it in that long. I’m so proud of you. Now, I need your mouth on me. Suck my cock, baby.”

He watched with growing excitement as she traced her hands down his muscled chest and the eight pack abs to the wet tip of his cock.

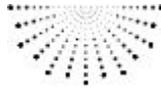
“Oh my. You are big and hard. Does it hurt?” She shifted lower on the bed as her hands traced his length before moving to his tight, aching balls. “Was it the thought of me wearing that plug? Or what you’re going to do to me after my ass is all trained and ready for you?”

“Baby, please,” Gray demanded through gritted teeth. His hips began thrusting, pushing his cock toward her mouth.

“Give it to me, Gray. Come for me.” She opened her mouth over his cock, swirling her tongue over the head once before closing her lips and sliding him deep into her mouth.

Gray closed his eyes and threaded his fingers through her hair, trying not to be embarrassed by coming as soon as he was in her mouth... “Oh God, baby, I’m coming, NOW.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Alaina eagerly swallowed his seed before licking his cock clean. Once she finished, she kissed his tip before sliding back up the bed. “Feel better?”

“Not hardly, but at least now I can take my time with you without fear of my head blowing off.”

She gasped but didn’t fight when he rolled her under him and settled between her legs. As he began worshipping her breasts with his mouth and hands, she reached for the decorative box on the nightstand. It was a little metal box that held a healthy supply of condoms. She’d had the box forever, but only recently found the perfect use for it. Flipping the top off with her thumb, she grabbed a condom and tore open the plastic package.

“You feel so good,” he said between kisses to her neck and shoulders. He pulled back just long enough to glove up before rubbing his cock up and down between her lower lips.

“Gray, please,” she begged.

“Please what?”

“Please fuck me,” Alaina whispered, although she was tempted to scream her demand. When she realized what she’d

said, her face flamed, and her eyes widened as they met his. She never used such crude terminology before.

Gray's head came up and he stared at her for a long few seconds before nodding. Without another word he shifted over her fully and plunged his entire length into her hot, wet core.

Alaina cried out in wonder at the heat and size, and how good he felt as he pressed against her cervix.

When he pulled nearly all the way out again, she whimpered a protest.

“Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere.” He slammed home again, then began a fast, hard pace.

Alaina quickly spiraled out of control as she rose to meet every thrust. Too soon, she screamed her release as Gray's roar told her he followed her over the edge into bliss.

After dealing with the condom, they lay curled together, fully relaxed for the first time since he'd left.

“I missed you.” Her words were soft and slurred around the edges. She knew he heard them when the arm around her tightened.

“Maybe next time you can come with me. Tomorrow, we'll deal with your naughty misbehaviour.”

Alaina woke with a smile that encompassed her entire being. Gray was home, and they had three days together before he had to report back to base. Rolling over, she found herself alone in the big bed. But the empty space next to her was still warm, so he had not been gone too long.

The butt plug and lube on the nightstand drew her attention. She idly wondered if Gray had ever had such an experience. Maybe it was time to push his boundaries a little. With a mischievous grin, she rolled from the bed.

After putting on the silk robe hanging on the back of the bathroom door, she put the lube and plug in the pocket. She checked his suite, but finding it empty, she headed downstairs.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard a thud and a crack, then Gray muttering softly. She followed the sound of his voice to the kitchen door. He stood in the middle of the room, naked, holding two halves of a cereal bowl in his hands.

“You okay?” she asked softly when he just stood there and studied the broken edges.

“Yeah. I set it down on the counter and it broke into two pieces. I’ve never seen such a thing happen before. I’m sorry.”

“Those dishes either break into two or shatter into a million pieces the size of sand.” Alaina crossed the room to him. “I woke up, and you were gone.”

Gray tossed the broken bowl into the trash before wrapping his arms around her. As he lowered his head, his hands pulled open the robe so she could feel his skin against hers. “I was going to bring you breakfast in bed.”

“I’d rather have you in bed for breakfast,” Alaina murmured against his lips.

“That can be arranged too.” Bending his knees, he slid his hands down her back to cup her ass. Then he straightened, lifting her easily.

Alaina wrapped her arms and legs around him and held on tight; amazed that even after only a few hours of sleep Gray

could carry her from one end of the house to the other. When they reached her bedroom, he sat on the bed and shifted her to sit straddling his lap.

“Let’s take off your pretty robe. It’s just going to be in the way.”

He brushed the robe off her shoulders then lowered his head and kissed her senseless. Before she could catch her breath, he moved her again, this time to lie across his thighs, ass up.

“Gray? What are you doing?”

She struggled, but he held her in position with one arm a solid bar across her back. His free hand smoothed over the cheeks of her ass, sending prickles of heat through her.

“Shhhh, baby. We’re getting your punishment out of the way. I’m spanking you, not because you took the plug out and gave yourself pleasure, but because you didn’t call me so I could share in the experience. Understand?”

“Yes, Gray. Ouch!”

The first pop of his hand against her left cheek surprised her more than it hurt. The second pop on her right cheek was harder and elicited a squeak of protest.

By the fourth smack she squirmed in his grip, not to escape but to get her clit close enough to rub against his thigh. A touch, any touch, would send her flying. Gray held her firmly in place as he continued spanking her.

His cock pressed into her side, proving he wasn’t unaffected by her punishment.

Finally, she gave up and relaxed, embracing the red-hot pain in her ass.

It took a moment to realize he had stopped spanking her. Instead, hot, thick fingers smoothed over her flesh, caressing her ass cheeks. Then he parted them, and she could feel his gaze on the treasure hidden in between.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured.

One finger traced the length of her cleft, pausing to press gently against her puckered back hole before sliding fully into her wet, open pussy. He pulled it out before sliding two back in its place.

“Mmmm, it appears you like being punished.”

“Gray, I need you. Please.” Alaina began to struggle again, but Gray kept her where she was.

“First, apologize.”

“I’m sorry, Gray. Next time, I’ll call. I promise.”

Alaina gasped when he flipped her over and cuddled her close. “That’s all I ask. I love you, sweet baby. I never meant for you to be so aroused it hurt. Forgive me?”

At her nod and smile, he slipped a hand between her thighs.

“Normally, you wouldn’t be allowed to come after a punishment like this, but today, I find I need your orgasms.”

His fingers found her clit, like a laser-guided missile found its target, and began to flick it. In three heartbeats, she screamed out her orgasm. As she did, his hips jerked under her and hot, white seed spurt across her hip.

When she came back to herself, they were once again curled together in the middle of the big bed.

“Gray?”

“Yes, baby?”

“Have you ever worn a butt plug before?”

“What are you thinking?”

“I was just thinking maybe it’s time to push your boundaries a little.”

The End

ABOUT COOPER MCKENZIE

Cooper McKenzie always thought she had been born a hundred years too late, but appreciates air conditioning, computers and other conveniences of modern day living. She recently returned to New Bern, North Carolina, after a six-year sojourn to Georgetown, Texas. In addition to dreaming up her next story, Cooper enjoys reading everything except scary books and making amigurumi animals. She loves to hear from readers, and can be reached at coopermckenzie@ymail.com

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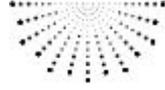
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A COWBOY TO CALL HER
OWN BY LAYLAH ROBERTS



Laylah Roberts

A Cowboy To Call Her Own

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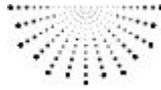
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Maren has to be one of the nicest people in this industry. I've loved working with her - whenever she proofs my stories for the Dirty Daddies Anthologies, she always says such kind things that often make me smile.

Also, her book, Pets, that she wrote as Darla Phelps, is one of my all-time favorite books.

CHAPTER ONE



Reggie glared down at her flat tire in despair.

Muttering under her breath, she grabbed her cell phone and searched for a signal. But no matter how many times she searched, the bars refused to show up. Her curses grew louder as she threw the useless phone back into her car with a growl of disgust.

Fatigued and frustrated, tears welled in her eyes as she leaned against her car and closed her eyes. This had been the week from hell. Her tire going flat on a deserted road in the middle of nowhere with no cell phone coverage was the icing on the cake.

Gathering up the last of her dwindling energy, Reggie moved to the trunk of her car. There was no other choice but to change the tire herself, which wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the piles of luggage that sat in her way. Basically, everything she owned was now sitting in her car, which was pretty damn pathetic when she thought about it.

“Why couldn't the stupid tire have lasted a few more miles?” she muttered to herself as she unlocked the trunk. Daylight was beginning to fade over the distant hills which just added to her misery.

“Damn it, this is hopeless!” She held back her tears as she pulled out each piece of luggage and dropped it on the ground. She wheezed, each breath a struggle.

The past week had been truly surreal, and at any moment Reggie expected to wake up and find herself staring up at the white ceiling of her bedroom, in the apartment she lived in with Lance. That she’d discover that this was all a dream. A nasty, horrid, crazy nightmare.

Everything had spiraled out of control when she’d caught Lance fucking their cleaner on the washing machine. He’d been away on a work trip, and she hadn’t even realized he’d gotten home. Ick. She shuddered in memory of his pale white ass pounding back and forth while Lucia had screamed loudly in Spanish.

She’d stood there like a dummy, unable to move until he’d finished. Which hadn’t taken long. Who knew if Lucia had gotten to come. Given that Lance was as selfish in the bedroom as he was in every other aspect of his life, that was doubtful.

Things had then gone from bad to worse when Lance realized she’d caught him. He’d shoved her against the wall as he’d yelled at her. Screaming that she was a useless fuck, so of course he’d needed to find someone else to screw.

Terrified, she’d managed to get free and run off to a motel. Only to get an email from HR that night telling her that she’d been fired. Oh, and the bastard also drained their bank account. She’d known she had to leave town. All of her supposed friends had sided with him, and none of them would help her.

Thankfully, she’d managed to sneak back into their apartment while he was at work. She’d used every piece of

luggage in the house, including his expensive Louis Vuitton cases which had still been out from the trip he'd just returned from, to pack up everything and leave.

Now here she was, jobless, with everything she owned in the trunk of her car, covering the stupid spare tire and jack. All she had to her name were some clothes, this car, and a measly four hundred dollars. Luckily, her friend Kelly had come to her rescue, inviting Reggie out to stay with her and her husband.

She was broke. She was homeless. She was alone. And as she stared into the empty space where her jack was meant to be, she also realized that she was completely and utterly screwed.

Could things get any worse?

Alex pulled up behind the red car parked on the side of the road. The tiny, dark-haired woman didn't even look up. She was too busy hopping around on one foot, while she tried to rub the toes on the other. He let a small grin slip, having a fairly good idea about how she'd hurt herself. Funny how kicking a flat tire never got it changed any quicker.

Climbing out of his truck, he frowned at the poor language spewing out of her mouth. She sure knew some interesting phrases.

Alex cleared his throat, hoping to gently introduce her to his presence. However, his efforts were wasted when she let out a loud gasp. As she turned quickly toward him, he saw a glimpse of her pale face before she bent over in a loud, chesty coughing fit.

He frowned at the sound of her hacking up half a lung. What the hell was she doing, driving around the country when she was obviously sick? She should have been home in bed with someone waiting on her hand and foot.

The image of her lying naked and glistening in his bed rose unbidden in his mind, but he quickly shook it off, surprised at himself. He didn't even know her.

“Need some help, ma'am?” he asked.

The woman had gotten her breathing under control and was now sending him a suspicious look.

“Where did you come from?” she asked. Alex didn't know if the huskiness of her voice was due to her coughing or natural, but his body sure as hell liked the sound of it.

“Well,” he said, scratching his head in his best good ole boy manner. “Best as I knows it, my mama and my papa decided to—”

“Stop right there!” She held up a hand, interrupting him, while her cheeks turned a delightful shade of red. “I don't need to know your life story.”

His eyebrow rose warningly at her tone. Surprisingly, she backed down.

Puffing out a breath, she seemed to wilt right in front of him. “Sorry, I'm not normally so rude. Bad day.” She attempted a small smile, and he noticed that she had large dark circles beneath her eyes. Hell, the woman was sick and exhausted, and here he was standing around teasing her.

“I was driving home when I noticed your car,” he explained quietly, moving slowly towards her. She was as skittish as a colt and took two steps back as he approached her.

“No jack?” he asked, assessing the situation. She just shook her head, but he saw her lower lip tremble.

“Don’t worry, darlin’. We’ll have you on the road in no time.” He wasn’t sure what it was about her, but the sudden urge to both soothe and protect her filled him, and he found himself moving quickly to get his jack, eager to get her on her way and far away from him.

“Where are you headed?” he asked moved to her empty trunk, taking in the luggage strewn haphazardly on the ground. The woman sure did pack heavy. Nope, definitely not anyone he wanted to get involved with. No matter what other parts of him thought about that idea.

“We got a problem, darlin’.”

They had a problem? Well, that was an understatement if ever she heard one. She was tired, she was scared, and she was beginning to think she was really sick, and if all that wasn’t bad enough, this really sexy cowboy was causing her tired body to wake up and do a little dance.

Chill.

It was hard, though, when he stared down at her with stern, brown eyes. He was tall, his shoulders wide. And the blue denim jeans he was wearing ... well, they suited him just fine. She stared down at his big hands. He’d rolled up the cuffs of his shirt, revealing muscular, tanned forearms.

Who knew forearms could be so sexy?

“Did you hear me, darlin’? Your spare tire is flat.”

Reggie looked up, way up at him. He stared down at her in a mix of concern and resignation.

Reggie looked at him, puzzled, until his eyes directed hers to what he'd found in the trunk of her car.

“Oh, fuck! He told me he was going to get that fixed.” Once more, Lance had screwed her over.

Asshole.

“Shit, shit, shit!”

“I know you're upset, but you should watch your language.”

His voice was so calm and controlled that she barely noticed the warning behind the words. She was too caught up in the pitiful state of her life.

“That bastard! I can't believe this.” Inexplicitly, tears ran down her cheeks. No! She wouldn't do this. She would not cry.

“Don't go crying, darlin',” the big cowboy soothed. “It's not a big deal. We'll put your stuff in my truck, and I'll take you wherever you want.”

What Alex really wanted was to get back into his truck, drive home, and pretend he'd never seen her. But his mama had taught him far better manners than that. He watched as she assessed the situation, remaining quiet even though he usually preferred to take charge. In his life, his word was law.

But he was prepared to give her a moment to come around to his way of thinking before he picked her up and chucked her in the truck, which was going to happen in five, four, three, two ...

“Okay, thanks. I appreciate it.” She didn’t sound very grateful, but he forgave her as she began to cough and shiver.

When she started to pick up the luggage, he just grabbed her hand and led her towards his truck. Ignoring her arguments, he picked her up and placed her in the cab.

“Stay here, darlin’.”

“Oh, but I can help.” She went to wiggle down out of the seat.

He placed his hands on her thighs, trying to ignore the sizzle of heat. She wasn’t his type. He wasn’t attracted to her.

Right. If he said it enough times, he’d start to believe it, right?

“No, you can’t help. You don’t sound well and even if you were, I still wouldn’t want you carrying around heavy pieces of luggage.”

“I put it in my car myself,” she told him.

Who the hell was meant to be looking after this girl? And yes, he was well aware that he was a tad old-fashioned in his beliefs, but she was clearly ill and needed some coddling.

“Well, now you don’t have to do it yourself. Just sit here.” He gave her a firm look to let her know he meant business.

Reggie watched the bossy cowboy easily move her luggage in two trips, when it had taken her at least five to load it in her car. Despite the fact that she should disobey his order on principle, she found herself staying in the truck.

She was feeling light-headed and exhausted. And it was a bit of a relief to let someone else do the heavy lifting. She

probably shouldn't be sitting here in a stranger's truck, but there was something about him that felt so safe and trustworthy.

She'd need to call someone about her car. But she guessed that could wait until she got to Kelly's place.

"Right, darlin', where were you going?" he asked after climbing into his truck and starting it up.

"Umm, to the McKenzie spread. I'm staying there for a while."

She watched his large hands tighten on the steering wheel for a moment before he relaxed once more.

"That so? You know, the boss there doesn't like his cowboys having women in his bunkrooms. Whoever you're going to see is brave risking Alex McKenzie's wrath."

"Got a temper, does he?" She wasn't too worried. She'd visited the ranch before without a problem, but Mr. McKenzie hadn't been around those times.

"Why don't you rest your eyes for a bit? I'll wake you when we get there." His voice was surprisingly gentle, and she turned to look out the window, hiding the sudden tears that rose.

"I'm okay," she said, yawning as her eyes began to droop. "I'm not going there to see a cowboy. I've sworn off men."

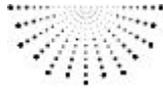
"That so?" His voice was a low, quiet rumble, and she started to drift off, her body growing leaden with exhaustion.

"Uh-huh, rat bastards every one. I'm going to stay with my friend Kelly." Her eyes closed.

"Well, damn," he murmured. "Not going to be that easy to get rid of you, is it, darlin'?"

What did he mean? All he had to do was drop her off. But she was too tired to answer him. Gradually, she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO



“We’re here, darlin’.” The sound of a man’s voice shocked Reggie into full consciousness. She opened her eyes, freezing with fear. Where was she? Who was she with?

Someone chuckled. “You can breathe, little one. In fact, I insist on it. I don’t want to explain to Kelly why I have her friend’s corpse in my cab.” The voice was dry, light-hearted, but she heard the command in his tone. “Stay there while I come around and get your door.”

Reggie watched a little warily as the large man exited the high cab gracefully before navigating his way around the front of the truck. Still half asleep, she felt disoriented and out of sorts. The short cat nap seemed to have increased her exhaustion, and she was glad of his support as she exited the cab, swaying slightly.

A low growl had her glancing up in surprise at the man clasping her tightly around her waist.

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said tiredly, trying to move back from his touch. However, he had her trapped between the truck and his hard body, and seemed in no hurry to let her go.

If she hadn’t been so tired, she might have enjoyed being pressed up against him far more.

“You’re white as a ghost, you’re obviously exhausted, and you’re coughing like you smoke a pack a day.” His eyes narrowed at her. “You don’t smoke, do you?”

“No. Never have.”

“That’s a good girl.”

Oh, shit. She liked being called a good girl. What was wrong with her?

“Reggie!” The sound of her best friend’s voice had her sighing in relief, and he gave her a slight grin, releasing her.

“Saved, little one. Remember, you can run, but you can’t hide,” he murmured as he stepped back, allowing her to see Kelly racing towards her from the house.

“Running seems to be my thing,” she said without thinking.

“Well, maybe because you never had a place that you felt safe.”

No, she’d never had that. And she didn’t think she’d find anywhere like that in the near future. Before she could say anything, though, Kelly was there, wrapping her up in her arms.

Relief filled her as she slumped against her friend, listening to her chatter about how much she’d missed her.

“So how do you two know each other?” Alex McKenzie asked.

Reggie looked across the table a little warily at the man who sat opposite her. What were the odds that the owner of

McKenzie's spread would be the one to pick her up off the side of the road?

She should have known. Kelly had told her Colin's boss was sexy as sin, with the body of a God and the face of a fallen angel — her words, not Reggie's. What she hadn't mentioned was the sheer arrogance and confidence that the man wore like a second skin.

He was trouble, pure and simple. And Kelly had invited him to dinner! She flashed her best friend a warning look, but the blasted woman just smiled back, unrepentant. Damn it, she'd better not be matchmaking.

“Reggie and I met in college, didn't we, Reg? She was so quiet, I thought she didn't like me. Turns out she was just shy. Luckily, I talk enough for the both of us.”

“Is it hot in here?” Reggie asked, wishing she hadn't said anything as Alex frowned over at her.

“Are you still not feeling well?” His voice was a low growl that had her stiffening her shoulders.

“No, I'm fine,” she answered quietly.

“You're not eating,” he pointed out, nodding at the small amount of food on her plate.

“Oh, don't worry about that,” Kelly spoke up, saving Reggie from having to answer. “Reggie never eats.”

Reggie glared over at her friend as Alex's gaze grew stern. She found herself squirming under his intense scrutiny.

“Well, she eats, but just not that much. Her willpower is incredible. I see chocolate, I eat it. Reggie could stare at it all day and not even be tempted!” Kelly sighed. “It's the reason I'll never get rid of these hips.”

“I like those hips!” Colin spoke up for the first time. He was a quiet man. But kind and steady. Exactly what Kelly needed.

“And I do get tempted,” Reggie protested. “You make me sound like a robot!”

Kelly snorted. “Girl, sometimes I think you are.” She turned back to Alex. “Do you know she runs ten miles every day? Doesn’t matter if it’s raining, snowing, or if she’s sick. She had bronchitis once, and she kept running! Can you believe it?”

“No, I can’t,” Alex murmured softly, while Reggie forced a forkful of food into her mouth.

“I like running. It helps with stress. It clears my head,” Reggie explained.

“Well, I suppose you needed it when you were living with Lance. I can’t believe he kicked you out. After everything else he’s done to you. What an asshole!”

“Kelly!” Reggie and the two men all spoke her name in reproach at the same time, although Reggie thought she was probably protesting for a completely different reason. She really didn’t want her dirty laundry hung out in front of Alex.

“What?” Kelly glared at them all. “It’s not swearing if it’s true. First, he cheats on her, then he gets her fired, then he kicks her out of her apartment!”

Before Reggie could die of mortal embarrassment, Alex spoke up. “You’re exhausted, Regina. Perhaps you should go to bed.”

“It’s Reagan.”

“Sorry?”

“Reagan, my name’s Reagan, not Regina. My parents were expecting a boy.”

“I see.”

He probably didn’t. Her parents had been jerks to her just because she’d dared to be a girl. Like she’d had any choice.

A coughing fit overtook her, making her gasp for breath as she quickly reached for a glass of water. Suddenly Alex was next to her, gently rubbing her back with his large hand. A flush ran across her skin that had nothing to do with her slight fever.

“Time for bed.” His voice was firm.

“I’m fine.” She wasn’t, and bed sounded wonderful, but she couldn’t let him get away with ordering her around. Reggie was a strong, independent woman who could take care of herself.

Well, that’s what she told herself anyway. But part of her was still a love-starved little girl that wanted someone to lean on, someone to love and cherish her. Reggie had this feeling that Alex McKenzie could be that someone, and that scared her to death.

She’d just got out of a terrible relationship. She wasn’t looking for another one.

No, thank you.

Kelly added her loud agreement to Alex’s. Reggie gave in to the combined pressure. After saying good night to Colin and Alex, she rose to follow Kelly out of the room. Colin stood and gathered up some plates, taking them into the kitchen. She paused in the doorway, turning back to Alex.

“Thanks for all your help today. I really appreciate it.” He’d even called someone to go and tow her car for her. She guessed there wouldn’t be much left of her tiny nest egg after she paid for the tire to be fixed.

“You’re welcome. They’ll call you when it’s ready to be collected. Oh, and Reagan? No running until that cough has gone, understand me?”

Reggie narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you threatening me?”

“Little one, it’s not a threat, it’s a promise.”

“You have no say over what I do, Mr. McKenzie.” Reggie kept her voice cool and remote.

“I disagree, sweetheart. You’re on my land, staying with my manager, and therefore my responsibility. I will not have you abusing yourself while you are here.”

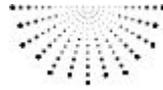
“I don’t a-abuse myself!” she sputtered out. That damn eyebrow of his rose again. Couldn’t he keep it under control?

“Don’t you? If you were mine, I’d have you over my knee right now for the way you’ve been treating yourself.”

“Ex-excuse me?” Surely she’d misheard him. He couldn’t mean ...

“If you were mine, and you’d traveled for days while feeling ill, not to mention that you started this trip without having your car checked over, I would put you over my knee and warm your ass. You’d do well to remember that.” With that said, he started clearing the table, leaving Reggie shocked, confused, and weirdly intrigued.

CHAPTER THREE



Striding toward the stables, Alex heard someone coughing. Following the chesty sound, his suspicions were confirmed as he came across Reagan attempting to lift a saddle onto a horse that was far too tall for her short reach.

“Just what do you think you’re doing, little one?” he asked sternly.

He hadn’t seen her much since she’d arrived a few days ago. He’d been attempting to keep his distance, even though he couldn’t stop thinking about her.

“Ahh,” Reggie screamed, dropping the saddle right on top of her foot. She grabbed her foot, hopping around. Suddenly, she tripped and fell backward into some hay.

“Ow!” she cried out.

Moving quickly, he picked her up, holding her against his chest as he carried her out of the stall.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?” Reggie finally sputtered out. “You damn well scared me to death!”

Alex frowned at her. “I don’t appreciate that sort of language, Reagan. You had a good education. I’m sure you can find other words in your vocabulary to use that aren’t vulgar.”

She glared up at him, then started coughing. He headed toward Colin and Kelly's place.

"Where are you taking me? Put me down," she demanded.

"No, I need to check your foot."

Reggie shook her head. "It's fine. I'll be okay. I'm going for a ride."

"No, you're not."

"Excuse me?" she asked as he walked up the stairs to the front porch.

"The only place you are going, young lady, is back to bed for a nap. Just what did you think you were doing, trying to saddle up Petrol by yourself?"

"I always ride Petrol when I'm here. I'm a good rider."

"I'm sure you are," he agreed. "But he's too big for you to saddle by yourself, or are you going to try to tell me that you always saddle him yourself?"

"Well, no, usually one of the hands is around to do that. But I thought I could manage. Put me down. I can walk."

"Ahh, but why walk when I can carry you?"

Reggie stared up at Alex, who was carrying her without the slightest hint of exertion. Wow, he was strong.

"Reggie! Alex! What happened? Are you okay?" Kelly called out, walking into the entrance.

Reggie's chest decided right at that moment to let out a series of chesty, gasping coughs.

“I’m fine, Kel,” she answered once she’d caught her breath again. “Alex snuck up on me and I dropped a saddle on my foot.”

Alex walked into the living room and set her down on the sofa.

“So why are you so dirty?” Kelly asked.

“I fell over,” she gritted out. That had been his fault, too. “I’ll just get changed, then I’ll head out to give Colin that message.”

She felt Alex stiffen as he crouched in front of her. “You’re not going anywhere but to bed.”

“It’s the middle of the day!” Reggie protested. “And it’s just a bruised foot. I feel fine.”

He’d started to undo her boots, then gently drew off her socks. Lance would never have cared for her like this.

“You have a bad cough, the last thing you need is to be riding around the countryside. Now, wiggle your foot.”

She wiggled it around. “See, just bruised. And it’s not a bad cough. Like I said, I’m fine.” She seemed to be saying that a lot around him.

“Don’t lie to me.” His voice was scarily cold, and she looked up at him warily.

“It’s okay, Reg,” Kelly said. “I’ll take the message out to Colin.”

“You will not,” he growled at Kelly. “Why don’t you just give him the message over the radio?”

Kelly blushed, while they both looked on in amazement. Kelly never got embarrassed about anything. “It’s kind of

private, okay?”

“Fine. I will take it out to him. Right after I carry this one up to bed.”

But she didn't want to go to bed. However, Alex had clearly made up his mind as he picked her up and started carrying her upstairs.

“Which bedroom is yours?”

She frowned at him. She wasn't telling him that. Unfortunately, Kelly was in a helpful mood. She rushed ahead and opened the door, and he walked into her room, setting her down on the bed. He pointed a finger at Reggie. “Stay put. Sleep. I'll check on you when I get back. Where's the message?”

“Oh, um, here.” She reached into her pocket for the piece of paper that Kelly had given her. She'd had to swear that she wouldn't open it.

“Thanks, Alex,” Kelly told him.

“You're welcome. Reagan, I'll see you later.”

“I look forward to it.” Not really. “Sit, Reggie, sit. Good girl, woof-woof.”

“Oh man, that was awful!” Kelly came in and sat next to her on the bed.

“You're telling me,” she grumbled. “Did you hear him order me to sleep? Who the hell does he think he is?”

“Oh, I'm not talking about that.” Kelly brushed Reggie's comments aside. “Alex has always been overprotective towards women, especially those he considers under his care.”

“I’m not under his care. I’m thirty-two years old. I can take care of myself.”

Kelly just shook her head. “Alex is kind of old-fashioned, but you get used to it after a while. Besides, while he may come across as overbearing and bossy, he really does care. If Colin is ever away, Alex always visits me to make sure I’m all right. Once, I broke down on the way home from town and I couldn’t get hold of Colin. I tried everyone, finally I called Alex. Even though I had to endure a lecture about not having called him immediately, he was there within ten minutes.”

“But surely he doesn’t act like this with the women he dates. I mean, Kel, he said that if I was his and had driven here while sick, that he would have spanked me!” And damned if that didn’t turn her on, just a little.

Kelly shrugged. “As far as I know, Alex is always like this. I can’t imagine he would ever change. Besides, some women like the whole spanking thing.” Kelly wriggled her eyebrows at Reggie, who snorted in laughter.

“I’ve only ever met one of Alex’s women, Sascha. He dated her for a whole six months. She said he’s intense, possessive, and bossy.”

Reggie nodded in agreement.

“But she also said that having all that attention and intensity aimed at you is an amazing experience. When he’s with you, he is well and truly with you. He makes sure you’re looked after, happy, healthy. That you have everything you need. He would never cheat, or lie, or disrespect a woman.”

“You like him.”

Kelly nodded. “Yep.”

“You’re not setting us up, Kel,” Reggie warned.

Kelly just grinned unrepentantly.

“Kelly,” Reggie warned. A sudden thought occurred to her. “Hey, if you weren’t talking about his behavior toward me, then what was so mortifying?”

“The message he’s taking to Colin.”

Reggie frowned. “What about it?”

Kelly blushed bright red. “It was a booty call,” she whispered.

“A what?” Reggie squealed loudly.

“Colin and I are trying for a baby, and I’m ovulating. So I was sending Colin a message to see if he could come back, and you know ...”

“Get it onnnn.” Reggie was grinning as Kelly stuck her tongue out at her.

“Yes, moron.”

“Kel, that’s fantastic. You two will make wonderful parents.” Colin was calm, patient, and steady. Kelly was fun, friendly, and energetic. A perfect combination.

Kelly grinned. “Isn’t it though?” A dreamy look entered her eyes before they narrowed back on Reggie as she began to cough.

“Into bed with you, young lady.”

“Urgh, now you sound like his lordship.”

“Well, you don’t want him to catch you disobeying him.” Kelly stood and opened the bedroom door. “Unless you really do want a spanking.” With a laugh, she closed the door.

Smart ass.

Surprisingly, Reggie found that she slept most of the afternoon away. She was obviously more exhausted than she'd thought, although she wouldn't be telling Alex McKenzie that any time soon. He was arrogant enough as it was.

Sighing, she laid the table, trying to stay away from Colin and Kelly who were snuggled up in the living room in what she could only guess was a post-coital glow. Luckily, she had managed to sleep through that. The walls in this house were alarmingly thin. She knew that from past visits.

A small, sad smile played around her mouth. A baby.

Reggie had always wanted a family, but Lance hated children and dogs and anyone who didn't fit in with his country club image. Reggie sighed. What the hell had she been thinking, dating a man like that?

Shaking her head, she moved into the kitchen to grab the salt and pepper. She'd told Kelly she'd prepare dinner. It was the least she could do for them. After all, it wasn't as though she had any money to help pay her way. The fact that she was basically living off their charity felt like acid in her stomach.

Reggie needed to get herself sorted out, and the first order of business was getting a job. Although she'd have to get rid of her cough and get her car fixed first.

"Dinner's ready," she called out, going back to grab the casserole. She set it on the table.

"Yum, Reg. It all looks great." Kelly gave her a hug from behind before sitting at the table.

“It’s the least I can do, seeing as how I’m an uninvited guest and all,” Reggie half joked.

Colin’s voice was serious. “You can stay as long as you want, Reggie, you know that. In fact, I’m glad that Kelly has the company, it’s coming up to our busiest time of the year and I don’t like leaving her alone for long amounts of time.”

A knock at the door sounded before Reggie could answer. Colin went to answer the door.

“I’m glad you’re here too, Reg. That asshole wasn’t good enough for you.”

Reggie’s eyes filled with tears. “Thanks, Kel.”

“What are you doing up?” The dark voice sounded from behind her, frightening her into dropping her fork onto the floor.

“Shit,” she swore softly, before turning around to glare at him. Bending down, he picked up the fork and handed it to her.

“Can’t you wear a bell or something?” she asked.

His sudden grin was so wickedly sexy that her breath caught on a hitch. “I’ll see what I can do. You didn’t answer my question. What are you doing up?”

“Eating dinner.”

“I can see that.” His voice remained calm, but she could hear the warning. “But you could eat in bed while you rest.”

Yeah, that wasn’t happening. She wasn’t an invalid. “No, I couldn’t.”

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Alex? Reggie makes a great beef casserole,” Kelly said.

Her face went red as she realized she'd forgotten that Kelly and Colin were right there. Yikes. Alex made her forget everything around her.

Please don't say yes. Please don't say yes.

“Thanks, Kelly. That's very nice of you to offer.”

Kelly set up another place for him. But instead of serving himself, he picked up her plate and piled it up with the casserole.

“What are you doing?” she asked as he placed the plate back in front of her.

“Making certain that you eat. How is your foot?”

“It's fine ... I can't eat all this.”

He leaned in as Kelly and Colin started helping themselves. “Try, little one. For me?”

Whoa. Okay, he was nearly impossible to resist when being bossy, but when he tried to cajole her ... yeah, she could fall for this guy.

Bad, Reggie. Bad.

Luckily, Colin pulled him into a conversation about the ranch, and it gave her a chance to breathe. Her mind started wandering to her life.

What was she going to do? She had to find a job. Quickly.

“You're not eating, little one.”

She jumped at the quiet words. He'd leaned in close to her to speak, and she could feel the heat radiating off him. What would happen if she rested her head on his shoulder?

He frowned. “Reagan? Are you all right?”

Everyone stopped and turned to look at her. “Me? Oh, I’m fine. Tired, I guess.”

His frown deepened. Shit. Why did she say that?

“Really? Even after your long nap?” Kelly asked.

“You had a long nap?” he asked, looking ridiculously pleased with himself. Like he’d had something to do with it. She was just exhausted after all the drama she’d been through lately and the long drive.

“I probably shouldn’t have slept during the day. Now I won’t sleep tonight.”

“I’m sure you will,” he countered.

Colin and Kelly were back to cuddling up against one another, whispering.

Great, she really felt like a third wheel. She had to take charge of her life. Find a job, get out from under their feet. They wanted to start a family, and she was ... drifting.

“What’s wrong, little one?” A light finger under her chin turned her face toward him.

For some reason, being called ‘little one’ by him made her go all warm. Everything about him spoke to her. Even his arrogance and bossiness.

Maybe she was losing her mind.

“Nothing.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t like being lied to, Reagan.”

A shiver went down her spine at the stern note in his voice. The last thing she needed was another man telling her what to do. Lance had beaten her down with his words until she now felt like a shell of herself.

Indecisive and anxious.

“My thoughts are my own. You don’t have access to them.”

“Not yet.”

Well. That wasn’t ominous or anything. She stood suddenly, vertigo hitting her at the quick movement.

Whoops.

“Reagan?” he asked, standing.

Shoot. Was it too much to ask that he didn’t notice everything about her? And also ... why did it feel good?

Maybe because you’ve never had anyone pay this sort of attention to you.

Sad, but true. Most of the attention she’d had in her life had been negative.

“I’ll clean this all up, guys,” she said, ignoring him. “You go relax.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Kelly protested, glancing up. “You cooked.”

“I also slept most of the day. And I don’t have much else going on. Go. Relax with Colin. I got this.”

“But I think—” Kelly was interrupted by Colin who whispered something to her. Kelly giggled and nodded. “Okay, if you’re sure. We’ll go for a short stroll.”

Uh-huh. Just a walk, huh?

“You two lovebirds have fun,” she teased. “Have her back in bed by ten, Colin.”

“Oh, I will,” he promised.

Kelly was giggling again as they left. Reagan sighed. What would it be like to have someone like Colin in her life?

“I don’t like seeing you sad.”

She startled. How had she forgotten that he was there? She turned to find him watching her with concern and plastered on a big smile.

“No, don’t do that.”

“Do what?” she asked.

He reached out and traced a finger across her lips. “Don’t pretend to be all right. Maybe you can’t tell me everything, but just be truthful with what you do say.”

She stared at him, flabbergasted. Okay, she needed arrogant Alex back. Because insightful Alex ... well, she might easily fall for him.

Hard.

“I won’t keep you,” she said. “I’m sure you need to get home.”

“I’ll help you clean up.”

“That’s not necessary,” she replied quickly. “I have it.” She needed to get rid of him. Right now.

“It is necessary, and it is pointless to argue with me, my mind is made up.”

And he was back to being infuriating. Thank goodness for that. To her shock, he really did help her clear the table. He even loaded the dishwasher after she’d scraped and rinsed. She’d cleaned as she cooked, so there wasn’t a lot to do.

As they finished, she turned to him. “I didn’t think you were the type to do the dishes.”

He leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. “I might be old-fashioned in some ways, but not when it comes to things like this. I know how to clean, I can cook the basics. I know my views on what I want in a relationship aren’t necessarily what most people want. But they’re my beliefs and desires.”

“Like what?” she asked.

“Well, I want a relationship like my parents had. My dad was the head of the household. He was in charge. But he never used that responsibility or power to hurt my mother. He would never have done anything to make her feel like she was less. Because she wasn’t. She was the most important person in his life. All he wanted was for her to be happy and healthy.”

It sounded amazing. There had to be a catch.

“Anything she needed, he wanted to provide. But he also knew that to keep her safe and healthy, she needed rules. Limitations. And if she broke those rules, then he would punish her.”

She winced. “What did he do to her?” Had he grown up in an abusive household?

“Well, for instance, my mom had a lead foot. She’d drive too fast, forget to put on her seatbelt. If she got caught speeding, then my dad would spank her.”

“You saw him spank her?”

“Of course not. It was always in private.” He eyed her. “You look horrified.”

“Your dad hit your mom.”

“No. Never. He adored and cherished the ground she walked on. And she loved him. I heard my mom talking to my

aunt about it once. She said it made her feel safe, knowing that he would always be there. That he cared enough to pay attention.”

She was so confused. She should condemn his dad. As a kid, she'd been hit for the smallest things. Taking food she shouldn't, even though she'd been starving. But mostly, she'd been screamed at, called names, her hair pulled, rejected and unloved.

“Reagan ...” He reached for her, but she shied back. “You're scared of me now.” He looked upset by that. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you this. It's too soon. I just ... I feel this pull toward you and I never want to be anything but upfront about my needs.”

“I asked. You don't need to apologize.”

He reached out again slowly, cupping her cheek with his hand. “Do you feel it too?”

“Yes, but I don't think I can act on it. I just came out of a bad relationship. I'm not looking for another.”

“It sounds like this guy was a jerk and didn't treat you like he should have. I'm not like that.”

“You might not verbally abuse me like Lance, but you'd want to hit me.”

“I would never hit you,” he said fiercely. “Ever. Anything that would happen would be because you'd broken a rule and understand the consequences. You'd have to agree to that sort of relationship. And you would be looked after, cherished, protected. But I've given you a lot to think about, and it's probably time I backed off and left.”

Strangely, she didn't want him to go.

“I want you to go straight to bed, little one. You look pale. And you’ll rest tomorrow.”

She sighed. “Do you boss everyone around this much?”

“Only people I care about.” He grinned.

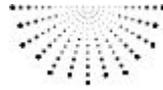
Damn, her legs went weak at that smile. Seriously. She was in trouble here.

“If you’re interested, you can do some research on domestic discipline relationships.” He ran a finger down her cheek. “Sleep well, little one.”

She stood there, thinking long after he’d left.

Alex McKenzie was an added complication she didn’t need in her life. And yet ... she knew she wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about him.

CHAPTER FOUR



It was early morning as Alex walked toward the stables.

He took the path past Colin and Kelly's place. He wondered how Reagan was processing what he'd told her the other night.

You're moving too fast.

Yes, but Alex wasn't a man to waste time. When he wanted something, he went after it. And he couldn't get Miss Reagan out of his mind. She'd wormed her way in there. He wanted her. And he'd have her.

He frowned as he saw someone sitting on the front stoop, looking up at the stars.

"Reagan?"

She startled, letting out a small scream. "Oh my God! Why don't you make any noise when you move?"

He thought he'd made plenty of noise.

"What are you doing out here, little one?" he asked. "It's cold and still dark. You should still be in bed."

"I got woken up and couldn't go back to sleep."

He sat next to her. "Worrying about something?"

“That’s part of it. Also, the walls are really thin in this house.”

What did that have to ... oh.

“Colin and Kelly are awake?” he asked.

“Um, yep.”

He had to grin. Although, he hadn’t realised the walls would be that thin.

“I really need to get a job and move into my own place.” She let out a small cough, clearly trying to stifle it.

“You’re not well enough to work.” And he didn’t particularly want her leaving the ranch.

“I can’t live here forever, though. I have my car back now. I should probably be out there searching for a job.”

“You’ve only been here a week. Why don’t you give yourself some more time to rest up?”

“I don’t want Colin and Kelly to get sick of me,” she whispered.

He stilled. This was the most honest she’d been with him. And he understood that she was in a bad position. But pushing herself to go out and get a job when she still wasn’t well wasn’t a good idea, either.

“I don’t think either Colin or Kelly are going to get sick of you. Kelly seems ecstatic to have you here.”

“Everyone gets sick of me eventually.”

That asshole ex of hers had done a number on her self-esteem.

“If you’re not going to sleep anymore, I have somewhere to show you, if you’d like to see.”

“Oh. I ... okay,” she said shyly.

“Go get some warm clothes on. I’ll wait here for you.”

Reagan followed the big cowboy to where one of the work trucks was kept. He opened the passenger door. Then, to her shock, he lifted her into the seat. Grabbing the belt, he buckled her in.

“I can do that myself.”

“I know, darlin’. But I like to know you’re safe.”

These feelings she had for him confused her. She shouldn’t like the way he just took over, but she really liked how he focused on her.

His attention could be addictive.

Climbing in, he drove them out across the hills. She’d grown up in the city, so all this countryside was both gorgeous and intimidating.

“It’s so beautiful here,” she whispered.

“It’s where I grew up. I love it. My brothers prefer living in the city, but the ranch is where I’m happiest.”

“Must have been nice to have siblings.”

“You didn’t?”

“No. My parents couldn’t have any more kids. My dad was upset I wasn’t a boy and my mom followed whatever he said.” To protect herself.

“I’m sorry, little one. They were short-sighted. I’d have loved a little sister to coddle and protect.”

“I used to wish for a big brother. Maybe you could be my big brother,” she teased.

“Oh, these feelings I have for you aren’t brotherly,” he replied.

She swallowed heavily.

“You think about what I told you the other night?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I did some research, too. I still don’t know what I think about it.”

“I think you’d do well to have someone looking out for you, little one. And I want to be that man. I want you.”

“You move fast.”

“No point wasting time when you know what you want.”

She wished she could be that confident all the time. He stopped the truck on the top of a hill, looking out over the land ahead of them. The sun was just starting to come out over the surrounding hills and her breath caught.

He climbed out and came around to help her. Then he led her to the front of the truck. They leaned against the hood and watched the sun rise.

“Magical,” she whispered. “I can’t believe how beautiful it is.”

“It is. And so are you.”

She blushed, suddenly realizing that she was holding his hand. But when she tried to tug it free, he wouldn’t let go. Turning to her, he trapped her against the truck. But she didn’t feel threatened. Nope, she was hot and turned on.

He let go of her hand to reach up and cup her chin. Then he kissed her. His lips were firm and unyielding. Demanding. And she melted. The kiss was both tender and hot.

It was the most amazing kiss of her life. And when he finished, she whimpered, trying to get closer to him.

“Yes, beautiful and tempting,” he whispered to her. “You can’t deny what’s between us, baby.”

“I ... I’m still scared.”

“I’ll be right here, ready to catch you if you fall. What I can’t do is ignore this. Don’t ask me to do that.”

“What ... what do you want?”

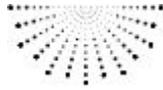
“Spend time with me. Get to know me.”

Her head still spinning from that kiss, she nodded. “All right.”

Leaning in, he kissed her again, and the rest of the world faded away.

Magical.

CHAPTER FIVE



There was a knock on the door just as she finished putting dinner on the table. Alex was late. That wasn't like him.

Butterflies filled her tummy. She couldn't believe it had been just two weeks since he'd taken her for that drive and kissed her. He'd been here each night for dinner and he'd kissed her several more times. Kelly liked to tease that Alex was courting her.

This was like nothing she'd experienced before. He might have a stern, commanding side, but he could also be kind and sweet. And he was so attentive. She'd even started feeling better with him watching over her, demanding that she rest and take it easy.

Although, she really needed to find a job now.

But that meant she might have to leave the ranch and him. That made her tummy feel yuck.

Think about it later.

The one thing really putting a damper on things was Lance. Over the last few days, he'd left her several voicemails and texts. She didn't know what he wanted all of a sudden. She'd blocked his number without even looking or listening to the messages.

She didn't owe him anything.

She turned to look at Alex as he entered the room. He was frowning slightly. Was something wrong?

"Hey, Alex, we were just putting dinner out," Kelly said. "I was starting to think you couldn't make it."

"Actually, I can't stay."

He couldn't? What was going on? Disappointment flooded her.

"Unfortunately, I have to leave for a while. I need to head into the city. Colin, can I talk to you a moment? Reagan, I'll be back in a minute."

She nodded, worried. He gestured at Colin, who followed him out into the living room.

"I hope everything's all right," Kelly murmured, frowning as she spooned up a large serving of food. Reggie spooned up a much smaller serving without any mashed potato. Lance had never let her eat carbs at night.

She caught that nasty thought as it flitted through her mind. Lance wasn't here now. She proceeded to spoon some potatoes onto her plate, feeling stupidly pleased with herself.

"There's been some issues lately with the business Alex owns with two of his brothers," Kelly confided.

"What sort of business?" Reggie asked.

"Pharmaceuticals. Louis is a genius. He's the head research scientist. And Matthias is the CEO. Alex owns part of the company, but just goes in when they need some advice or something is going wrong. I think Louis has been having issues with some members of his team. Alex will get it sorted."

Both women quieted as the two men re-entered the room.

“Reagan, can I talk to you?” Alex asked.

“Sure.” She followed him into the living room. “Is everything okay?”

He turned and grasped her hips, drawing her close. Then he ran his thumb gently down her cheek, leaving goose bumps of sensation in its wake. With the side of his hand under her chin, he tilted her head back until she was staring into his intense brown eyes.

“It will be. I’ll sort it out.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just Louis needing some support. Hopefully, I’ll only be gone for a few days. Are you gonna miss me, darlin’?”

More than she thought she would. “Maybe.”

“Hmm.” He ran his thumb across her lips. Her heart raced. “Maybe? I think we can do better than that.”

He kissed her, wrapping his arms around her as he held her tight. Then he drew back and she would have fallen had he not been clasping her around the waist.

“What about now?”

“Stay,” she told him.

He grinned. “That’s better. Wish I could, but I’ll try to come back quick.”

Shoot. What was she doing? He had to go help his brothers.

“Sorry, of course you have to go.”

“I want you to be a good girl while I’m gone,” he told her firmly. “Don’t push too hard, you still have a slight cough. And you’re a bit pale. Did you do too much today?”

“No.” She’d only cleaned the house from top to bottom and washed the windows while Kelly was out getting groceries.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, baby?”

“No,” she replied. But she crossed her fingers behind her back.

“Lots of rest, no running, or horse riding, and I want you to eat more. Do you understand me, Reagan?”

“I understand you’re bossy, Alex McKenzie.” His hands cupped her cheeks, his warmth seeping through her cold skin.

“I care about you, little one. Is that so bad? Now, you have a choice. You can do as I say or you can disobey me.”

Reggie frowned. “And if I disobey you?”

A large hand patted her bottom. “If you disobey, then your bottom will suffer.”

“That is so wrong on so many levels!”

The bastard just chuckled and gave her a hard swat that made her yelp in surprise. But shockingly, a tingling arousal also filled her.

“Unless you want to find yourself over my knee getting your bottom warmed, I suggest you do as I say, darlin’. Hmm, perhaps I should warm your butt right now, just to ensure your good behavior.” He looked at his watch, sighing. “Drat. Wish I could, darlin’, but I’m out of time. I’ll miss you.”

He drew her in for another kiss, before turning around and landing another smack on her ass.

Good Lord. He was impossible.

“Hello?” Reggie was breathless as she answered her cell phone. She’d had to run to catch the phone call, and although she was feeling much better than she had been when she’d arrived three and a half weeks ago, she still wasn’t up to anything more than a stroll.

“Hello butterfly,” a dark voice drawled down the phone at her.

A cold, hard lump of clay formed in her stomach at the sound of that voice. What the hell? What phone was he calling from?

“What do you want?” she snapped, moving into the privacy of her room.

“Why, is that any way to speak to your husband?”

“We’re not married, Lance,” she snarled back at him, so angry it took all she had not to throw her cell phone across the room. But she couldn’t afford to replace the damn thing.

She heard him sigh and knew it for the fake sound it was. “I know, and it’s one of the biggest regrets about our relationship that I have.”

“What are you blathering on about, Lance?” She knew he’d never wanted to marry her. Oh, she’d thought he did when she’d moved in with him. She’d imagined the white picket fence along with the two point four kids and a dog. But

after a year went by and there was still no proposal she'd known the truth, deep inside. But still, she'd fooled herself.

“Butterfly, I should never have let you go. Tell me where you are and I'll come and get you. We'll pack up your things, bring you home. Haven't you been listening to my messages? I'm sorry I was angry in the first two, demanding you return my things, but I was just upset.”

The nerve of him! She stuttered, speechless for a brief moment until the rage kicked in, lending her a voice.

“What the hell makes you think I would want anything to do with you, Lance?”

“Come on, Reggie, you can't tell me you don't miss me. Miss our apartment, the club, the dinners out, the opera, the spa.”

“I don't want those things and I don't want you! You cheated on me! Kicked me out! Got me fired!”

“And you took my luggage!”

“So? You can't really care about that? You took all of my money! Do. Not. Call. Me. Again.” Reggie hung up the phone, breathing heavily as she turned it off. Shaking, she sat on the bed as thoughts raced continually around her head.

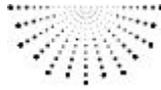
Alex has only been gone three days, but she missed him like crazy. She wished she could tell him about this, get his help. But Lance was her problem. Maybe she'd change her number. Urgh, but she'd just sent out some resumes to places in the closest town. She couldn't change her number now. She'd just have to be careful. It wasn't like he knew where she was, anyway.

She tried to keep herself busy by cleaning the fridge and pantry. But it didn't work. She couldn't get him out of her

head.

Finally, unable to stand it anymore, she headed back to her bedroom and pulled on her running gear. Running had always been her freedom, her escape, and right at that moment, nothing mattered except her need to get away.

CHAPTER SIX



As Alex drove the last leg of his journey, he found his mind wandering. He should have been thinking about all the jobs that awaited him once he got home, instead all he could think about was the small brunette living on his ranch. Perhaps he should take her out to dinner tonight. He didn't trust that she'd been eating enough while he was gone. He was determined to ensure she took care of herself.

If that meant he had to warm her ass to get her to take her health seriously, then he would. Alex was never one to shirk his duties. In fact, he'd always taken them very seriously, from his role as the oldest child, to running his ranch, and problem shooting for the company he owned with Matthias and Louis.

He'd missed her. A few text messages hadn't been enough. It was only a matter of time until she would be his.

He blinked and shook his head, certain that he was seeing things.

Because surely that wasn't, it couldn't be ...

"It damn well is!" he yelled, as he drove closer to the small figure running toward him up the steep hill. His breath caught in his chest, his throat constricting in fear as she swayed before slumping in a heap on the side of the road.

He drove over to her, barely managing to get his truck into park before leaping out, shouting her name.

“Reagan!” She didn’t move.

Alex landed beside her on his knees. Relief raced through him as he saw her chest rise and fall. Running his hands over her body gently, he searched for some sort of wound or injury to explain her sudden fall.

Finding nothing, Alex attempted to wake her, first calling her name, then patting her face gently. Worried about a head injury from where she’d fallen, he double-checked her head and neck before pulling her into his arms and carrying her to his truck. The only response he had was a few wheezing coughs, which had him frowning in worry.

Picking up his phone after doing a quick U-turn, he called the doctor and berated himself the entire time. He should have insisted she visit the doctor as soon as she’d arrived at the ranch. But she’d seemed to be doing better. Although, not good enough to go running.

Obviously, the woman had very little common sense. She couldn’t even follow orders properly. But that was all going to change.

Reggie woke with a groan as she was jostled about. She tried to fight her way into consciousness, but she felt sluggish, drained.

“Calm down, little one. You’re safe, I have you.” She knew that voice. Alex. Immediately, she relaxed, knowing

Alex would take care of her. Breathing in deeply, she burrowed her face into a warm, hard chest.

“Alex,” she murmured, wheezing.

“Just keep your eyes closed and relax.”

Reagan thought that sounded like a great idea. For some reason she was completely exhausted.

“Alex. Good to, see you. Bring her in here.”

Reagan stiffened at the sound of another man’s voice and moved her head away from Alex’s chest so she could look around her.

“Alex?” she said in alarm as she noticed they were in a doctor’s office. Confused, she began to panic. Reggie had no recollection of how she’d gotten here.

“Shh, little one. Calm down.”

“Where am I?” She stared over at the strange man standing across from them as Alex laid her on the examination table. “How did I get here?”

Reggie found she was clinging to Alex, unwilling to let go of the one familiar element in the room.

Alex leaned over her, softly caressing the hair off her face. “It’s okay, darlin’. You had a fall, so I’ve brought you to the doctor.”

“A fall? How?” She coughed, groaning slightly as memory returned. “I was running when I felt dizzy. I really fainted?” She looked up at him in confusion.

“I don’t know. That’s why the doctor needs to examine you.” He nodded towards the kind looking older man standing

a few feet away. “This is Doctor Harper. He used to take care of me as a kid. He’s going to give you a check over.”

Reggie grabbed his hand as he moved away. Ashamed at her fear, her clinginess, she still couldn’t bear for him to leave. “You’ll stay?”

He grinned at her slightly, his eyes concerned. “You couldn’t make me leave.”

By the time the doctor had examined her thoroughly, from listening to her chest to checking her reflexes, Reggie was absolutely exhausted. When he finally let her get off the examination table, she moved slowly to sit beside Alex. It felt as though she’d run a marathon.

“Well, Reagan, I’ll send away your blood samples for some tests tomorrow. But my initial diagnosis is bronchitis, and I think you’re probably low in iron as well. Do you run a lot?”

Reggie nodded.

“Hmm, not a good idea when you’re feeling sick, young lady. I’m going to write you a prescription for some antibiotics and iron tablets. You need plenty of rest, fluids, and good food.”

Reggie worriedly chewed at her lip as she realized that she didn’t have any money to pay for all of this.

“Don’t worry, Doc.” Alex spoke up grimly, pulling her attention back to the now. “We’ll be following your instructions to the letter. I thought she was doing better. But obviously I was wrong.”

We?

She didn't have the energy to worry about that right now. Instead, she concentrated on giving her thanks to the doctor.

"Nice to meet you, Doctor Harper. Will you send the bill to the ranch? I'm afraid I don't have my wallet on me." She watched as the doctor gave Alex an indecipherable look before he nodded, smiling.

"Of course, dear. Take care."

Before she could rise, Alex had her in his arms and was carrying her towards his truck. She should have argued, would have argued, but she simply didn't have the energy.

Reggie woke to find Alex carrying her once more, only this time it was into his house. They'd stopped once on the trip back to the ranch to fill her prescriptions.

"This is getting to be a habit," she murmured tiredly.

"I certainly don't mind carrying you, darlin'," he replied. "But I'd rather it wasn't because you were too exhausted to walk."

Sleepily, she wiped her eyes clear as she looked around in interest. She'd seen his house a few times, but had never been inside the impressive building. It was large, with two levels and a wrap-around porch covering three sides.

"Alex?" she yawned.

"Yes, little one?"

"Why are we at your house?"

"So I can keep an eye on you." He moved up the stairs easily, showing no sign of strain.

Reggie frowned. “Why would you need to keep an eye on me? I don’t have a concussion, and even if I did, Kelly’s at home.”

“Kelly may be at home, but she obviously has no control over you.” He walked into a beautiful room with a four-poster bed dominating one wall, and a large bay window looking out over the rolling hills of the ranch.

“Control over me?” she repeated as he laid her on the bed, and moved into what she assumed was a bathroom. The sound of running water accompanied him as he returned.

“You need someone to look after you, Reagan. I brought you here because you’re not going to get that at Kelly’s. She lets you away with whatever you want.”

Reggie looked up at him in disbelief. “I’m not a child, and Kelly is not my mother! I can take care of myself.”

He pierced her with a stern glare before coming to lean over her. Reggie found herself shrinking backward in fear as his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“Reagan?” His voice was casual, conversational. “You know I would never hit you, don’t you?”

Reggie nodded a little hesitantly.

“Hmm,” he said thoughtfully. “Let’s get you into the bath and then you’re going to bed.”

“But it’s five at night, and I don’t live here!” She attempted to sit up, only to have him lightly push her back down before he untied her sneakers.

“You will go to bed. You need rest. And you are staying here. You need a keeper. Therefore, you will stay here where I can monitor your behavior.”

“You are so arrogant!” she snarled.

“You can call me what you like. But I need to know you’re well, Reagan.”

She stared up at him, shocked by the fear in his voice. “Alex?”

“You scared me. When I saw you faint ... I thought you might have stopped breathing. I was terrified.”

Oh. She hadn’t realized ... no one had ever worried over her this much.

“Stay here. Please. For my sake as well as yours?”

“A-all right,” she agreed.

“Good girl. I’ll get you in the bath.”

She blushed. “I can do it.”

He didn’t look happy, but he nodded. “I’ll let you get undressed and climb in, but I’m leaving the door open and I will be checking in constantly.”

“Okay.”

He carried her into the bathroom, setting her down on the counter before he tested the water. He’d even put bubble bath in. When had anyone run her a bubble bath before?

“You were really worried about me?” Reggie asked.

“Of course I was worried about you.” He turned off the water, then spun to clasp her face between his hands. “You collapsed in front of me! You chose to compromise your health and your safety. Believe me once you’re well enough, you’re going to realize just how unacceptable that behavior is.”

Reggie narrowed her eyes at him. She did not like that sound of that at all.

“There are consequences for your behavior, Reagan. Now, bath. Let me know if you need me. I’ll get you something to wear.”

She undressed, then climbed into the bath, thinking about his words. Yeah, he was threatening to spank her. But he’d also been scared about something happening to her.

And that meant the world to her.

When it came time to get out, she just didn’t seem to have the energy. “Alex?”

“Yeah?” He was there immediately, staring down at her. Had he been on the other side of the door this whole time?

“Can you help me out?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Relief filled his face. Reaching in, he drew her out and set her down so he could briskly dry her. To her surprise, he didn’t try to grope her or stare at her.

Probably just as well, since she was so tired she barely knew her own name. He carried her into the bedroom and slipped a large T-shirt over her head. It went halfway down her thighs.

Then he tucked her into bed and sat beside her. “I’m going to get you something to eat and you’ve got to take your antibiotics.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You’ll eat, even if I have to feed it to you.”

“I really don’t want to be a bother. I should go back to Kelly’s.”

He clasped her face between his hands. “I’m not happy with you, Reagan.”

Panic stabbed her. Was this when he told her that she was too much work? That she should leave?

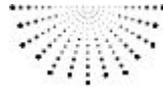
“But you aren’t going anywhere. You’re staying here so I can take care of you and ensure your health. All you have to do is listen to what I say. Understand? I’ll take care of the rest.”

It was so tempting to let him ... and what choice did she have? Well, she could make a fuss and force him to take her back to Kelly’s. But she didn’t want to go. She wanted to be here with him.

Finally, she nodded. “Okay.”

Relief filled his face. “That’s my good girl. Just rest.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



The next week was a period of enlightenment for Reggie. For the first time in her life, she felt cherished, protected, even loved. Not that Alex ever mentioned love. But he took such good care of her, making sure she ate and rested. The way he seemed to meet each of her needs before she even realized them surprised and delighted her.

In fact, life would have been perfect for Reggie if it hadn't been for two things. One was the fact that Lance continued to call her, using different numbers that she kept blocking. She only knew it was him because she'd started listening to one of the voicemails he'd left.

She'd managed to keep it a secret from Alex so far by keeping her phone off and only turning it back on when he was out of the room. But she was going to have to change her number. She hadn't had any calls from those resumes she'd sent out, so she didn't think she'd be losing out on a job.

The other thing worrying her was the threat Alex had made to spank her. Reggie kept telling herself that he would forget. Somehow, she didn't quite believe it.

"How are you feeling?" Alex asked her, looking up from where he was sitting in an armchair reading something on his phone.

Reggie was lying on the couch, flicking through the channels in disinterest. “Good. In fact, I was thinking I’m well enough to leave tomorrow.”

She didn’t want to.

Which is probably why she should. She was coming to rely on him, and that was never a good thing.

To her surprise, he nodded. A shaft of pain streaked through her. He wanted her to go.

Okay, she was being silly. She was the one who suggested she go. She couldn’t get upset because he was letting her.

“Doctor Harper was pleased with the way your chest sounds.” The doctor had made a house call yesterday, much to Reggie’s amazement. Who the heck made house calls anymore?

“So it looks like tonight is the night.” He set the paper down, looking at her firmly as she felt her stomach dance with nerves.

“The night for what?” she asked.

“For you to receive your punishment. You’re going to get twenty spanks with my hand on your bare bottom. Go upstairs to your room. I’ll be up shortly and I’ll expect to find you standing in the corner with your bottom bare.”

Reggie looked at him in amazement. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“Not at all, young lady. You knew the consequences for not taking care of yourself. Now, I want you to go get into position.”

When Reggie didn’t move, he held up a finger. “One.”

Another finger rose. “Two.”

But by that time, she was off the couch and moving up the stairs. This was it. It was happening.

And she didn't know whether she felt terrified or relieved.

Alex walked up the stairs slowly, pondering his next move. He fully expected for Reggie to balk at her punishment. After all, no one liked to be punished. That was the whole point. To enforce the fact that her behavior was unacceptable, so that the next time she went to deliberately put herself in harm's way, she'd think twice.

However, he didn't like the look of fear and resignation that had come over her face. A little fear he could understand. This was her first time being disciplined, and she didn't really know what to expect from him. But he didn't want her to be scared.

When he walked into his bedroom, she was in the corner with her bottom on display. She'd stripped off her bottom half entirely, so she was just wearing a T-shirt. That was a surprise. But what was more of a shock was the way she was shaking.

“Little one, what's wrong?” He moved immediately towards her, concerned that she'd hurt herself. He gently turned her to face him. Her flinch as he touched her rocked him. “Darlin', are you scared of me?”

“Please,” she spoke so quietly it was almost a strain to hear her. “Just get it over with.”

“Okay, darlin'. We need to talk.” He drew her up into his arms and then sat on the bed, holding her on his lap with his

back resting against the headboard. Rocking her, he crooned under his breath soothingly, his hand rubbing her back until her shivers subsided.

“Just what did you think I was going to do to you, darlin’?” he asked.

“Y-you said y-you were going t-to punish me.”

“And did I not explain exactly what that would entail?” he asked.

“Y-yes.”

“So repeat it back to me.”

“You said you were going to spank my bare bottom with your hand.”

“Right. Why didn’t you tell me that the thought of that terrifies you? You’ve known this was coming for a while, little one.” He kept his voice low, soothing, hoping she would trust him with her secrets.

“It’s not that. Well, I mean, it kind of is ... ” She took in a deep breath. “I just ... I can’t ... I don’t know if I can let you spank me.”

“All right,” he said easily. “Why haven’t you said anything before now?”

“Because I know that you won’t want to be with me!” she blurted out.

“Because I can’t spank you?”

“Exactly! This is the sort of relationship you want and I can’t give it to you, so I might as well leave.”

“And why are you so terrified of being spanked? Were you never spanked as a child?”

“I was punished all the time. Scratched, pinched, my hair pulled. I was told I was useless, dumb, a waste of space.”

“Oh, baby.” Murderous rage filled him. No wonder she was scared. He cursed himself for not questioning her more about her past. “Who?”

“My parents,” she whispered.

“Those assholes. No one knew? Helped?”

“Eventually, my grandma found out what was going on. She told them she was taking me. After that, life was a lot better. I haven’t seen them since the day she took me with her.”

“A good woman.”

“The best. She died during my first year of college.”

His poor girl.

“Baby girl, you should have told me. I never want to scare you.”

“I should just go now,” she said in a low voice. “I’m sorry.”

He tilted her face back, kissing her lightly. “You don’t need to go anywhere, baby.”

“But ... but I can’t give you the sort of relationship you want.”

“We can still have a domestic discipline relationship. It’s just that spankings wouldn’t be part of the discipline.”

“What ... what would be?” she asked, staring up at him.

“Hmm, things like corner time, writing lines, being grounded. I could take away your phone, use of your car. I could edge you for hours without letting you come. Make you

wear an anal plug and a clit tickler. There are lots of punishments I could use. This isn't the end of us. You're not leaving me that easily. I love you, Reagan."

She gaped at him.

Had he just said that? He hadn't, right?

"It's too soon," she whispered.

"Says who? Are you telling me I don't know what I'm feeling?"

Nope. She wasn't going to tell him that. She didn't think anyone would dare.

"Really?" she asked. "You love me?"

He cupped her face with his hand. "I love you."

Her lips trembled. "I'm scared."

"Of me?"

"That this will all go away. That you'll change your mind once you really know me."

"I do really know you, and something you should know about me is that when I claim something, I keep it. You're mine, Reagan. For life."

It should scare her. It was too soon. But it actually eased the knot of worry and fear in her tummy. She knew that Alex McKenzie didn't say what he didn't mean.

"I love you and I want to take care of you. Make sure that you're happy and healthy. You know the sort of relationship I want. It doesn't have to involve spankings, but I will be the head of our household. I will make the rules. And I will protect and cherish you. But if it's something you don't want, tell me now."

This was it.

Now or nothing.

And the thought of not being with him was enough to make her cry.

“I love you, Alex McKenzie. I want to be with you too.”

He let out a whoop and stood with her in his arms, spinning. She found herself giggling at his excitement.

“Thank you, baby. You’ll see, I’ll look after you.”

“I know. I trust you.” And she did. She couldn’t love him, couldn’t have stayed here with him if she didn’t. It hit her then exactly how much she trusted him, wanted him. All of him.

“I want you to spank me,” she told him.

He sat on the side of the bed with her on his lap. “Baby, not if you’re scared.”

“I am. But I trust you. I know this isn’t like what ... what my parents did to me. I can’t promise I won’t freak out, though.”

“It’s all right. If you find it scares you, then we’ll choose another punishment.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Or no punishment at all?”

“That’s not happening. You’ll be getting punished. You put yourself at risk and that’s unacceptable to me. I care about you too much to let you harm yourself. A punishment will remind you next time you think about doing something naughty.”

That made her feel all squirmy inside. Embarrassed and happy. It was a weird combination.

“If you need me to stop, yell red. And you can write lines instead. As well as being grounded for a week.”

“A week!” she protested.

He gave her a stern look. “Yes.”

The spanking was starting to sound better and better.

“All right, I think it’s best to start, so you don’t keep worrying.” He slid her around so she was lying over his lap instead of sitting on him.

“Why are you being punished?” he asked, pushing her top up over her bare bottom.

“Because I went running while I was sick.”

“And what did I say would happen to you if you went running while you were still sick?” he asked, rubbing her bottom.

“Y-you said you would spank me.”

“That’s right. Remember, just say red if this is too much for you and we’ll switch to another punishment.”

His hand landed on her ass, the sting sharper than she had imagined. He didn’t hesitate, didn’t stick to a pattern, and he wasn’t taking things easy on her.

The first five landed so quickly, she could barely catch her breath. As the next few landed, she started kicking her legs.

She couldn’t. It was too much!

“Oww! No!” she cried.

He stopped. Oh, thank God it was over.

“That wasn’t your safeword, but we’re halfway through, so I thought I’d check in. Do you need to stop?”

Halfway? Damn it.

Did she need to stop? Sure, it was painful and embarrassing. But not anything she couldn't handle.

“No. I don't need to stop.”

“That's my good girl. Last ten.”

She liked being his good girl. She just wished she didn't have to have her butt roasted to be his good girl.

Soon, her ass was flaming hot. The man obviously had a hand made of wood as he laid down each punishing smack.

When he finally stopped, she just lay on his lap and sobbed heavily. His hand rubbed her back soothingly while she continued to cry. Turning her over, he settled her on his lap with her bottom resting to one side and hugged her tight.

Okay, this part she liked.

“I know that you don't know me very well, darlin', but you scared me to death. When I saw you collapse, I was terrified. I don't ever want to feel like that again. You hear me, Reagan?”

“Y-yes.”

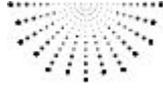
Her sobs grew harsher. The release from the pressure of the last few weeks, hell the last few years, seemed to pour out of her as she cried against his chest.

“That's right, darlin' girl, cry it all out while I hold you close. That's it, baby.” Reggie listened to him crooning softly to her as he lay back on the bed and tucked her in close to his chest. Still sniffing, she just lay there and let him hold her.

It was like a weight had lifted off her. She felt so much lighter. She hadn't realized that she'd been feeling so guilty about worrying him like she had.

“My good girl. Just go to sleep. I have you and I’m never letting go.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Pain in her backside woke her as she rolled onto her back.

“Ow, son of a—”

“You may want to rethink that sentence, darlin’.”

Reggie looked up as Alex walked into the bedroom, all refreshed and cheerful looking.

“What am I meant to say when my ass hurts like hell because someone has a hand like a wooden paddle?”

“Hmm, a wooden paddle, huh? Not a bad idea, actually.” He sat a tray down on the bedside table. Reggie glanced over to see a full breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and orange juice.

“No way. Your hand is quite enough, thank you. I’m not going to be able to sit for a week as it is,” she grumbled, lying on her side.

He chuckled, taking a seat next to her on the bed.

“Put a pillow under your bottom. It should help.” Reggie frowned at him, trying desperately to be irritated.

She slid the pillow under her ass. Okay, it helped a little. “I should be furious with you. My bottom really hurts.”

“It’s meant to hurt, little one. Otherwise you wouldn’t remember this and think twice the next time you go to do something naughty.”

“Believe me, I won’t forget being spanked. And I don’t want one again anytime soon.”

He tilted her face back. “But you’d be all right with that punishment again? I didn’t scare you? Make you fear me?”

The worry on his face floored her. And she slid onto her knees to wrap her arms around him. “No, you could never scare me, Alex McKenzie. I trust and love you.”

“Good. I’m glad.” He kissed her gently. “Now, sit back and eat your breakfast.”

There was Sir Bossy again.

When she sat back, a napkin was placed over her lap before a forkful of scrambled eggs danced in front of her mouth.

“Now, open your mouth for the train.”

She glared at him.

He grinned. “Seriously sweetheart, eat up.”

“I don’t really feel like scrambled eggs. I’ll just have the toast.” There was no way she was eating all of this.

“You’ll have some eggs and bacon as well. You need to build up your strength.”

Reggie gulped at his firm tone of voice before she opened her mouth and let him place the most delicious scrambled eggs she’d ever tasted into her mouth. He continued to feed her and, for once, Reggie just sat there and let someone else take care of her.

“Good girl,” he praised as he leaned in and kissed her forehead when she’d finished nearly half of the huge plate of food.

Darn, she was close to exploding.

“Alex?” she asked.

“Yes, darlin’?”

“We, um, well ... if we love each other and stuff and, well ... you haven’t mentioned, uh ...”

Spit it out, Reggie.

“Sex?”

She blushed. “Umm, yes. Are we? I mean ... do you want to?”

“Darlin’, we most definitely are, and I really, really want to.” He smiled at her wickedly as her face flamed. “But you’ve been sick, and then I had to punish you. Plus, we still have some unfinished business to talk about.”

“Yes, but perhaps we could talk later?” Moving onto her knees, she kissed his lips softly, caressingly, but when he didn’t respond she leaned back in disappointment, doubting herself.

Then, with a loud groan, he took her mouth with his. With his thumb on her chin, he pulled her mouth open. He caressed and sucked, and drove her so crazy that she was burning alive with sensation.

She felt wild, out of control, and she loved every single second of it. He kissed his way down her neck, suckling and nibbling until he got to her T-shirt. He whipped it off. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath. Suddenly, her nipple was surrounded by warmth.

The feel of his mouth sucking on her sensitive nipple sent arcs of lightning right to her clit. She felt close to coming from just his mouth on her nipple alone.

He laid her on her back, leaning over her, his gaze taking her in hungrily.

“Don’t come until I say so, darlin’,” he murmured before his mouth moved to her other nipple, and his hand moved down her stomach to cup her mound, his finger slipping just slightly between her lips.

“Are you trying to kill me? You enjoy torturing me, don’t you?” she groaned as he just laughed and lightly rubbed her clit.

“Oh wow, oh wow.” Reggie found herself writhing on the bed as her orgasm built.

“I love how responsive you are. So beautiful, so gorgeous.” His finger began to circle her clit slowly, and tremors raced through her with the force of a tidal wave.

“Please, Alex, please, please,” she begged when she couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Please what?”

She shook her head.

“Say it,” he crooned. “Say it now, darlin’.”

“Oh hell, please let me come, Alex, please!”

“Come then, baby, come.” So she did, crying out as she shuddered through the most explosive orgasm she’d ever experienced.

“That was so sexy.”

Reggie opened her eyes to see Alex staring down at her, a look of such incredible hunger and love on his face. She blushed as she realized he'd watched her while she'd come. But before her embarrassment consumed her, her attention was caught by his naked chest, his very broad, very muscular chest.

"Yummy," she murmured as she sat, then licked over his nipple. He let out a chuckle, which turned into a groan as she reached for his cock through his pajama pants, squeezing it firmly.

"Oh no, darlin'. You start doing that and I am not going to last, and I really want to last." He pressed her back once more before standing and stripping. Dear God, he was gorgeous. Thick with muscle, he had wide shoulders and abs that made her want to lick him all over. And his dick.

Good Lord, it was long and delicious looking.

"Do I need to use a condom?" he asked, pulling her attention away from his body.

"I ... yeah ... probably best knowing Lance was sleeping around on me." She hadn't even thought of that.

"We'll both get tested for our peace of mind, because I really don't like the idea of anything between us." Reaching into the nightstand drawer, he drew out a condom and slipped on his firm, fat cock.

Then he lay back next to her before kissing his way down her stomach.

He kissed the top of her mound. Then his tongue slid between her slick lips. He licked and swirled his tongue around her clit, playing with her until she came yet again in a shattering explosion.

That was when he entered her, pushing inside her. He drove himself in and out. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, just holding on as he fucked her with hard, fast thrusts.

When he came, she felt a rush of pleasure from just watching him lose complete control. From knowing she did this to him.

That she was his.

Reggie stared down at the scales in shock before she let out a small scream. About a week had passed since her spanking. Living with Alex was actually surprisingly easy. When he wasn't threatening to spank her, that is.

Alex raced into the bathroom, deep concern on his face, and she quickly stepped off the scales, trying to unobtrusively push them back beneath the floating cabinet.

“What’s wrong? Did you hurt yourself?” he asked.

“No, no.” She blushed as he turned her in a full circle, obviously searching for bruises or bleeding. “I’m fine, Alex. I just saw a grey hair,” she lied.

He stood back and crossed his arms, while staring down at her with one eyebrow quirked. By now, she knew that look. It meant she was getting herself into trouble.

“What would you need to hide so badly that you’d lie to me?” His voice was soft, calm, and all the scarier for it. Reggie gulped as she stood there, naked and blushing.

Her chin rose as she threw her shoulders back. She might be naked, but she still had some pride.

“Some things are still private, Alex. I don’t have to tell you everything.”

His eyes narrowed, and she almost lost her nerve. Then he nodded. “You’re right, some things are private.”

Reggie’s shoulders slumped in relief.

“However, there will be no secrets between us, and there will certainly be no lies. When I ask you a question, I expect an honest answer. If you lie to me, if you keep things from me, if you break the rules, then your butt will pay. You know this, Reagan, and yet you’re still lying, and you’re still keeping secrets.” A surge of guilt raced through Reggie as she bit at her lower lip.

More secrets than he knew. Although she hadn’t heard from Lance in a while.

“Some things are private, but nothing that causes you to scream and turn pale is going to be.”

She wrinkled her nose at him as her bottom tingled in a warning that she didn’t need. She already knew she was in trouble.

“So what the hell is private?” she asked, disgruntled.

His lips quirked up in a smile as he drawled, “Not much, darlin’, not much.”

Breathing out a sigh, she glared up at him while he stood there calmly waiting.

“Damn it, Alex. I don’t want to tell you.”

“Then you shouldn’t have lied. If it’s something worth lying about, then I think it’s something I need to know about. What caused you to scream?” His voice became harder,

implacable, and she knew he was capable of waiting right there until she answered him. Stubborn male.

“The scales. The scales caused me to scream,” she admitted reluctantly as he allowed her to push past him and walk into the bedroom.

“The scales caused you to scream?” he spoke slowly.

“Not the scales themselves,” she replied as she searched for some clothes. “The fact that I’ve put on weight.”

“Turn around and look at me, please.” She knew that voice, knew he expected immediate obedience.

Reggie turned slowly. He had his arms crossed again as he leaned against the doorway between the bedroom and the bathroom.

“Explain why you’re so upset about putting on a little weight?”

“I’m not upset!” Why was she lying to him? Urgh!

“Come here.” He crooked a finger at her, and she moved toward him. As soon as she got within reach, he grabbed her, carrying her to the bed where he sat before he arranged her so she was lying face down on his lap.

“Hey!” she squealed. A sharp smack to her ass had her wriggling harder, but he easily held her in place.

“What are you doing? I didn’t break a rule!”

“You’re not being honest with me. And I thought this position might help remind you to be honest.”

“Okay, okay,” she said hastily. “I’m upset about putting on weight because of Lance! He, well he didn’t like me putting on any weight. When I met him, I was twenty pounds heavier

than I am now. He said I needed to lose ten pounds of weight before I could move in with him. So I dieted and exercised. I was so stupid!” Alex turned her over, holding her on his lap.

Reggie rubbed her face tiredly. “Once I lost the ten pounds, I stupidly thought it would stop there. But he wanted me to lose more, and I wanted him to love me.” She leaned against his chest. “So he put me on a diet and each week I had to hop on the scales in front of him, if I lost weight then he was happy, if I was the same he upped my exercise, and if I put on weight, he ... he ...”

“He what, little one?” Alex rubbed her back gently.

“He’d beat me down with his words, telling me how ugly I was, how pitiful, that I wasn’t good enough for him.” She began to cry in earnest, large sobs that shook her slight body.

“Oh, baby,” Alex murmured, rocking her. “You know none of that’s true, right?”

She felt him tense before she shook her head. “No, I know. But he’s just got me so messed up. I hear his voice in my head, telling me that I’m ugly and awful and it’s hard not to listen.”

“Darlin’, you are not fat. And all that matters is that you’re healthy. How you feel about yourself. I just want you to be happy and well. Do you think we should get you a therapist?”

A therapist? No. Maybe.

“I don’t know. Perhaps.”

He nodded, then set her on the bed.

“Wait here.” Turning, he walked into the bathroom before returning to the bedroom carrying the scales. Reggie couldn’t help but gulp in worry.

But instead of setting them down in front of her, he moved to the window. Opening it, he peered out before throwing the scales out of it.

“Alex!” she admonished with a grin before racing over to the window to look down on the smashed scales lying on the ground.

Alex hugged her from behind, kissing her neck. “We don’t need those.”

It wasn’t like things were going to magically change in her head. But she got what he was saying. He wasn’t Lance.

“We’ll find a therapist. We’ll get that asshole out of your head. I promise,” he told her.

“Thank you.”

Reggie yawned as she studied the computer screen. Desperate for a job, she despaired at the small amount of options open to her. She’d had no luck with anything close by, so she’d turned to looking at jobs in the city, although her heart really wasn’t in it. The thought of having to leave the ranch, leave Alex and go work in the city again filled her with dread.

Two months had passed since she’d left Lance and, as hurtful as it had been at the time, she knew him cheating on her was actually the best thing to happen to her. Because now she was far away from his toxicity. Because she was with someone who loved her and wanted what was best for her.

Her eyes blurred, and she let out a deep yawn, thinking longingly of Alex and their bed. He’d gone up a short time ago, and she’d told him she’d follow.

Reggie yawned again as the door to the study opened and Alex walked inside. “Time for bed, darlin’,” he spoke firmly.

“Just a little longer,” she replied absently, having spied a job advertisement that had potential.

“It’s two a.m., Reagan, and you’re going to bed.”

Reagan looked at the clock in shock, wondering where the last three hours had gone. “Okay, I’ll be up shortly.”

“You won’t be up shortly,” he said, moving over to pick her up.

“Damn it, Alex. Let me go! I’m busy.” She tried to wriggle free.

“Reagan, I know you’re tired, but you better stop this tantrum right now.” Reggie heard the clear warning in his tone, but she simply didn’t care.

She could go to bed whenever she chose to!

Reggie was too busy trying to free herself from his tight grasp to notice that he’d sat in her newly vacated chair. It wasn’t until she found herself positioned face down over his lap that she realized what he intended.

Her struggles renewed themselves with vigor, but he easily ignored her, pushing down her pajama bottoms and panties until her bottom was exposed to the air.

Realizing the futility of fighting, Reggie turned to pleading her case.

“Alex, I’m sorry. I’ll go to bed now. You’re right, I’m tired. A good night’s sleep and we can both forget this happened, right?” She spoke up hopefully, but inside she knew how her argument was going to be received.

Alex snorted. Yep, he was so predictable sometimes. He rubbed her bottom as it tensed in anticipation of a smack.

“You’ve been warned about this before, Reagan. You stay up late, then you’re grumpy and tired the next morning. Plus, it’s not healthy for you. I think I’ve been far too lenient with you lately.”

Lenient, her ass! It seemed like she and her poor bottom were constantly in some sort of strife.

“Alex, please,” she began to cry softly, totally undone. “I’m just so tired.”

He rubbed her back soothingly. “I know you are, baby. You’re tired, and you’re stressed, and enough is enough. I’ve had enough of you walking around here with dark circles under your eyes, all pale and grouchy. That’s why I’m stepping in. From now on, you have a bedtime of ten p.m., lights out at eleven. Understand?”

Reggie’s jaw dropped. A bedtime? Was he insane?

“That’s crazy, Alex. You can’t give me a bedtime!”

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Reggie yelped as his hand landed heavily on her ass. Her hands went immediately to her backside, trying in vain to protect it. But he’d already stopped smacking her, moving his hand to rub her thighs instead.

“Want to change what you just said, darlin’?”

Reggie rubbed her stinging bottom frantically while she had the chance.

“I’m not a child you can give a bedtime to, Alex. I’m a grown woman who can make her own decisions.”

Her hands were clasped and held at the small of her back as his other hand rained thunder onto her bottom. She felt her butt cheeks shake under each spank.

“Okay, okay,” she yelled out as he continued to spank her. “I give in.”

“How do you give in?” he asked as his hand stilled.

“I’ll go to bed at ten,” she muttered reluctantly.

“And?” He rubbed her sore bottom, bringing her a little relief.

“And lights will go out at eleven,” she groaned as he touched a particularly sore spot.

“Good,” his voice was rich with satisfaction. “You can also have a nap tomorrow afternoon.”

She groaned. “Yes, I’ll have a nap.”

“Good girl.” His praise ran through her, warming her from the inside out. He turned her over, cuddling her against his chest.

“Now, what was so damn important that you had to stay up so late?” Alex moved his hand towards the mouse to refresh the sleeping screen.

“No!” She reached out too late to grab his hand.

“What is this?” He peered at the screen before turning to look down at her.

“It’s a job searching site,” she muttered reluctantly.

“Why are you looking for a job?”

She rolled her eyes, although she kept her head safely lowered so he couldn’t see her.

“Ahh, because I need a job?” She couldn’t stop the sarcasm from slipping through. “I’m broke, Alex. I need money, and the only way I’m going to get that is if I get a job.”

He leaned back in the chair to stare down at her thoughtfully, one finger rubbing against his cheek. “So you’re planning to move to the city and get a job, and you didn’t think I needed to know? Or were you going to travel back and forth for each day?”

Suddenly, she shattered. It was all too much, the stress, the worry, the thought of having to be away from Alex for long periods of time. Tears ran in rivulets down her face. “I don’t want to. But there’s nothing for me to do here. I sent out resumes and got nothing. I didn’t want to tell you until I’d made up my mind what I was going to do.”

“Baby, I can’t believe you haven’t talked to me about this. You know I’d provide whatever you need.”

“But that’s not the way it works. I have to make my own way.”

“I don’t want you away from the ranch for long hours. But I might have another idea,” he said as she went to protest. “I need someone to help with paperwork. For the ranch and our business.”

“Are you just making that up?” she asked suspiciously.

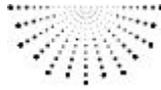
“Not at all. And if you’d talked to me about this earlier, I would have told you that. And you wouldn’t have been worrying about this.”

Oops.

Standing, he lifted her into his arms and carried her up to bed. “Tomorrow, we’ll have a chat about you keeping things from me.”

Great. She was looking forward to that.

CHAPTER NINE



“We have an announcement to make!”

Kelly sounded so happy that Reggie smiled in response, even as she glared warningly at Alex. She’d already filled her plate with as much as she wanted to eat, but as usual Alex thought he knew better. He’d just grabbed her plate without a word and began to pile it up higher with the dinner Kelly had prepared for them.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense, Kel. What is it?” she asked.

“We’re pregnant!”

“Oh wow, that’s wonderful!”

“Congratulations!” Alex said with a wide grin.

She hugged both Colin and Kelly, thrilled for them. It was weird to think she’d been living here for less than three months and yet so much had changed. Her life was better now. She felt loved and secure. Even if she couldn’t sit well a lot of the time. She’d had her first session online with a therapist yesterday, and even though it had been draining, she felt so much lighter after.

Best of all, she hadn’t heard from Lance in well over a week. Finally, he’d given up.

She'd also started working for Alex. And he hadn't been making anything up. He really did need her help with his paperwork. She'd been worried about working and living together, but so far everything was going really well.

Reggie ate as much as she could, although she left half her plate full. She stood and helped Kelly clear the table. In the kitchen, she found her friend at the sink, staring out into the dark night.

"Kel?" she asked softly as her best friend jumped in fright. "Sorry." She laid an arm around Kelly's shoulders, alarmed as she felt them shake. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," Kelly said, swiping at the tears running down her face.

"What's wrong?" Reggie asked in concern. She couldn't remember a time when Kelly had ever cried.

"Oh, it's silly. I'm sure it's just hormones or something."

"Kelly," Reggie adopted Alex's stern tone. The one he used when he knew she was hiding something, and let her know that she better speak up now unless she wanted a spanking.

Kelly let out a snort of laughter. "You know, you sounded just like Alex then. How is it going with you two, anyway?"

"Uh-uh, tell me what's wrong."

"Oh." Kelly turned around and hopped onto the kitchen bench, and Reggie followed her lead. "It's silly, really. I'm sure it's just hormones. It's just, well, since we found out I'm pregnant, Colin hasn't touched me, not once. He thinks I'm fragile or something." Kelly sounded bewildered and Reggie snorted.

“Men,” she commiserated, shaking her head as she winked at her friend. “They’re so foolish sometimes. Kel, he’s probably worried about hurting you. It is his first baby.”

“But what if he doesn’t find me attractive anymore now that I’m fat?”

“Kel! You’re ten weeks pregnant. You’re not even showing!”

“I know, but I will be, and if he doesn’t want to have sex with me now, what will he be like when I’m as big as a house?”

“Kelly Ann, you listen to me. That’s just stupid! You’ll be sexy no matter what size you are. My advice is to seduce him, get out your sexiest negligee and seduce that man. Then, when you’re all high on post-coital bliss, tell him what you’re worrying about. I think you’ll find you have nothing to worry about.”

“You think so?”

Reggie nodded. “I do. And if you do have something to worry about, I’ll kick his ass for you. It’s my right as a best friend and honorary auntie.”

Kelly let out a snort of laughter.

“Hey! What’s so funny?” she asked.

“The image of you kicking Colin’s ass. I can just see you trying to hit him while he tries desperately not to hurt you.”

“Hey, I may be little, but I’m a scrapper.”

“You certainly are.” Kelly gave her a warm smile. “So, you dodged the question before, but how is everything between you and Alex?”

“Ahh, good I think.”

“You think?” Kelly jumped off the bench and began to load up the dishwasher.

“Well, I’ve never been the best at relationships, Kel, you know that. What if I mess it up?”

“Do you love him?” Kelly looked over at her in concern.

“Yes, yes, I do.”

“Good,” Kelly nodded firmly. “Because the way he looks at you, it’s like you’re his whole world. Alex isn’t the casual type. He’d never move someone into his house whom he wasn’t completely serious about.”

“I know, he’s old-fashioned. But if he’s so old-fashioned, then why hasn’t he ... ” her voice drifted off, unable to say it.

But she didn’t have to, like a true best friend Kelly knew what she was trying to say. “Asked you to marry him?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, hon.” Kelly gave her a huge hug, rocking her slightly. “Just give him a chance.”

“I’m trying.” It was just her silly self-doubts. It had only been a few months for goodness sake. She was being foolish.

“Reagan, time to leave.” Alex’s voice made both women jump and giggle. They were still giggling as they walked into the foyer to find Alex and Colin waiting. Both men gave the women a strange look, but didn’t say anything about their silly grins as Alex bundled Reggie up in her coat for the short walk to the truck.

Once they had said their goodbyes, Alex took Reggie’s hand and guided her toward the passenger seat of his truck.

He'd insisted on driving rather than walking, stating it was too cold at night for her to walk around.

Clasping her around the waist, he lifted her into her seat before she could try to haul herself into the high cab. Reaching across her, he buckled in her seatbelt, making Reggie gasp as his arm brushed her breasts, causing her nipples to harden.

“What, no moaning about how you're capable of doing up your own belt? Or how you want to drive for a change?” he teased as he climbed into the driver's seat and started the truck.

Reggie shook her head, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of marriage and babies. Cool air hit her face, bringing her sharply back to reality. Looking around, she was surprised to see they were already home. No, this wasn't her home, it was Alex's place. Reggie didn't have a home, she never had.

As she walked into the living room with him, her phone rang.

“Who on earth calls at this time of night?” Alex asked.

Reggie answered it.

Please don't be Lance.

“H-hello?” She tried to move out of the living room, but Alex was blocking the door so the best she could do was turn to look out at the moonlight.

“Hello, Reg? It's me, Angel.”

Reggie's shoulders slumped in relief at her co-worker's voice. Well, ex-co-worker.

“Hi, Angel. What can I do for you?” Reggie looked over her shoulder at Alex, who was busy turning the T.V. on to the news channel.

“I have some documents for you from HR. Probably a statement for your last pay or something. Just wondered if you wanted it forwarded on?”

“Umm, sure,” Reggie answered distractedly, her gaze caught up in the strong profile of the man she loved.

Why was she worrying about whether he wanted to marry her? He was here with her. He loved her. She needed to be happy with that and not think about what was wrong. For once, she was going to be positive.

Quickly giving Angel her new address, she hung up and turned off the phone before walking over to Alex, hugging him from behind.

“Hey.” He turned and clasped her against his chest, rocking her slightly. “What’s all this for?”

Reggie shrugged. “Just because I wanted to. I love having your arms around me. It makes me feel so safe.”

“Anytime, darlin’. Anytime.”

Reggie lay on the sofa, her head resting against Alex’s chest as they both watched a crappy horror movie on T.V.

“Eek!” she screamed as she hid her face against Alex’s thigh at a particularly scary part. Alex chuckled and rubbed her back soothingly.

“Perhaps this movie is a little scary for you, little one. We don’t want you having nightmares.”

“I’m not a child, Alex.”

He moved, reaching down further to pat her still throbbing ass. “Not a child, but you are my little one. And you looked so cute when you were over my lap earlier getting a spanking. Your legs were scissor kicking while your little bottom went from lily white to a very angry red. But perhaps I didn’t spank you hard enough.”

Reggie glared up at him, knowing he was teasing, but still too sore from her spanking earlier to laugh it off. “You spanked me quite hard enough, thank you very much.”

And he had. He’d caught her up a ladder when he had specifically told her he didn’t want her climbing it without him. First, he’d ordered her down from the ladder which had been up against the inside wall of the barn, then grabbing her by the hand he’d made her strip off her pants and lay over a hay bale, where he proceeded to spank her ass.

Once he’d reduced her to a sobbing, heaving mess, he’d held her and made her promise that she wouldn’t climb up a ladder again without him.

Afterward, he’d made love to her in the barn before ordering her inside for a nap. Which is why it was getting close to her bedtime, and she was still wide awake.

Suddenly, the front door rattled with the force of a powerful knock. Before Reggie could move, they both heard it open and Alex stiffened.

“Yo, Alex, it’s just me.”

Alex rose to his feet as a tall, dark-haired man appeared. “Matt, good to see you.”

The stranger moved into the living room. He was smiling, but to Reggie, it didn’t look like a very happy smile.

“You too, big brother.”

Reggie peered up at him in interest. So this rather angry-looking man must be Alex's brother, Matthias. The family resemblance was there in the dark hair and the way they both held themselves so confidently. But where Alex had laugh lines on his face and warm brown eyes, this man's icy blue eyes seemed to be stern and unbending, like he didn't have much to smile about.

Alex was smiling as he walked forward and clasped the slightly shorter man in his arms for a brief hug. "This is a surprise. I didn't realize you were coming tonight."

"Neither did I," Matthias replied. "But I had a gap in my schedule, and I needed to get away for a while."

Alex opened his mouth to ask more, but Matthias directed his attention toward Reggie, who was now standing awkwardly by the sofa.

"Sorry," Alex said. "Reagan, my younger brother Matthias and this is Reagan."

"Reagan, lovely to meet you." Reagan shook his firm hand, surprised by its warmth. She'd expected his temperature to run cool.

"Nice to meet you too, Matthias. Call me Reggie."

"Reagan was just going to bed," Alex stated. Moving to her side, he placed an arm around her and kissed her forehead, ignoring her blush of embarrassment.

"Well then, I look forward to getting to know you better tomorrow," Matthias said.

Matthias' manners were smooth, but she could sense his impatience. It was obvious that he wanted to speak to Alex alone, so Reggie just nodded, and moved quickly from the room.

Heading up the stairs, Reggie came to a stop, slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand as she swore softly. She'd left her cell phone in the living room. Quietly, she walked back towards the living room, knowing that Alex wasn't going to be happy with her, but she didn't want to leave her phone there.

Coming to a stop outside the open door, she prepared to announce her re-entrance but froze as she heard her name mentioned.

"You didn't tell me she was living with you," Matthias said.

Reggie waited, her lips clasped tight, for Alex's answer.

"It wasn't important," Alex answered as Reggie's stomach dropped in shock and disappointment.

"Not important? You have a woman living here and you don't think it's important? You've never had a woman live here before."

Reggie felt her heart lift with that statement.

"And she has a bedtime, huh? How ... um ... youthful."

She heard Alex sigh.

"Don't be an ass, Matthias."

"Do you want me to get rid of her for you? Looks like a bit of a rabbit to me, scared little thing."

"And since when do I need you to do my dirty work, Matt?"

Reggie felt her heart freeze. Why wasn't he protesting, telling his brother how much he loved her?

"I know you. You're an old-fashioned guy. So when are the two of you getting married?" Matthias asked.

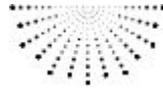
“I haven’t asked her.”

“Huh, interesting. You’re not going to ask her, are you? Are you just stringing her along?”

“You know what? You’re right.” Reggie held her breath as she backed away from the doorway.

She’d heard enough.

CHAPTER TEN



“You’re right about the fact that I’m old-fashioned. I am going to marry her. I’m just waiting for the right moment. The last thing I want is to scare her and make her run.” He held up a hand as Matthias went to speak. “And she is *not* a scared little rabbit. She’s much tougher than she looks. Now, will you quit trying to wind me up?”

“But it’s so much fun.” Alex watched Matthias smile sourly and wondered how he’d failed this brother. As a child, Matt had always been easygoing, the quickest to laugh and forgive. But he’d changed into someone darker, nastier. But no matter what, he was still Alex’s brother, and he loved him.

“Don’t disrespect my girl, Matt. I won’t be forgiving.”

“I’ll be nice. I just wanted to make sure you were going to do the right thing by her.”

Alex let out a sigh of frustration, well aware he was being teased.

“When have I ever not done the right thing? I love her. I even have the ring. Reagan just needs some time to trust me before I propose, okay? Happy now?”

“Ecstatic, I—” Matthias replied sarcastically, before a cheerful ringtone interrupted him. Both men looked over at the

buzzing metallic red cell phone vibrating on the coffee table.

“Want me to run and get Reggie?” Matthias offered, but Alex shook his head absently before pressing a button and holding the phone to his ear. He listened for a moment before speaking.

“Who is this? No. Is this Lance? She doesn’t want to speak to you. Do not call her again, you understand me?” He pulled the phone away and looked at it with a frown. “Bastard hung up on me.”

“Who was it?” Matt asked.

“Unknown number, but it was her ex.”

“He been hassling her?”

“Not that I know of,” Alex murmured absently as he stared down at her phone. “From the look of her call register, she’s been getting a few unknown calls. They could have been him. Damn it.”

“Did you hear a car start?” Matthias asked, standing. Both men rushed outside, just in time to see the tail lights of Reggie’s car disappear around the bend.

“Oh, that girl is in so much trouble,” Matthias drawled while a speechless Alex just nodded in agreement. She certainly was.

Alex frowned. “I was so sure she would be here.” He paced Kelly and Colin’s living room floor. “Where would she go?”

Kelly stared up at him with worry. “I don’t know. What did you say to her?”

“Nothing, at least nothing I can think of. She wasn’t pleased at me when I sent her off to bed, but not upset enough to run off. I figured she was just coming here to moan at you.”

Kelly shook her head. “She wouldn’t worry you unless it was serious. She’s run from you, which means she’s scared or angry. Reggie, she, well, she’s used to being abandoned. If she thought you were going to leave her, she might leave you first.”

“I’ve made sure that she knows how much she means to me. I haven’t talked to her about marriage, much as I’ve wanted to, because I didn’t want her to run off scared.”

“You’re going to ask her to marry you?” Kelly asked in amazement.

“Of course,” Alex frowned. “I’ve just been waiting for her to grow more used to the idea of the two of us together.”

“Oh, Alex. You need to ask her soon. She’s beginning to feel that you don’t want to marry her.”

“You mean I’ve waited too long?” he asked.

Kelly shook her head. “I don’t think so. At least, she didn’t say that the other night.”

Matthias clicked his fingers, bringing their attention to him. “This isn’t helping us find her.”

“You’re right. Let’s go.”

“We’ll help,” Kelly offered, moving to gather up her coat.

“No, you won’t,” her husband countered, grabbing her coat from her hands. “I’ll go. You’ll stay by the phone in case Reggie calls.”

“But Colin—”

“Stay,” her husband ordered firmly as he moved outside.

“Now that’s how a man controls his woman,” Matthias commented to Alex, grinning evilly as his older brother frowned at him.

He could be such an asshole.

“Oh, Kelly.” Alex turned back to look into her worried face. “Did Reagan say anything about Lance calling her?”

Kelly’s face grew pale, and Alex felt a pang of remorse for worrying her. “No, she didn’t. Oh, hell, that’s not good. Find her, please, Alex.”

“Don’t worry, I will.” He muttered the next bit under his breath. “And when I do, her ass is mine.”

“Well, this is a pleasant surprise.”

Reggie felt herself freeze at the sound of that cruel voice drifting out from the dark behind her.

“Well, don’t you have anything to say to your husband, butterfly?”

Reggie took a deep breath, trying to push down the fear and nerves as she turned away from the doorway of her cheap motel room. Standing behind her, a self-satisfied smirk on his face, was her worst nightmare.

The car ride here had been one of sheer endurance. Holding back her tears had taken every bit of control she’d had. Reggie had wanted to make it to the next town before she stopped, but the intense need to give in and just break down

had forced her to stop at Ingleweed, the town closest to the ranch.

Alex wouldn't notice she was gone for a while yet, and perhaps hiding in plain sight was the best idea. She could cry herself to sleep and leave early in the morning. She didn't know what she was going to do when she was nearly totally broke, but what choice did she have?

You could have gone to Kelly's.

She should have. She'd realized that as she was halfway to town. This was stupid. But she was here now, so she'd stay the night. It wasn't safe for her to keep driving any longer.

“What are you doing here?” Reggie frowned. “How did you even know where I was?”

“Why, butterfly, I've been keeping an eye on you for days, just waiting for my opportunity to speak to you privately without that hulking Neanderthal. He's worse than a cold, always hanging around.” His voice was petulant, whiny, and Reggie wondered what she had ever seen in him.

“You were watching the ranch?” Reggie gulped. Dear lord, had he gone mad?

He nodded. “Of course I was, butterfly. I missed you. Now, what say we go inside where it's a bit warmer and we can talk.” His voice was smooth as he crowded in close and Reggie knew he'd force the point if she didn't let him in.

Biting her lip, she turned around and opened the door before walking inside.

“Don't think much of your choice of motel room, butterfly.” He wrinkled his nose, sneering at the plain but clean room.

“Well, it’s not like you left me with much choice. You got me fired and took all my money, remember?”

The slap caught her unawares, and she stumbled backwards in shock, holding her hand up to her throbbing cheek. Tears flooded her eyes, and she blinked furiously to hold them back. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“That’s quite enough of that, you little bitch.”

“And the real Lance appears,” she muttered to herself, watching him warily. She should never have left the ranch. What a fool she’d been! No matter what, she should have stayed and confronted Alex. Now she was stuck in a tiny motel room with a mad man bent on hurting her.

“How did you find me, Lance?”

“That was easy, you stupid cow.” He paced in front of her, basking in his cunning. “After I couldn’t get anything out of you, I got that silly bitch Angel to call you. I had to find something to bribe her with first, or I would have done it earlier. Found out she’d been cheating on her husband and I threatened to expose her unless she helped me. I knew you trusted her, that you wouldn’t suspect her of helping me.”

He was right. But she couldn’t believe he’d done that to Angel. “You asshole.”

Suddenly, her arm was caught in a bruising grip, and he shook her harshly before shoving her away. She hit the wall with a thump, knocking her head. Blurrily she watched him coming toward her as she slumped onto the floor.

She needed to turn his attention, to find some way to get past him. If she could just get out the door, she knew she could easily outrun him. “Why did you want to find me, Lance? I thought you wanted nothing to do with me.” She watched as

he undid his belt, and holding it by the silver buckle, began to swing it back and forth.

Thwack! The belt flicked in front of her, not touching her, but scaring her so badly that she screamed in fright while he laughed cruelly.

“I came because you stole from me, you little bitch.”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t steal anything from you!”

Reggie let out a cry of pain as his belt lashed out again, this time making contact with her face and arm.

“Don’t bother lying, bitch. You have my luggage. I want it back.”

“Your luggage? Are you serious? This is all over some luggage?” He dropped the belt, and grabbing her by the hair, dragged her into the middle of the room where he kicked her in the ribs, hard. Sharp, piercing pain stabbed at her, robbing her of breath as he screamed down her.

“It’s my luggage, you bitch! It’s got the pen drive I need in it. I want it back.”

“What pen drive?” she asked. What was he talking about?

“The one I was using to store software secrets on that I was going to sell to the highest bidder. I took it with me on my last trip and it should have been safe in the hidden compartment until I went to go find it and realized you’d taken it! I want it back!”

He was insane. He was selling trade secrets to the highest bidder?

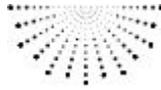
“Now, we’re going to go back to the ranch and you’ll get me what I want, without letting that idiot cowboy you’re living

with know.”

“Lance, I can’t do that.”

He smiled evilly. “You will. You just need a bit more convincing.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Alex ended the call. “She checked into Sunnyside Motel ten minutes ago.”

“Good old Millicent. Still the town gossip, then?”

Millicent was the owner of a small, run-down motel in town. She knew everyone’s business, and thank God that she did. Alex sped toward the motel, a bad feeling in his stomach urging him to hurry.

He parked in front of the motel, driving recklessly for the first time since he was a teenager. Racing from his truck, he was barely aware of Matthias running beside him as he headed toward her room.

He didn’t even bother calling out. The screams of pain coming from the room were making it obvious he needed to move fast. Alex slammed his shoulder against the door.

“Here! I have the key! I’ll call the sheriff.” Millicent moved toward them, but he didn’t want to wait. He’d pay for the repairs.

Pulling back, he gave the door a hefty kick, and raced inside to a sight he never wanted to witness again in his life.

With a roar of fury, he jumped toward the man daring to touch his woman.

Reggie heard someone yell. She tried to cringe back further, certain that Lance was going to kill her now. But the death blow never came, and as Reggie lowered her arms slowly, disbelief temporarily overtook her fear.

Slam! Alex's fist pummeled Lance time and time again, giving the smaller man no chance to fight back.

"Get her out of here!" Alex yelled.

Reggie glanced around, slow and sluggish with shock and pain, as she wondered who he was talking to. It was then that Matthias appeared in front of her, blocking her view of the fighting men.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to lift you up, okay?"

Reggie shook her head, whimpering as she cringed back. She didn't want him touching her. She didn't want anyone touching her.

Except Alex.

"Alex, stop," she cried, terrified. "You'll kill him."

"She's right, Alex. Enough," Matthias commanded.

"Get her out of here and I'll stop." She barely recognised his voice. It was so cold, so detached.

"Come on, sweetheart," Matthias told her. "If you want that bastard to live, you're coming with me."

Before she could protest, she was in Matthias's arms as he strode out of the room. "No!" She wriggled, trying to get herself free.

“Stay still before you hurt yourself further,” his stern voice ordered as he opened the backseat to the truck and placed her inside. “Look, the sheriff’s here now.” He nodded his head toward the men running into the motel room.

“He’ll kill him,” she whimpered, frantic to get back to Alex, not caring that every move she made sent fiery arcs of pain through her body.

“What do you care? Do you still love him?” Matthias’s dark gaze was glacial, accusing, and she shuddered in response.

“N-no, I never l-loved him. I just don’t w-want Alex getting in t-trouble over me.”

“Well, if you hadn’t run away from him, if you had told him about the calls from that bastard, he wouldn’t be here now, would he?”

Reggie let out a sob as she recognised the truth of his words. She should never have kept the phone calls a secret from Alex. This was all her fault.

Matthias looked at her. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. He won’t kill him. Alex isn’t stupid. You’d do better to worry about the spanking that’s coming your way once this is all over. You are going to have one sore bottom by the time Alex gets through with you.”

Reggie looked at him in shock, her jaw dropping.

“Alex would never spank me while I’m injured!”

“No, he’ll just wait until you’re well and then wallop you. Believe me, I know.”

“What do you care?” She glared at him. “According to you, I’m a scared little rabbit who’ll run for the hills if you so

much as look at me!”

“Seems like the rabbit has claws. So you were eavesdropping, were you? Tut-tut, sweetie. You know, listening in on other conversations, and then running away when you misconstrue the conversation, is not the way to keep your lily-white butt from being blistered.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said tiredly, her body starting to ache and throb as the adrenaline rush subsided. “It’s not like I’m going to be around much longer anyway. You were right, Alex is old-fashioned. If he was truly serious about us, he would have asked me to marry him.”

Why was she telling him this? It had to be because her body was burning with pain.

“*Alex* was waiting for the right moment. *Alex* was waiting for you to trust him. That is if you were interested in actually asking *Alex*.”

Reggie opened her eyes to find Matthias had moved away, and Alex now stood in front of her. She felt her trembling increase and wanted nothing more than to climb into his arms and just collapse. To forget about this horrid night and stay in his embrace, safe and secure in his love.

“How bad are you hurt?” he asked.

“I-I’m all right. You got there b-before it got too bad.”

He let out a noise of disbelief.

“Matthias, can you drive?” he asked, not taking his gaze from hers. “We need to take her to the hospital. One of the deputies will interview her there.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” she whimpered, shuffling away from him as he moved to sit beside her in the

back seat. Matthias started the truck with a roar.

“Don’t, Alex.” She tried in vain to fight him as he gathered her in close to his side and buckled her seat belt. Agony engulfed her. Shit.

“Stay still,” he ordered gruffly. “I won’t have you hurting yourself.”

“Then let me go. I don’t want to be held by you.”

“Yes, you do,” he said with total confidence. “Now, we’re going to the hospital. If they give you the all clear, we’ll take you back home and I’ll put you to bed.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital, I’m fine. I want to go to Kelly’s.”

“Well, I want to be at home in bed, cuddled up with the woman I love, not taking her to the hospital after she received a beating. A beating from a man who has apparently been calling her for weeks!”

His voice didn’t rise, but she still heard the barely controlled fury.

“You don’t love me. You want your brother to get rid of me.”

“You never learn anything good while eavesdropping, sweetheart,” Matthias scolded her.

She was trembling by now, the shock of adrenaline wearing off. She could feel every lick of the belt, every kick and punch.

“You also only heard half the conversation. If you had stuck around, you would have heard me tell Matt just how much I love you and want to marry you.”

“B-but you told him he was right when he said you were stringing me on.”

His arms tightened. “And if you’d heard the rest instead of running off, you would have heard that I was waiting to propose. That I was giving you time. But after tonight I have no more patience with you, Reagan. You will trust me, and you will marry me.”

“Now that’s a romantic proposal.”

“Shut up, Matthias,” Alex and Reggie spoke up at the same time as their eyes locked on each other. Tears began to drip down Reggie’s cheeks in a steady stream.

“Really?” she asked.

“Really,” he said, running his thumb over her trembling lower lip before leaning in to kiss her gently.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry, Alex.”

“I know, baby. You’ll be even sorrier when I punish you. Eavesdropping, running away and lying to me is not acceptable behaviour, miss.”

She frowned. “When did I lie to you?”

“When you didn’t tell me about Lance contacting you.”

“Well, technically, I didn’t lie. I just omitted the truth,” she explained.

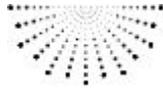
“Which is just as bad when it endangers your life. When I came in to find him beating you, your face bloody, your cries of pain ... ”

“Shh,” she murmured, snuggling close, ignoring her pain as she tried to comfort him. “I’m okay. You got there in time.”

“Never again, little one. Not even if I have to lock you in your room. Never again will you put me through this.”

“I won’t, I promise, I won’t.”

CHAPTER 12



Tonight was the night. The night she had to pay the piper, and she was dreading it. Reggie knew it was going to be bad. Really bad.

It had taken five weeks for her body to heal from the beating it had received. Alex had babied her terribly until she was healed. He never even raised his voice. Reggie would have rather just gotten this over and done with. What was a sore bottom when you added it to all the injuries she already had?

But that was the point, she supposed. Alex wanted her to remember this spanking so that the next time she thought about lying to him or leaving without talking to him, she'd remember this punishment and think twice.

Reggie kind of thought the beating was enough of a punishment. But Alex had asked her to really think about that. And if she truly believed that, then he'd said he wouldn't punish her. Damn him. Thinking sucked sometimes. Because she'd realized she had this ball of guilt in her stomach. She'd lied to him. And she wanted that guilt to go away. Which a spanking would achieve.

So tonight she was standing naked from the waist down in the corner of the study, awaiting her punishment.

“Come here, darlin’.” Reggie turned to find Alex sitting in a straight-backed chair in the middle of the room. As he pulled her between his open legs, she peered down at him in fear, wishing this was already over.

“Okay, tonight we’re going to begin your punishment, Reagan. Tell me, why are you being punished?”

Reggie sniffled, wiping at the tears that were already running down her cheeks. Shudders raced through her body as Alex peered up at her, not without some sympathy, before he grabbed her hands in his to rub them softly.

“I’m being punished because I didn’t tell you that Lance was calling me and for running off without letting anyone know where I was going.”

“That’s right.”

“I really am sorry, Alex,” she cried out, sobbing now.

“Oh, darlin’,” he said softly, pulling her down to sit on his lap where he rubbed her back. “I know you are. I hate seeing you like this, and I hate causing you more pain and tears. But we both need to do this, little one. Now, are you ready to take your punishment?”

Reggie nodded, standing up and facing him.

“You know I only do this because I love you, don’t you?”

Reggie nodded again. She knew he loved her. It was in the way he cared for her while she was sick, the way he looked at her with such tenderness and warmth. It was in the way he laid down some basic safety rules for her to follow, rules to help keep her secure and healthy. Every day he showed her just how much he loved her, but she never tired of hearing him say it.

“I never want to experience the fear and pain that I went through that night. I can’t go through that again, Reagan. This punishment is going to be very hard on both of us.”

But harder on her.

“I’m going to spank you, first with my hand then with this.” He reached down and grabbed the paddle she’d seen sitting on the floor by his chair. She’d been trying to ignore it in the hope that it would go away.

“Please don’t, Alex,” she whimpered, her eyes going wide.

“Look at me, darlin’,” he said tenderly. “At me, not at the paddle.” Reggie looked into his face, seeing his sympathy and his determination.

“I didn’t want to have to use this paddle on you, darlin’. But I feel you’ve left me no choice. But for me to use it, you’re going to have to trust that I will not hurt you more than you can take. You have to trust me to punish you and to look after you. Do you trust me, Reagan?”

This was Alex. Alex had promised never to harm her, and she knew he wouldn’t break that promise.

“I trust you.”

He smiled, and she felt a surge of happiness rush through her at his approval. “Good girl. After your spanking, I’ll comfort you and then it will be time for bed. For the rest of the week, you’re grounded. You’re not allowed to go anywhere unless I give you permission. Your bedtime has also been reduced to nine-thirty.”

Reggie felt her jaw drop at his announcements. Grounded as well as a spanking? So mean.

“I hate to hear you cry, particularly when I cause it, but we are going to do this. Because I know that you need it. Now, over my knee.”

Reagan followed the firm command, already sobbing at the thought of this punishment. Alex didn't make her wait, but began to immediately spank her.

When he switched to the paddle, her bottom was already hot and sore. But the paddle ... oh, it was so much worse. The sting as each whack landed soon turned to a deep burn.

“Please stop, stoooppp, Alex!”

She was wasting her breath. Alex continued to spank her with the paddle at a steady rhythm, over and over on her buttocks and thighs, until she began to cry in deep, heartfelt sobs that rocked his heart.

He hated making her cry, but they both needed this. She was carrying a lot of emotion from what happened with Lance. The bastard.

At least he was in jail. The judge had refused bail, given his likelihood of fleeing. They'd found the pen drive he'd been after and handed it over to the police. He was in deep trouble over that as well.

When Alex was finished, he threw the paddle away and turned her over so she was straddling his lap. He rubbed her back, whispering to her lovingly.

God, what would he do without her?

“I'm really, really sorry, Alex. I know I messed up. I will try harder. I will.” She began to sob again, and he drew her in close, rocking her gently as he let her purge it all out.

Her tears soaked his shirt, but he didn't care. All that mattered to him was Reagan, her comfort, her needs.

"Enough tears now," he said, worried that she was going to make herself sick. "I'm sorry that you overheard me talking to Matthias and thought that I didn't want you. Because you're the most important thing in my life. And I'm going to spend forever showing you that. So you'll never doubt it again."

"I won't. I won't ever doubt you again. I love you."

"Love you too, little one."

THE END

ABOUT LAYLAH ROBERTS

USA Today Bestselling Author, Laylah Roberts loves writing stories about possessive, protective men and the women they adore.

When she's not writing, she's reading, chasing after her eight-year-old, and ignoring her never-ending washing pile.

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Sir's Redemption

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Daddy's Little Darling

Daddy's Naughty Darling Novella

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Wilde

Sinclair

Luke

Holidays at Rawhide Ranch

A Cozy Little Christmas

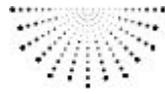
Standalones

Their Christmas Baby

Haley Chronicles

Ally and Jake

A DOUBLE DOSE OF
DISCIPLINE BY STELLA
MOORE AND GOLDEN
ANGEL



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For more Rawhide Ranch stories check out this link- <https://linktr.ee/Rawhide>

Before I joined social media and the author community, I was hooked on Maren Smith's Masters of the Castle series. They always say never to meet your heroes, but whoever said that has never met Maren. She's one of the most warm, giving, generous people I've ever met and I am so grateful to have her in my life.

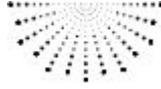
All Hail the Queen of Green Beans,

Angel

It's no secret that Maren Smith is hands down my favorite kink author, and one of my favorite authors across any genre. The depth of emotion and understanding of human nature in her stories leaves me in awe of her talent. But more than being an incredible author, Maren is one of the best, most loving people I've ever known. I have watched her support and encourage so many authors during the few years I've known her. Maren, if you're reading this anthology, I hope you know how deeply grateful I am for you, as an author and a person, and that this project gives you some inkling of how much you are loved.

Stella

CHAPTER ONE



The Hideaway was more perfect than anything Hayleigh had ever imagined. Sun, sand, beautiful, clear blue waters.

And some of the most amazing sex she'd ever had.

Her body was still humming from the wake-up call her husband had given her that morning when they sat down for breakfast at one of the resort's fantastic restaurants. Even Connor couldn't find anything to complain about, and as a world-class chef himself, he wasn't easily impressed.

As she reached for the slender champagne flute that held her daily mimosa, the stones on her left hand caught the bright, tropical sunlight and she grinned. It still felt so surreal to her, to be married to the love of her life. She assumed it would wear off eventually and at some point it would all feel "normal," but for now she was basking in the newlywed glow.

"You're looking very pleased with yourself this morning, wife."

Grinning, she lifted her mimosa and sipped. "I'm feeling rather pleased with myself, husband."

"Good." With the most relaxed smile she'd ever seen on his face, Connor nodded at her full plate. "Eat up, baby. You're going to need your energy."

It shouldn't have been physically possible for her to feel that pulsing heat between her thighs again so soon, but there it was. Her body couldn't seem to get enough of her new husband, and even as exhausted as she was, she was looking forward to what he had planned next.

Because the resort he'd chosen wasn't just any old island in the Caribbean. The Hideaway was an exclusive BDSM getaway, where couples like her and Connor could not only enjoy the luxuries the resort had to offer, but also different themed rooms, new toys unlike anything Hayleigh had seen before, and plenty of sexy demonstrations of various kinks and techniques.

She thought she'd seen it all, seeing as how she and Connor *lived* at a BDSM resort back in the states, and she'd literally taken classes on different aspects of BDSM and human sexuality. But after this week, she was wondering what she was missing out on at the Ranch. For the most part, she lived as a Little, so aside from her college courses, she spent nearly all her time in "Little" mode. Which, unfortunately, meant that certain parts of the Ranch were off limits to her.

Maybe when they got back, she could talk Connor into exploring more of what Rawhide had to offer. Even if they couldn't make it to any demonstrations or anything like that, she knew for a fact there were plenty of different themed rooms she'd never explored. And then there was the dungeon she'd only ever gotten a glimpse of during her initial tour. The throbbing between her thighs grew more insistent as various scenarios played out in her mind. There were just so many possibilities she'd never really considered before.

Frantic movement from across the restaurant caught her attention and she waved excitedly when she spotted Vicky, one

of her best friends in the whole wide world. Their husbands were good friends from way back, and after they'd met earlier in the year, Vicky and Hayleigh had gotten super close as well. So close, in fact, they'd had a joint wedding ceremony at Rawhide.

The joint honeymoon, however, had simply been a rather hilarious coincidence.

At least, she and Vicky had thought it was hilarious, and as soon as they'd found out where they were actually going, they'd launched into excited plans about spending time at the beach together, going on adventures together, watching the demonstrations together.

But their husbands had quickly squashed all their plans. Apparently, a double wedding was all fine and well, but a double honeymoon was just pushing things too far.

Men.

Connor had even gone so far as to take her phone when he'd caught her texting Vicky in the middle of the night. She was allowed to check it throughout the day and respond to pretty much anyone *except* Vicky. But considering she hadn't gotten a single text from her friend since that night, she had a feeling Saul had done something similar.

“Hayleigh...”

The warning note in Connor's voice had her dropping her hand and crossing her arms. She knew she was acting like a brat, but it was hard not to slip into her Little space when he was being such a hardass about stuff. “I know, I know. I'm supposed to pretend one of my bestest friends in the whole wide world doesn't even exist because we're taking ‘separate vacations’.”

A muscle in her husband's jaw twitched, letting her know she was on thin ice. "Keep up that attitude, little girl, and you can finish your breakfast sitting on a red-hot bottom."

Considering she was still somewhat stiff and achy from their multiple play sessions over the past few days, she wasn't really that eager to push him into actually punishing her. It just wasn't *fair*. What was so bad about wanting to spend some time with her friend?

"Sorry," she mumbled, picking up her mimosa again. Her throat felt tight, and for a moment she was worried she might just burst into tears right then and there.

"Hey." Reaching across the table, he linked his fingers with hers, and she glanced up to see the breezy, teasing smile on his face that had been in place nearly their entire trip. Guilt tugged at her heart; he was always so stressed back home and now she was ruining the little bit of time he was able to actually relax and unwind. "Is it so bad, spending all your time with your Daddy?"

"No, of course not!" Ugh, now she felt like a complete jerk. "I'm just being a brat. I'm sorry."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I know how to deal with brats, huh?"

Heat rose to her cheeks at the not-so-thinly-veiled threat. "I'll be good, Daddy."

"Why don't you show me what a good girl you can be and finish your breakfast."

Doing her best to forget all about Vicky and the fun they could be having, she dug into her food. She was nearly finished when out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her friend heading into the bathroom.

With a smile she hoped wasn't too eager, she set her fork down and pushed away from the table. "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

She had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at the suspicious tone in his voice. "Just to the bathroom. Promise."

"All right." With an uncharacteristically mischievous grin, he picked up her champagne flute, dangling it between his thick fingers. "I'll be here, enjoying the rest of this delicious drink."

"Don't you dare drink my mimosa, Connor Blackburn!"

His laughter followed her all the way to the bathroom, where Vicky was standing just outside the stalls. Silently, they rushed forward and wrapped their arms around each other, squeezing so tightly Hayleigh could barely breathe.

"I have *so* much to tell you," Vicky whispered. "But not here. I have to get back before Saul gets suspicious, but take this."

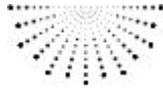
Pulling away, Vicky pressed a piece of paper into Hayleigh's hand before giving her another hard hug. When the bathroom door had swung shut behind the other woman, Hayleigh unfolded the paper and grinned down at the note.

Talk Connor into taking you to the luau tonight. I NEED to talk to you!!! Love, Vicky.

It was a brilliant plan. The men couldn't be mad at them if they just *happened* to end up at the same event. And, knowing their husbands, they'd get to talking anyway and forget all about them, giving her and Vicky some much needed girl time.

Perfect.

CHAPTER TWO



Saul

Narrowing his eyes suspiciously at his new wife—and he loved calling her that both inside his head and out loud—Saul cast his gaze back to the bathroom door.

“So you and Hayleigh just *had* to go to the bathroom at the same time, huh?” he asked. He wasn’t really mad. In fact, part of him was even impressed at how well she and Hayleigh had toed the line since he’d caught Vicky texting with her.

And it wasn’t that he wanted to keep them apart, but was it really so bad to want his wife’s full attention on their honeymoon? Especially when he hadn’t had it during their wedding. Not just because they’d shared the day with Hayleigh and Connor, but the snowstorm that had rolled through right before the big day had caused a lot of emotions too.

Now they were on a sunny island, with perfect weather for days, and he wanted Vicky all to himself.

Okay, so maybe it was just a tiny bit selfish. Letting the girls have a meal together at some point might not be the worst idea, but he wasn’t ready for that yet. When—if—he got to

that point, he'd check in with Connor and see if he felt the same, and if Connor was up for it *then* they'd let Hayleigh and Vicky know about the special treat. Afterward, he would also reap the rewards for being such a good, sharing husband.

Though he was already reaping plenty of rewards since the Hideaway was so fantastically set up for kinky couples.

Something he was probably going to get to remind Vicky of soon as she stuck out her tongue at him in response to his question.

“Yes, it does happen, you know, especially during breakfast.” Her tone was only a little sassy, so he didn't comment on it. “We were barely in the bathroom together for five seconds. Are you really going to complain about that?”

“No,” he said easily, reaching out to take her hand from across the table. “Just making sure you two aren't up to something.”

Vicky pressed her lips together and then scowled at him.

“How could we be when we're not allowed to text, much less talk?” she asked grumpily. Movement across the room caught both of their attention.

“Oh, am I not enough for you?” he teased as Hayleigh made her way back to Connor. Something about the expression on his friend's face made Saul think that he was asking her a similar question to the one Saul had greeted Vicky with upon her return.

“Of course you are, but it's not exactly easy knowing she's here and I can't talk to her. It's like a giant tease.” She jutted out her lower lip and gave him a look with big, mournful eyes. Saul laughed. Yeah, he was probably going to have a talk with

Connor about getting all four of them together at some point, because he wanted to indulge his little nuisance.

“Well, I’ll just have to keep finding ways to keep you focused on me. We’ve got a pretty busy day today—swimming with dolphins and then the luau tonight.”

The expression on Vicky’s face turned more suspicious than anything else.

“And that’s it? No demonstrations?” She shifted a little bit in her seat and Saul grinned. The two-handed flogging demonstration they’d attended last night had been a lot of fun. He hadn’t gone very hard on her, but she’d been wiggly for hours afterward because it had sensitized her skin so much. That had been a lot of fun.

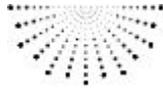
“I thought we might take a break from the demonstrations today. Just have regular honeymoon activities... and then some fun tonight.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her, making her laugh. Squeezing her hand, he grinned back.

As much fun as the incredible array of kinky activities The Hideaway offered were, he was looking forward to being more traditional honeymooners today. Thankfully, The Hideaway also offered pretty much everything a kinky couple on vacation could want, from the vanilla to the fetish and the ocean to the bedroom.

“That sounds good to me,” she said, smiling back at him. For all intents and purposes, she seemed to have forgotten that Hayleigh and Connor were across the room. Saul squeezed her hand again.

It was going to be a good day.

CHAPTER THREE



Connor

As much as he'd enjoyed the... less vanilla aspects of their vacation, he had to admit Hayleigh had been right about the luau. It was more fun than he'd expected, just hanging out with other visitors and watching the dancers. Not to mention the food, which was beyond excellent. If it hadn't been their honeymoon, he probably would have talked his way into the kitchens to see what secrets he could glean from The Hideaway's chefs. As it was, he was already working out the best approach to talk Derek into letting him dig an *imu* so they could roast their own *kalua pork* back at the Ranch.

For now, he was more than satisfied to sit back and watch his beautiful wife, her brows drawn together in concentration as she tried to copy the hula instructor's steps. The long strands of her grass skirt parted, exposing the smooth, creamy skin of her upper thigh and his mind immediately shifted from recipes and roasting techniques to getting her back to their villa for an entirely different kind of tasty treat.

"Connor! Hi!" Vicky's excited squeal carried across the beach as she dragged Saul over to where Connor was standing.

Tearing his gaze away from Hayleigh's curvy form, Connor grinned at Saul, who was currently shaking his head at his wife's antics. "I was wondering if we'd see you two here."

"Some party, huh?" Saul responded with a grin of his own. "That pig smells delicious."

"It is. You should see the setup they have for roasting it. I can't wait to try it back at the Ranch."

Saul's eyes lit with interest, but before he could ask for details, Vicky tugged on his sleeve, demanding his attention. "I wanna dance!"

"Sure thing, babygirl. I'll be right here, watching you."

With a roll of her eyes, she sprinted off toward the dancers. After being gifted a grass skirt of her own, she took her place beside Hayleigh, who squealed and paused dancing to throw her arms around Vicky's neck.

Seeing the two of them so excited to see each other had Connor's stomach twisting into a guilty knot. Maybe it had been selfish of him to want all of his Little girl's attention this week. He'd just been so excited to not have to share her with the other Littles at the Ranch, or her family, or Vicky. But perhaps completely forbidding them from having any contact at all had been a bit of an overreaction.

"Maybe we should have dinner—"

"Do you think we should let them—"

Turning to each other, he and Saul burst into laughter. "Great minds think alike, huh?" Connor said once he'd gotten himself back under control.

"Apparently. You were saying?"

“Dinner. The four of us.” Connor sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “I feel like an asshole, not letting them spend *any* time together this week.”

“Same. What about tomorrow night? The only demonstration they have going on tomorrow is for knife play, and neither Vicky nor I are particularly interested in going.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea.” When he spotted the girls headed their way, Connor dropped his voice. “But let’s make it a surprise.”

“Agreed.”

Holding out his arms, Connor pulled Hayleigh in for a quick kiss. “Hey, jellybean. Are you having fun?”

“*So* much fun! But um, Vicky needs to go to the bathroom. Can I go with her? We’ll be right back, we *promise*.”

After a quick glance at Saul who nodded his agreement, Connor smiled down at his wife. “Go on. We’ll wait for you here. But no dilly-dallying.”

“Oh my god, what does that even mean?” Vicky asked with another exaggerated eye roll.

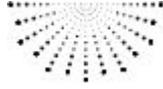
“It means, you better bring your butt right back here if you don’t want everyone to see you get it busted,” Saul shot back with a teasing grin.

“Okay, okay, we get it! No fun allowed.”

Before either of the men could say anything, they were off, running across the beach toward the bathrooms. Shaking his head at them, Connor turned back to his friend. “Okay, so, dinner tomorrow night. Why don’t we make an evening out of it? We could meet up in the afternoon, take the girls for a swim, then back for dinner.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan. Now.” Saul rubbed his hands together, a gleam Connor recognized all too well in his eye. “Tell me more about this pig roast.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Vicky

“Haha, free at last!” Maybe she should feel guilty about tricking the husbands—and she didn’t think she would ever get tired of calling Saul that, even just in her head—but if they’d been more reasonable, then she and Hayleigh wouldn’t feel the need to sneak around. Besides, they’d come out of the bathroom and seen the guys deep in convo and figured they wouldn’t be missed for a few more minutes. “How have you been? Tell me everything!”

Hayleigh laughed.

“I don’t think we have enough time for me to tell you everything,” she said, giggling and glancing nervously around the little alcove they’d found. It was right next to the luau and had a comfortable lounging couch in it as well as a little table and big squishy ottoman. Being on the beach it was all outdoor furniture, but it was really comfy outdoor furniture.

It was also really *kinky* outdoor furniture. Vicky didn’t miss the little rings and places to secure restraints that were attached to, well, everything. But she and Hayleigh could ignore them for right now.

They could still hear all the noise from the luau, including the music, and she figured they had probably at least one or two more songs before the guys got suspicious.

“Well, tell me what you can. Where are you guys staying? Saul got us one of the oceanside villas, we’re on the south side of the island and I swear it’s like we’re totally alone until we come back to the main building. It would be a little creepy if it wasn’t so beautiful.”

“We got a villa, too! I’m a little scared to know what Connor paid for it,” Hayleigh said with a laugh. “But it’s so worth it. Never in a million years would I have dreamt of something so perfect for our honeymoon. It almost doesn’t feel real.”

“And have you met the owner yet? Oh. My. God.” Vicky fanned herself. Hayleigh covered her face, though not before Vicky had seen her turn bright pink even in the dim lighting.

“I thought I was going to die when he spoke. His *accent*.”

Javier was a seriously sexy older man with an accent like Antonio Banderas. She might be married now, but she wasn’t dead, and she’d been drooling. From Hayleigh’s reaction, she hadn’t been the only one.

“Do you think he’s a Daddy?” Vicky asked. “He looks like he could be a Daddy. Or a Zaddy.”

Hayleigh snorted.

“I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it, I felt guilty enough just noticing him on my honeymoon.”

“Honey, you would have to be dead not to notice him.” Vicky shook her head. “It’s like being at a museum. We can look, we just can’t touch or take it home with us.”

Cracking up, Hayleigh reached out and hugged her.

“Oh my god, I missed you! I don’t care that it’s only been a couple of days, it’s been torture knowing that you’re here on the island and we can’t talk.”

Squeezing her back, Vicky felt a rush of warmth go through her.

“I know! If we’d been at different places it would have been one thing, but knowing we *are* here and can’t hang out? What the hell?! Saul and I went swimming with dolphins today and all I could think about was how much you would have loved it.”

“Oh my god, Connor and I were talking about doing that tomorrow!” Hayleigh threw up her hands, sitting up straight again. “What would have been so wrong about doing some of the vanilla stuff together?”

“Or even the kinky stuff.” Vicky huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “We could have totally gone to some of the demonstrations together and compared notes. They’re being so unreasonable.”

“Oh are we?” The mild tone of the question was at complete odds with Vicky and Hayleigh’s reactions as their husbands melted out of the shadows and into the alcove with twin expressions on their faces. She and Hayleigh shrank in toward each other on the couch, leaning against each other for support. Saul crossed his arms over his chest. “No, no, don’t stop now, babygirl. Please. Keep talking about how unreasonable we are.”

Even though she knew it wasn’t the smartest move in the world, something about Saul’s demeanor brought Vicky’s brat rushing to the surface. She scowled back at him.

“Incredibly unreasonable, especially because you’re looking at us like we did something wrong when you know we’ve been wanting time together all week.” She pushed her chin up into the air stubbornly, ignoring Hayleigh’s frantic shushing noises. “It’s *our* honeymoon too, we should also get a say in what we do on it, and both of us wanted to see each other.”

“Funny enough, these two unreasonable Daddies were talking about just that while you were supposedly in the bathroom,” Saul said a little grimly, gesturing with one hand back and forth between himself and Connor. Hayleigh’s Daddy also had his arms crossed over his chest and was glowering at Hayleigh. Vicky shifted a little trying to put herself in the way of his dark gaze. She wasn’t exactly a Little, not like Hayleigh was, and she often found herself wanting to protect her friend. “We were talking about doing something all together tomorrow.”

Not to be deterred, Vicky crossed her arms over her chest as well, leaning forward even more to hide Hayleigh further behind her.

“Well, it might have been nice if you’d, you know, actually talked to your wife about that.” Eep. Why couldn’t she just quit while she was ahead? Even before the words came out of her mouth she knew she was setting herself up for a punishment, but that hadn’t stopped her.

It rarely did.

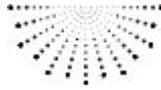
Especially because she really did feel she had a point, but on the other hand she knew what kind of relationship she’d signed up for with Saul. He was the boss, the Daddy, and while he could be incredibly indulgent, he also ran the show.

“We can talk about it now,” Saul said with a slow smile.
“Since you and Hayleigh want to spend time together so badly,
we can do something together right now.”

Crap on a cracker.

That didn't sound good at all.

CHAPTER FIVE



Hayleigh

They were in so much trouble.

Even before Saul had started speaking, all it had taken was one look at her Daddy's face for her to know she was about to get her butt roasted. In fact, she was so caught up in trying to read Connor's expression, she missed most of what Saul had said entirely. Beside her, Vicky inhaled sharply, and Hayleigh finally looked over at the other imposing Daddy Dom in the alcove with them. "What?"

"Since you two are so keen on spending quality time together, we figured we should start as soon as possible." Now it was Connor who spoke, the corner of his mouth lifting in a devious smirk. "Naughty little girls who break the rules together get punished together. Isn't that right, Hayleigh?"

Crap on a cracker.

That was, indeed, how it often worked at the Ranch. But this was a first for her and Vicky. "Y-yes, Daddy."

"But that's not fair!" Leaping to her feet, Vicky crossed her arms and glared at their husbands. "If you'd just let us in on

your plans, we wouldn't have had to sneak away!"

"Or," Saul's voice had taken on a deceptively calm tone that sent a shiver down Hayleigh's spine, "you could have trusted that your Daddies would meet your needs, even if it wasn't on your timetable."

Anger churned in her gut and Hayleigh pushed to her feet, mirroring Vicky's stance. "That's not fair, either. We trust you, but you wouldn't even let us text each other! How the hell were we supposed to know you were suddenly going to change your minds?"

"Little girl—"

"Oh, don't 'little girl' me, Connor," she snapped. "You guys made it *very* clear you had no intention of letting us spend time together. Don't act like we're the ones in the wrong because we're not freaking mind readers."

"Uh oh," Vicky muttered when Connor's eyes narrowed.

"You're right." Although he'd theoretically just agreed with her, the butterflies in Hayleigh's stomach told her this wasn't going to go her way. "We did make it very clear. And you chose to go behind our backs anyway. What was the last thing you said before you two went off to the bathroom together, Hayleigh Anne?"

Some of her bravado faded and she gripped Vicky's hand for support. "That we would be right back."

"In fact, you *promised* you would come right back. And you broke that promise. Is that how our relationship works, little girl?"

"No, Daddy," she whispered, tears burning at the backs of her eyes. "But it's not *fair*."

“I know.” His expression softened, just a bit, but there was still a glint of determination in his eye that didn’t bode well for her bottom. “And we realized we were being selfish, keeping you two apart. I’m sorry I didn’t pay more attention to your needs, but sneaking around and disobeying your Daddy is not the way to get what you want, is it?”

Ugh. She hated it when he was so reasonable about things like this. It just made her feel even more like a naughty little girl being lectured by her Daddy. “I guess not.”

“I know for a fact it’s not. Which is why you two are going to kneel on that ottoman right there, side by side, and get your naughty little bottoms paddled. The original count was fifteen each, but after that outburst I’m thinking it’s another five each. Sound fair to you, Saul?”

“Sounds perfectly fair to me,” Saul replied, sounding far more chipper than Hayleigh thought the circumstances called for.

Her vision blurred as the tears she’d been so valiantly holding back filled her eyes. “Daddy, no! Vicky shouldn’t get in trouble because of me!”

“Keep that in mind the next time you want to snap at me, little girl. You two got each other in this mess, so until we say otherwise, any additional punishments earned by one of you will be delivered to both of you.”

Saul picked up the thread. “Twenty each with the paddle, so a total of forty. After each, you will count and thank us for the swat. If you miss a count, there will be a penalty swat.”

“It was my idea for us to sneak off.” Vicky’s tone took on a desperate edge. “I’ll take all forty. Hayleigh shouldn’t get punished because of me!”

Saul shook his head, a not unsympathetic smile on his face. “Sorry, babygirl. I know you want to protect your friend, but she’s just as capable of taking a paddling as you are.”

“But that’s not fair! None of this is fair!”

“Vicky, it’s okay.” Hayleigh squeezed her friend’s hand and forced a smile, determined to not let Vicky make things any worse. As much as she might agree with her, she didn’t really want to see what else their devious Daddies could come up with. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Ugh. Fine.” With another heated glare for their men, Vicky tilted her nose in the air. “But only because you asked, Hayleigh.”

Saul’s lips twitched, and Hayleigh got the distinct impression he was holding back laughter. Unfortunately, she doubted his amusement with the situation was going to save their asses. A fact he confirmed with his next words. “Skirts and shorts off, and up on the ottoman.”

As one, she and Vicky turned and slipped out of the grass skirts they’d been so excited about just a short while ago. Then their shorts, leaving them in only their tank tops and panties as they climbed up onto the ottoman, their knees sinking slightly into the plush cushion.

“Elbows and palms on the cushion, girls.”

It felt odd taking orders from Saul. She was plenty used to taking them from others at the Ranch, but this was... Saul. He was so much more laid-back than her own Daddy, and although she knew from stories Vicky had shared that he could be just as strict when it came to handing down a punishment, knowing it and experiencing it were turning out to be very separate things.

Taking a deep breath, she obeyed, lowering her torso so her forearms were flat against the ottoman and her ass was raised high in the air. Beside her, Vicky huffed out a loud, annoyed breath before following suit. When she was in position, Hayleigh shifted her hand to the left and linked pinkies with her friend.

“Good girls.” Saul’s words slid over her, settling some of the nerves jumping in her stomach. Some of the tension in Vicky’s shoulders seemed to fade as well, so hopefully she was feeling comforted by her Daddy’s praise as well. “Find anything good for us, Connor?”

“As it so happens I did. Aren’t these gorgeous?”

“Oh, wow. Are these bamboo?”

“They are. I wonder if they sell them on the island. I’ve heard bamboo holds up really well. And packs quite a sting.”

Would you two just get on with it already! It was mostly her desire to not add any more to Vicky’s punishment that kept the words in her head. She hated the anticipation even more than the spanking itself, and her Daddy knew it, which was probably the whole reason they were standing there, gushing over a freaking paddle while she and Vicky were ass up, waiting for their punishment to begin.

After a few more moments of admiring the workmanship, they finally approached, and her heart thumped against her ribcage when the soft cotton of her panties slid down, exposing her—*all* of her—to the men behind her.

“Oh, Daddy, no!” Vicky’s anguished wail pierced the air, reminding Hayleigh she’d never actually been punished in front of anyone before. It was such a normal part of Hayleigh’s

life that the embarrassment barely registered anymore, but she vividly remembered how hard it had been at first.

Shifting her hand to cover Vicky's, she linked all their fingers together and squeezed. "It's okay," she whispered. "I'm right here."

Vicky whimpered softly, and Hayleigh felt a fierce wave of protectiveness wash over her. It was a complete switch of their usual dynamics, since it was normally Vicky trying to protect her, and she suddenly understood her friend a little better. She wasn't about to defy their Daddies the way Vicky sometimes did, but Vicky's reactions to Hayleigh being in trouble made a lot more sense now.

A familiar, heavy hand rested at the small of her back and a moment later Connor's voice whispered in her ear. "Daddy's very proud of you, baby."

Even if she still felt their punishment was unfair, those words filled her with joy. Glancing over, she saw Saul on the other side, whispering something to Vicky. Whatever he said seemed to settle her again, and she gave a small, hesitant nod.

Then the men were behind them again, and something hard tapped against Hayleigh's bare bottom.

"Don't forget to count, jellybean."

It was all the warning she got before the soft *whoosh* of air, the loud *crack* of wood meeting skin. As always, there was a split second of nothing but the force of the impact before the pain exploded across her skin, hundreds of little bees stinging her everywhere and she gasped. "One, thank you, Daddy!"

Oh, shit? Was she supposed to include Saul? If she was, what was she supposed to say? "Thank you Daddy and Saul" seemed like a mouthful, but if that's what they wanted, then

that's what she would say. She could only pray they wouldn't add a penalty swat for not getting it right.

But apparently her count was good enough, because a couple seconds later another loud *crack* echoed around the alcove, followed by Vicky's loud, distressed squeal. "Two!"

Hayleigh's heart pounded even harder, panic building as she waited for her friend to remember the rest.

"What else are you supposed to say, Victoria Ann?"

Fun, easygoing Saul had completely disappeared. This version of Saul could probably give Connor a run for his money when it came to giving naughty girls the punishments they'd earned. A familiar heat flooded Hayleigh's pussy and she prayed the men didn't notice she was dripping with need.

"I am *not* thanking you for spanking me, Saul!"

"Very well." There was not a trace of softness in Saul's voice. "Penalty swat it is."

Sympathy stirred in Hayleigh's heart, and she was opening her mouth to encourage Vicky to just do as she was told when the paddle landed again.

It was so unexpected, it took longer than usual for the pain to register. And when it did, Hayleigh couldn't quite smother her shriek of surprise.

Fuck, that paddle hurt!

"What did you do?" Vicky screamed as she started to rise from her position.

The paddle connected with Hayleigh's bottom again, and the burn seemed to engulf every inch of exposed skin.

“Moving out of position gets you a penalty as well,” Saul informed her, and she immediately dropped back into place.

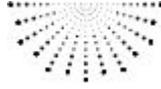
“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice thick with tears. “I didn’t know they were going to do that!”

“It’s okay. I can take it.” And despite how protective Vicky could be, it was the truth. Hayleigh had been spanked and paddled and strapped back home more times than she could count. “Just finish the count, Vicky. For me. Please.”

“Okay, okay! Two, *thank you, Daddy.*” The final part of the count was delivered through clenched teeth, but at least she’d finally said it.

And then it was Hayleigh’s turn. Again.

CHAPTER SIX



Vicky

Squeezing Hayleigh's fingers tightly, Vicky bit down on her lip against what she actually wanted to say. Because part of her wanted to kill her Daddy and Connor. Punishing Hayleigh for something she'd done? That was messed up.

It was also effective.

Pretty much the only thing that kept her in line as the count went higher and higher, her bottom burning hotter and hotter, was knowing that her actions affected what happened to Hayleigh. Otherwise she probably would have been cursing up a storm. That bamboo paddle hurt!

The hard wood bit into tender skin with both a sting and a thud, the painful smack reverberating deep into her flesh. Surface-pain was bad enough, but she knew she was going to be feeling this for a couple days at least. Unlike the other spankings she'd received on this vacation, this was a real punishment and it felt like one.

"Ow! Fifteen, thank you, Daddy!" Her voice came out as a high-pitched screech when Saul landed a good one across the crease where her bottom met her thighs.

That was going to hurt sooooo much tomorrow.

Dammit. She wished she and Hayleigh had waited.

Would it have really killed them to return to the husbands after going to the bathroom? They didn't have to duck away... they could have gone back and presented a united front, argued together that they should be allowed to hang out at least a little. She and Hayleigh had accused Saul and Connor of not communicating, but they'd done the same thing.

Rather than pressing their point, they'd snuck off to talk. Rather than confronting the unfairness while they had the upper hand, they'd waited until they'd disobeyed and then been caught out.

And now they were paying the price for it.

By the time they finished their count, both of them were squeezing each other's hand so tightly that Vicky could feel her knuckles creaking. Her bottom felt like it was on fire and judging by the way she and Hayleigh were soaking the ottoman with tears, she knew her friend felt the same.

Sneaking off hadn't been worth it at all.

Sure, the husbands had also been in the wrong, but it wasn't like she and Hayleigh were going to spank them for it. It also sounded like they'd been working on making up for it, even if it was a little late.

"Good girl," Daddy said soothingly in her ear, his hands sliding underneath her to help her up. On her other side, Connor was doing the same with Hayleigh. She wasn't at all surprised when Connor finished the move, scooping up Hayleigh in his arms and striding into the darkness. Vicky sniffled.

She wanted to know where her friend was going, but she also knew that Connor would take good care of Hayleigh. Hopefully they'd see each other again before the honeymoon was over and they went back to their respective homes practically all the way across the country from each other.

Rather than picking her up, Daddy flipped her onto her back and Vicky squealed as her poor bottom bounced off the ottoman. It was squishy but that didn't mean it was comfortable against her flaming skin.

Looking up at him through tear-filled eyes, Vicky sniffled a little.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she said sincerely. "We shouldn't have snuck away, we should have come back to the bar and made you and Connor realize how important it was to us that we get some time together."

"I'm sorry I didn't anticipate that," he replied, leaning forward over her and using his fingers to brush her hair away from her tear-stained cheeks. "I wanted you all to myself and I forgot that when we go home, I'd still have you, and you and Hayleigh would be far away without the chance to hang out in person. We're still going to spend some time with them tomorrow, okay?"

"If that's what you want, Daddy." Despite her obedient words, Vicky lit up from within the moment he told her the plan. Thankfully, her and Hayleigh's little bout of disobedience hadn't ruined everything.

Chuckling, Daddy ran his hands up and down her sides, and Vicky moaned a little, squirming as he cupped her breasts and squeezed the soft mounds. The pain from her spanking hadn't dissipated, but at his sensual touch it started to change from the heat of pain to the heat of arousal.

Giving her nipples a little pinch and twist, Daddy lowered his mouth to hers, claiming her whimpering lips in a kiss as he tormented her. Spreading her knees to let his body press against hers, Vicky wrapped her arms around his neck, surrendering herself to his hands and whims. He pinched and squeezed, rocking his body against her while she got wetter and hotter, squirming underneath him as the pain of her spanking turned into her own secret pleasure.

She heard the sound of nearby moaning, much closer than the sounds coming from the luau, and realized that Hayleigh and Connor hadn't gotten very far when they'd left. Hearing them together made her cheeks turn bright red as she remembered how embarrassed she'd been at knowing Connor could see *all* of her... and now she could hear them together. It was illicit and perverted and a total turn-on.

And when Daddy's lips left hers so he could slide his thick cock into her pussy, she maybe cried out a little louder than she would have normally. There was something incredibly arousing about knowing that she and Hayleigh had been punished together and now were being pleased together.

Crooking her knees over his arms, Daddy leaned forward, using the position for leverage to pound into her. Vicky cried out again, this time forgetting who might hear, as pain and pleasure mingled in her core, her sore bottom bouncing and rubbing against the ottoman beneath her while Daddy impaled her on his cock again and again.

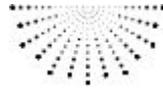
The mix of sensations was dizzying, mixing up her senses until she couldn't tell what was agony and what was ecstasy.

“Daddy! Oh God, Daddy! I'm coming!”

“That's it, babygirl.” Daddy's voice was a low growl in her ear. “Come for Daddy. Come all over Daddy's cock.”

Shuddering with pure sexual bliss, Vicky did exactly that as Daddy emptied himself into her.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Hayleigh

“I’m s-sorry, Daddy.”

Arms wrapped around his neck, Hayleigh sobbed into Connor’s shoulder as he carried her away from their friends. She was grateful for the distance; being punished together was bad enough, but crying like a baby in front of other people was always the worst. Especially because, as hard as she had tried to be brave for Vicky, she was feeling very Little just then and all she wanted was her Daddy.

“I know, baby. I’m sorry, too.”

“You are?” Never in all the time they’d been together had he apologized for punishing her, and the shock of it nearly had her tears drying up instantly.

“Not for spanking you,” he said with a chuckle, as if he’d read her mind. “You earned every swat of that paddling.”

“I know.” A few more tears slipped out and she sighed as he sat down with her cradled on his lap. “We should have just told you guys how we were feeling instead of sneaking around. It just—”

“What, baby?” His voice had changed from stern, strict disciplinarian to sweet, caring Daddy and suddenly she couldn’t keep the words inside a second longer.

“It just seemed like the only way ‘cuz you were being so strict, and I didn’t mean to be bad, I just missed my friend!” All of the words poured out of her in a rush, along with a fresh wave of tears.

“Poor little jellybean,” he murmured, rocking her gently. “I know you did. And I’m sorry I wasn’t paying more attention to your needs. I admit I was being selfish. Even at the Ranch it never really feels like we’re alone and I just wanted you all to myself. But I hurt you in the process, and I’m sorry. Forgive me?”

The lingering yucky feelings in her tummy seemed to evaporate with his apology. “Of course, Daddy.”

“My good girl. I love you, Hayleigh Anne Blackburn.”

“I never get tired of hearing that,” she said with a grin. “I love you, too.”

Now that they’d made up and her heart didn’t feel so heavy, the heat and pain in her bottom was morphing into something else altogether and she squirmed on his lap.

“What are you doing, naughty girl?”

“Nothin’.” It was a lie, one her Daddy probably saw right through.

“Nothing, huh? Then I guess you don’t want me to do this.” As he spoke, his hand slid up between her thighs, stopping just short of where she so badly wanted him to touch her.

“Daddy,” she whined, parting her legs and wincing when her punished flesh pressed more firmly against his thigh.

“What do you want, baby?” His voice was thick, rough the way it was when he wanted her. Which seemed to be nearly every second of every day, a fact which never failed to thrill her.

“You, Daddy. Please.”

When his fingers finally slipped inside of her, she gasped, her head falling back as the pleasure rose up within her.

“So wet for Daddy,” Connor murmured as he stroked the sensitive bundle of nerves just inside of her. “You’ve been dripping since I pulled your panties down to paddle your naughty little bottom. I think my naughty girl likes being on display, hmm?”

The words were designed to humiliate her, and it worked. But the embarrassment of it all only made her hotter, wetter, needier, and she ground her hips against his hand, desperately seeking relief.

“And don’t think I didn’t notice how wet you got when Saul was lecturing you. Maybe I need to reconsider letting the teachers discipline you at school. Would you like that, baby? Would you like having someone else pull your panties to your knees, exposing all your naughty bits to the world as they turned your bottom red?”

Other than Master Derek, nobody else at the Ranch had spanked her since she and Connor had become an item. Even when they had, it had always been so... detached. Clinical. It had never driven her wild with need the way it did now with her husband describing it to her in such excruciating,

humiliating detail. “I—I don’t know. Daddy, please, please let me come!”

“Not just yet. Up on the ottoman. Like before.”

Kicking her panties away from her feet, she practically dove for an ottoman identical to the other, positioning herself just as she had for her punishment, with her aching breasts pressed against the cushion and her ass high. Only now she placed her knees further apart, inviting him in.

A low, needy moan she didn’t recognize met her ears and it took her a moment to realize it must be Vicky having her own make-up session with Saul. Her clit throbbed painfully as her friend’s sounds of pleasure drifted across the beach.

Being punished next to someone was almost normal for her at this point. But she’d never been fucked with someone else in hearing distance, and the almost taboo nature of what they were doing was a thrill unlike anything she’d experienced before.

Even more so when Connor gripped her hips, his cock stretching her with a pinch and a burn, eliciting a similarly needy sound from her. She buried her face in her arms, determined to stay quiet, but her Daddy was having none of it.

Thick fingers dug into her skin, and she couldn’t help but yelp at the bite of pain as he drove into her. “None of that, little girl. I want everyone to hear your Daddy giving you exactly what you need.”

Pain and pleasure swirled together until she could no longer tell one from the other. And she couldn’t have held back the sounds of either if she’d wanted. The warm island air grew thick with her shouts and pleas, her whimpers and moans, and finally her scream of release as the orgasm crashed

over her, as fierce and wonderful as the ocean she'd so happily played in earlier that day.

"Fuck, baby," Connor groaned as he buried himself deep within her one final time, his cock pulsing inside of her as he finished.

When they'd both caught their breath again, he pulled away from her and gave her bottom an affectionate squeeze. "Such a good girl. Come here, jellybean."

"Daddy?" Curled up on his lap, she yawned and snuggled close as the sounds of the island tried to lull her into sleep.

"Yes, baby?"

"Can I at least talk to Vicky tomorrow?"

"You could. Or we could spend the whole afternoon with her and Saul. We were thinking some beach time and dinner together."

"Really?" Wide awake now, she sat up and stared at him, taking in the smile tugging at his lips. "I just thought—we were so naughty."

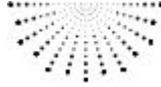
"My sweet little jellybean. You weren't *that* naughty. And you've already been punished. I'm not going to keep punishing you for something that's already been handled. That's not how our relationship works."

There'd been a time, before him, when that was exactly how her life had been. Endless bouts of silence, denial, neglect, all meant to teach her to be the perfect submissive.

But those days were long behind her, and her heart sang with the knowledge. "Thank you, Daddy."

"You're welcome, baby."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Connor

“Daddy, look! Dolphins! Do you see them?”

“I do, jellybean.” Half a dozen fins were breaking the surface at various intervals, a stunning, private little dance just for them as the sun set, giving the whole scene an otherworldly glow.

Beside him, Vicky squealed and bounced on her toes. “Oh my gosh! They’re so pretty!”

“Not as pretty as you, babygirl.”

Any other time, he might have rolled his eyes, maybe given Saul a hard time about his mushy statement. But with his own wife pressed against his chest, her head leaned back against his shoulder and a bright, happy smile on her face, he was feeling pretty mushy himself.

His wife. Nearly a week into it and he was still riding high on the thrill of calling her that. He assumed at some point it would become his new normal, but he hoped he never lost the joy of it, even as the new and shiny settled into the mundane.

As the sky darkened to a deep purple, a buzzing in his pocket told him it was time to leave their magical little spot. They'd brought the girls as promised, let them play together in the sand and surf, building sandcastles and swimming through the thankfully gentle waves. He was loath to break the spell, but they had dinner reservations, and someone had to be the responsible one.

"Time to go," he said, pressing a kiss to Hayleigh's temple.

"Awww, Daddy. Just a little longer?"

"Yes, please!" Vicky echoed, turning her wide, pleading gaze on Saul, who glanced over at Connor and shrugged.

Connor had planned for exactly this and had deliberately set his alarm fifteen minutes earlier than necessary so he and Saul could play the indulgent Daddies. And because he knew they'd have given in anyway, so at least now they wouldn't actually be late.

"Ten minutes, jellybean."

They were pushing up against that fifteen-minute buffer by the time they finally dragged their reluctant little girls away from the water's edge and back to the main area of the resort. He couldn't help but smile when both girls winced as they took their seats. Although the redness had faded from their skin, they'd made it clear throughout the day that the soreness still lingered.

He couldn't have said about Vicky, but he was certain part of Hayleigh's continued shifting in her seat was thanks to the large plug he'd settled in her bottom before taking her out to play. Once they were done with dinner, he had every intention of whisking his wife off back to their villa and claiming the only hole he hadn't yet claimed as her husband.

Picking up the menu in front of him, he tried to focus on the wine list to distract himself from the painful hardening of his cock. He wanted nothing more than to skip dinner altogether and get to the “main event” of their evening, but he and Saul had promised them dinner together after their beach time, and good Daddies always kept their promises.

And, he had to admit, the time together was actually really nice. They really hadn’t gotten to just sit down and enjoy a meal together without some kind of drama hanging over them and it was almost like getting to know Saul all over again. If nothing else, the beaming smiles from Hayleigh and Vicky as they talked and laughed their way through dinner made it worth the “sacrifice” of not having his wife all to himself.

After dinner, and plenty of hugs and tearful goodbyes all around, he and Hayleigh headed back to their villa, her fingers entwined with his and her head resting on his shoulder.

“Thank you for today. It meant a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome, jellybean.” Pausing just outside their door, he turned her and pulled her up against him, reaching down to cup her generous ass in his hands. “I just want you to be happy, Hayleigh. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“I know. And you make me happy.” He squeezed and she let out a little hiss of pain.

“Even when your bottom is bruised and sore?”

“Especially then, Daddy.” Tipping her head back, she grinned up at him. “Are you still planning to...?”

“To what? Oh,” he said when she rolled her eyes. “You mean, am I still planning to fuck my wife’s gorgeous bottom tonight? Yes, I absolutely am.”

“Well. Whatever Chef wants, Chef gets, right?”

It was a long-running joke from back home at the Ranch. But just then, with Hayleigh in his arms and his ring on her finger, it couldn't have been truer. She was everything he'd ever wanted in one gorgeous package, and he was never letting her go.

The End

See how Hayleigh and Vicky ended up on their accidental double honeymoon with these stories from Stella Moore and Golden Angel!

Hayleigh's Little Halloween

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ABOUT STELLA MOORE

Stella is a USA Today Bestselling author of romance featuring irresistibly sassy heroines and the strict, dominant men who try to tame them. Her favorite place to write is on her deck, with a glass of wine, enjoying her fabulous view of the countryside. Aside from reading and writing, Stella's favorite hobby is shopping. She is a fierce advocate for teaching women to love themselves, both in her writing and in the real world!

Keep up with Stella and stay up to date on new releases:

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ABOUT GOLDEN ANGEL

Golden Angel is a USA Today best-selling author and self-described bibliophile with a “kinky” bent who loves to write stories for the characters in her head. If she didn’t get them out, she’s pretty sure she’d go just a little crazy.

She is happily married, old enough to know better but still too young to care, and a big fan of happily-ever-afters, strong heroes and heroines, and sizzling chemistry.

When she’s not writing, she can often be found on the couch reading, in front of her sewing machine making a new cosplay, hanging out with her friends, or wandering the Maryland Renaissance Fair.

Golden Angel writes Contemporary BDSM romances, Historical Spanking Romances, and kinky Sci-Fi alien Romances. Explore the past, present, and future with her at www.goldenangelromance.com

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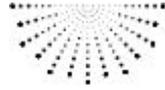
A Season for Spies

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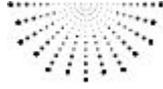
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This book is a work of fiction. Names, places, locales, and events are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, places, and events are purely coincidental.

Our dear friend Maren suffered a loss that no one should have to bear. I'm so glad to be part of this anthology to support her, the way she's supported so many others in this community.

CHAPTER ONE



She tried to control the harsh panting breaths as she ducked behind the purple *tellis* plant and crouched low. She could hear the crunching and rustle of footsteps coming closer and she stopped breathing entirely while she waited for them to pass.

She strained to see anything in the dim light, but even her slit-pupil eyes couldn't make out much more than shadows beyond her hiding place. Her life hadn't prepared her for this. There had been stories, rumors, about what life was like outside of the colony dome, but she'd always assumed it was just that—stories to keep people behaved. She had been wrong.

It was every bit as wild and frightening as she'd heard and now it was too late. She'd been exiled for failing to obey. She'd attacked her Advocate to avoid being forced into a breeding program she didn't want to be part of, and now this was her new life.

After the footsteps finally moved off into the distance, she relaxed and started to breathe again in slow gulping breaths. She settled back on her rump and pulled her knees up to her chest so she could hug them and conserve warmth. It wasn't dark so she wasn't entirely freezing *yet*, but the suns were

going down in the distance and when they were gone, she'd be chilled to the bone.

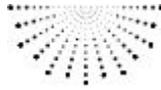
She was grateful for the short layer of rust-colored fur that covered most of her body. It helped to insulate against the cold, but her people no longer carried the heavy pelts they once had. It wouldn't be enough to keep her comfortable.

Her stomach growled and she eyed the purple plant, wishing it was berry season. She searched carefully, hoping there might be a few late fruits, but there was nothing and she sighed.

The only saving grace was that she was a botanist. If there were edible wild plants, she'd find them, and she could survive on them for a while. *If* she could find them. The planet had several short growing seasons and she'd made the mistake of being thrown out between them. She could only hope to stumble across the few digestible plants that were able to survive the off seasons. The colony life was harsh, filled with rules and work, but there'd always been enough food.

Lurking in the back of her mind was the idea that if she returned... if she apologized and promised to go along with the future they'd planned for her, they might take her back. She knew it wouldn't be that easy. She curled up in her hidden nook, but sleep evaded her as her mind insisted on replaying the events that led up to her expulsion and she couldn't shut it off no matter how much she tried.

CHAPTER TWO



It was three days before her birthday, and she was running out of time. She wasn't sure why it was so hard. It wasn't like there were a lot of choices, but before she turned twenty-three, she had to pick one of the few, and she hated it.

She could either present herself at the breeding center to be implanted with the first of her two pregnancies. Or she could register as an Auntie and go to the Med-clinic to be permanently sterilized. They would remove her eggs and freeze them while they were in their prime.

There was a third choice, of course, the one no one ever took. She could leave the dome, wander out into the lawless wastelands and try to survive without all the modern conveniences—like food, shelter, and safety.

Like every other teen or new adult in the colony she'd considered what it would be like to have the freedom to choose the other parent of her children, to go where and when she wanted without having the proctors stopping her, but no one ever really *chose* to leave. It was too scary out there beyond the dome.

The terraforming had made the planet livable. There was oxygen and water, and she supposed everything else needed to survive. The scientists had seeded the planet with various plant

and animal life decades before the first human had come to live, but it was the great mysterious unknown that scared people.

Colony life wasn't easy. She was from the first generation to be born on the planet and everything was still new and rough. People worked hard and there were aspects no one liked, but at least you knew what to expect. You knew where your next meal would come from. Those who couldn't handle the rigid structure under the dome and went out to live in the wilds, well, who knew what they had to deal with.

So, she was left with only two viable options. Aunties didn't have kids so there was no need for a family. The ones who chose it bunked together in groups and did the jobs no one else wanted—not very appealing. The Aunties who didn't choose it but failed their fertility tests were treated differently. They were allowed to pursue real studies and focus on careers.

That would have been ideal for her, but unfortunately her tests were perfectly fine. The doctor had even informed her that her wide hips would be perfect for birthing, as if that was a compliment.

The few who did decide to be sterilized tended to be shunned, because the idea of not wanting to contribute to the growth of the small colony was so shocking that people never knew how to react. Every birth was essential, and the only reason they were limited to two gestations was that they had to restrict the population growth until they had the resources to expand the colony.

But the dome extension was almost complete, and she'd heard that in two years the number of pregnancies per woman would be doubled to four, and the thought made her queasy. It

wasn't that she hated the idea of having children *someday*. She just hated the idea of being forced to procreate on demand.

First pregnancies were always fertilized in the breeding center from sperm that had been specially selected. Later, if you matched up with a partner who tested as a suitable gene-match you could get permission to breed together. But with such a small pool to draw from, not even an official pairing meant that you'd be allowed to make a baby in the natural way.

She hated that breeding was considered her prime function and role in life just because she was a young woman. The best genetic matches were planned out by the doctors with no input from her, or from him either. But of course, the men were free to deposit their seed and then go on their way with their function filled.

Men weren't human incubators for almost a year. And the formula vats had failed, so they had no milk substitutes. Women were expected to nurse their children, if at all possible, for the first two years, further tying them to the role of mother. Only after they'd filled their quota were they allowed to go back to their chosen careers.

Complaints about the ridiculous sexism of the situation fell on deaf ears since most of the colony leaders were older women who had already raised their children. They'd been through it themselves and had no empathy for those who didn't want to be mothers. Besides, they would argue, artificial wombs failed half the time. No one knew why, but their species just didn't do well outside of a natural host.

To do that over and over, what kind of life would that be, she wondered. Not one she wanted. Becoming an Auntie by

choice was selfish, that's what everyone else thought—but she didn't agree.

What really bothered her was that she felt like she was faced with a hopeless future filled with misery, but no one else seemed to mind. All the other women her age were counting down the days to their appointments at the breeding centers. It had become a rite of passage. The last step before true adulthood.

The closer she got to her birthday the more anxious she became about going through with it, and hearing the excited chatter of her best friend didn't help. Alixie was so excited it was all she could talk about.

“Mara, what's the big deal? You know you're going to have to get knocked up, so just go ahead and send in your form,” Alixie said, rolling her eyes.

“I haven't decided yet.” Mara shrugged.

“Oh please, like you want to be an Auntie. They get all the boring assignments, and everyone avoids them. Don't you want our babies to grow up together? They're going to be so cute!” she said.

Alixie had no doubts. In a way, Mara envied her. It would be nice to *want* the things that were being forced on her. It would certainly make it easier anyway. Her wrist-com beeped, and she looked down to see that she was being summoned to her advocate's office. She sighed. “I've got to go. Advocate Jesk wants me.”

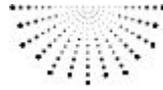
“Probably because you haven't filled out your forms. Just pick breeding, Mara. For me? I always dreamed about us having kids together. My birthday's only three days after yours. You know what that means?” Alixie demanded.

Mara sighed. “What?” She knew exactly what Alixie was going to say. She’d been saying the same thing since they were both ten years old and had been told the grand scheme of their future.

“It means we could even give birth on the same day! Wouldn’t that be amazing? We could hold each other’s hands during the labor!” Alixie’s eyes sparkled with happiness.

Mara’s stomach twisted. “Yeah. Amazing. Listen, I better go,” she said as she hurried away. It was probably the first time she’d ever been in a hurry to get to Advocate Jesk’s office.

CHAPTER THREE



She'd known what the meeting was about, and Alixie was right, of course.

The older woman made a show of swiping through Mara's file and frowning. "Mara, I don't understand why you haven't submitted your forms yet. You do realize you only have three days left?"

Did the advocate think she'd forgotten her own birthday? "Yes, Advocate Jesk, I know. I just haven't... decided yet," Mara said. She kept her voice as neutral as possible. Any emotion and her words would immediately be given less credit.

"What is there to decide? Forgive me, Mara, but no one wants to be an Auntie by choice. They get the worst jobs and no family." She tsk'd and shook her head. "Those who are infertile can't be blamed, but if you choose the role then it can be unpleasant."

"I just—I feel like neither of them are really what I want to do with my life. I mean kids are great, but I don't think I'm ready for them yet. What I'd really like is ..." The words trailed off as she looked up to find her Advocate staring at her. She shifted in her seat and tried to control her nerves. Was it really that weird?

The older woman carefully put her digital reader down and folded her hands. “Mara, you realize that as a colony we’re still very small and every life matters right now. Five years ago, we lost almost a tenth of our population to the Green Flu and something like that could happen again. You have a duty to the colony.” The lecture was delivered in a stern tone that occasionally tried, and failed, to sound encouraging.

“But I want to continue to study botany. I’m so close to finishing my Master’s research thesis and then I can start working on new plants for the gardens. Isn’t *that* important too?” She sat back in her seat and folded her arms across her chest.

She was tired of being told that her only value was as an incubator when she had so many wonderful plans that could benefit the entire colony. Suddenly the idea of taking her place at the breeding center was intolerable.

“Of course, it’s important,” the advocate said, trying to soothe her. “And you *will* do those things as soon as you carry out your reproductive duties. That’s why we have the Aunties. As soon as your children are weaned and can be dropped off at the creche you’ll be able to go back to your research. It will be eight years tops and then you’ll be free to take on other duties.”

“Eight years? Eight?” She blew out a frustrated breath. “You mean eight years *if* they don’t double the breeding quota, right?” There was no denial and after a long moment of silence she continued, “Why can’t I choose to be an Auntie and *still* continue my research? It makes no sense to punish people for not wanting kids.”

“You know why, Mara. People need encouragement to procreate and the best way to do that is to make it unpleasant

to refuse. Infertile Aunties and breeding women have a place here, but those who refuse their natural roles selfishly are a burden on society. They can only make it up by taking on the worst jobs. You're a smart girl and I know you'll make the correct choice."

"Could... could I at least continue to work after the birth? I'm sure I could handle it." Mara hated the pleading tone in her voice, but she couldn't help it. She loved her work and didn't want to lose it.

"Mara, even if you were to have only one baby to care for, which is unlikely, the demands of an infant should be your focus during these years," Jesk said in an admonishing tone.

Their people tended towards multiple births, usually two, but sometimes as many as four. It made doing anything but caring for the offspring difficult, but Mara had been a rare single. There was always the chance that her child would be too. At least her advocate could have left her with that hope. Her eyes filled with tears and she looked down.

Jesk picked up the file-reader, tapped a few times to bring up the correct document and then slid it across the desk. "Since you're here now, let's just get this out of the way. Sign and apply your fingerprint please."

Mara looked down and read the form, even though she knew what it was. Her wishes were being ignored as she was shoved against her will into a role she didn't want. She knew what would happen if she refused to sign and it shook her. She obeyed with numb fingers.

"Good girl!" Advocate Jesk smiled with nova-brightness, pleased she'd capitulated. "I knew you'd make the right choice. Now, I'll escort you right over to the center and we'll get started."

Mara was struck with a feeling of panic. She swallowed hard, forcing herself to sound calm. “But I still have three days. We’re not supposed to be impregnated before our birthday.”

The older woman smiled at her, but there was just a touch of coldness to it. “Oh, I think we’ll make an exception in this case. We find that women who are struggling with the idea do better once it’s over. It will be easier once the hormones kick in.”

Mara was pulled to her feet and hustled towards the door, while the advocate continued to talk in a reassuring tone. “I enjoyed every one of my pregnancies. They went so well, I even had a bonus baby past my quota.” She said the last in an air of confiding a secret, but everyone knew that advocates got their jobs by having extra children.

Mara didn’t care about any of that. She was too busy struggling with the rising urge to run, to escape, to get away. The wild urge to flee was beating at the inside of her chest like a caged animal, but she couldn’t get past the feeling of shock that had frozen her into this numb passive place, and she let herself be dragged without a fuss.

It wasn’t until she saw the doors of the breeding center that everything came crashing down. She dug her heels in and pulled to a stop. “No. I can’t. I don’t want this,” she blurted. Her wide eyes darted left and right looking for an escape route and the Advocate’s expression tightened.

“Mara, stop this now. You’re acting like a child. You’ve already signed the papers so there’s nothing you can do now but go through with it.”

She pulled at Mara’s arm, trying to get her walking, but Mara didn’t move. Children were trained to obey the colony

leaders from birth. It was too dangerous on an untamed planet otherwise, but something had broken inside of her and she knew that she would not—*could* not—do this. It didn't matter what the consequences were, she was just going to have to deal with them.

“No. I can't.” Her voice shook.

“What?” The advocate stopped and gave her a confused look. “Of course you can, Mara. Be a good girl.”

“No,” Mara repeated.

“I've tried to be nice about this, young lady, but you've signed the forms. You have no choice. Now you can either walk on your own like an adult, or I can have you dragged there. Either way you *will* be implanted by the end of the day!” Her tone no longer held an ounce of warmth.

Jesk's expression was filled with anger and frustration as she lifted her wrist-com and tapped the emergency button. Mara's eyes widened, and without thinking she turned and ran. She didn't expect the advocate to follow.

Jesk was far from elderly, and all colonists were healthy, but like most of the advocates, she was overly aware of her position. Chasing a runaway through the streets wasn't exactly decorous. Maybe she felt like she had a personal stake in getting Mara to the clinic, because she did follow.

Mara wasn't exactly sure how it happened. One moment she'd been cornered by the agriculture greenhouses, where she'd run instinctively, the next she was screaming and swinging wildly at her advocate. Flight mode hadn't worked so it was time for fight, and purely by accident she managed to land a solid blow to the woman's face.

She heard the crunch of Jesk's nose breaking, saw the dark blood spraying, and stopped. Complete shock took over and she stared as the woman covered her face with both hands and screamed. Two proctors came charging up and they too stopped and stared. They'd probably never seen an advocate hurt like that before; Mara was in shock herself.

They were visibly torn on what to do and stood there looking uncertainly between the two women until the advocate snapped at them to grab her. Mara had disjointed images of being dragged away, but they were distant as though they belonged to someone else. She wasn't even sure where they were going to take her.

Crime wasn't really a problem in the colony and small misdemeanors were punished with restrictions and extra work cycles. No one really needed to be locked up, but the medical clinic was a surprise. She began to struggle when she realized where they were going. At that point she was afraid they were planning to have the doctors implant her, she didn't realize that was no longer an option. There was a prick of a needle stinging her arm and then everything went dark.

When she woke up later, she was in a hospital bed. Her wrists were tied down and she couldn't move. She was alone, but an older woman bustled in almost as soon as she opened her eyes and Mara recognized her immediately. She known Doctor Lahn her whole life.

“Hello, Mara. How do you feel?”

“I-I'm not sure. Tired mostly. What happened? Did I get hurt?” She had a feeling like she'd forgotten something important, but she couldn't remember what.

“Not exactly. Your advocate was bringing you to the breeding center to be implanted with your first pregnancy and

you had a bit of an... episode.” The doctor was giving her concerned looks as she moved around the bed checking vitals. “Sometimes it takes the memory a minute to catch up after a sedative. Do you remember?”

Mara frowned and then her eyes widened. “Oh no,” she breathed out. She did remember now, and it wasn’t good. “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I really didn’t. I was just trying to get away and she grabbed me. Is—is she okay?”

The doctor gave her a faint smile. “She’ll be fine. Her nose has already been reset and will heal. Everyone understands that it was an accident.” Her expression turned serious and Mara’s heart jumped in her chest. “Advocate Jesk tells me you’re refusing to be implanted. Can you tell me why?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t want it. I’ve been working on an exciting new plant strain and I don’t want to put it off for eight years to have children. I don’t even like babies that much, to be honest,” she confessed. “Please, can’t you give me a waiver or something?”

The doctor hesitated and then she took a seat on the bed next to Mara. There was an odd look on her face, part sorrow, part worry and it made Mara nervous. “I’m afraid there’s a little more to it than that, Mara. I suppose it won’t matter if I tell you this,” she said, sounding resigned.

She gave Mara a long, searching look and then shrugged. “The fact that you don’t want children is troubling, you see. Because you *should* want them. You should be excited and eager to be implanted, like all of your age mates—but you aren’t and that’s an issue.”

Mara bit her lip, tilting her head. “It can’t be that unusual. Some choose to be Aunties,” she pointed out.

The doctor nodded, “On rare occasions someone will choose to be an Auntie but there are usually other factors, fears that they can’t get over. Underneath that they usually do want children. They just feel they *shouldn’t* have them. With you there seems to be a complete ambivalence to the idea of being a mother and there really shouldn’t be.”

Mara frowned; her eyes narrowed. “You’re telling me that no one else feels that way?”

The doctor reached out and set her hand on Mara’s arm. It was meant to be a comfort, but it didn’t feel that way. “I’m saying that no one but you *can* feel that way.”

Mara had trouble believing she was the only one. “I don’t understand. Why not?”

“Because the drugs that we seed the food with prevent it. You won’t remember this, Mara, but when you were very young there was a rebellion. The colony was almost lost as a result. We’re here alone, far from our home planet, and all we have is each other. After the near loss, the colony leaders decided that some changes were needed. So now the daily meals are filled with chemicals that enhance certain things like obedience and biological imperatives. It didn’t always work on the older residents, so we established the choice to become an Auntie, but it’s had a perfect success rate on your generation ...until now.”

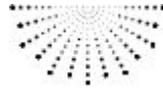
It was explained so matter-of-factly, like there was nothing wrong with controlling people by drugging their food, but Mara was horrified. Her mouth dropped open, but no words came out.

“I know it’s a shock and we don’t normally tell anyone. Even most of the advocates don’t know, but I decided to make an exception in your case,” Doctor Lahn said.

“Why? Aren’t you afraid I might tell?” Not that she thought it would do any good. Everyone else but her seemed fine with how things were run.

“No, no I’m not.” The doctor sighed. She was silent for a second and seemed to be gathering the energy to say something. Finally, she straightened and looked her patient right in the eye. “Mara you’re being exiled from the colony.”

CHAPTER FOUR



At some point, her mind gave up on reliving history and let her fall into an uncomfortable sleep. It didn't last long and when the temperature dropped in the darkness it woke her. She sat up with a wince. Everything felt sore and achy when she moved, probably from the cold, though sleeping on the hard ground hadn't helped.

The insect song and mating calls around her stilled as soon as she moved, and for a whole minute there was absolute silence. By the time the first tentative chirps began again, she was convinced that whoever had been chasing her was gone, which meant she could move.

As much as she would have preferred to sleep, she badly wanted to find a shelter where she could risk a small fire to keep her warm. A vague memory of the colony's maps indicated a rock face riddled with caves not far away and that was her goal. Of course, she wasn't stupid enough to think she would be the only exile to go there, but she'd figure that out when she found it.

She knew her survival was going to depend on finding other people to band with. She just needed to make sure they were safe to trust. She'd heard stories about how the outcasts treated each other, but what were her alternatives?

She hefted her pack onto her shoulders and started to walk. At least moving would keep her warm and if she couldn't find the caves, she'd keep going until morning and then sleep during the day. Her people saw pretty well in the dark, but the light of the moons overhead was a big help.

After a couple of hours trudging along, she was half-asleep on her feet and stumbling over everything in her path. The rock came out of nowhere and she didn't see it in time. She cried out as she tripped and hit the ground face first. It knocked the wind out of her and for several minutes she just lay there fighting the urge to cry as she struggled to breathe.

By the time she was ready to try getting up, it was too late. She hadn't lost her follower after all and her startled shout had told him exactly where she was. She saw him burst from the underbrush and scrambled to her knees.

"Don't move," he said. His voice was rough and sounded rusty from lack of use. He stood in the shadows and she couldn't make out his face, but he was tall and sturdy, towering over her in an ominous threat.

"W-what do you want?" she asked. She wrapped her arms around herself to make the shaking less noticeable.

"You're a new exile." It wasn't a question, he knew.

She wasn't sure how it was so obvious, but she didn't bother to deny it. "Yes. They kicked me out because—"

He cut her off with a sharp gesture. "Save it. I'm not interested." And then he was reaching down and hauling her to her feet with a harsh yank that made her stumble against him.

She put up her hands as she fell into him and they ended up trapped between their bodies, pressing against his chest. Her eyes widened as she felt the rock-hard muscle under his

clothing. That much strength should have been frightening with her so vulnerable, instead she was oddly intrigued. It took an effort to force her hands to drop, and then she took a step back.

She knew he wasn't going to let her go, but some part of her thought if she pretended, then he might go along with it. "Thanks. Well, I better be going," she said as she turned away. Her intention was to put a little distance between them and then take off running before he caught on. She didn't get more than two steps before he grabbed her by the arm and yanked her to a stop.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"I-I have to keep moving if I'm going to stay warm, but thanks for helping me up. I'm fine now," she said, putting some firmness into her tone.

He stared at her like she was crazy and then shook his head laughing. "You're not going anywhere girl, I'm claiming you. Besides, it's no good you being out here alone. You won't last the night before something makes a snack out of you."

She wasn't sure what he meant by claiming, and she didn't intend to find out. "I'll be fine, thanks, but I appreciate your concern." She made a real effort to keep the sarcasm out of her tone and mostly managed, though the way his eyebrow rose suggested at least a little had slipped in.

His grip on her arm tightened painfully. "Girl, things are different out here. We don't follow those polite colony rules, and you better learn fast or you'll regret it." It was a clear warning.

She probably would regret it, but she hadn't broken free of one confining situation just to get herself trapped in another

one. She stuck out her chin stubbornly. “My name isn’t *girl*. It’s Mara, thanks, and I’d really like it if you let go of my arm. I have friends waiting for me and they’ll come looking if I don’t catch up.” The last was pure bluff of course, but it was worth a try.

“Your name is what I say it is, *girl*, and I’d be happy to let go of you, but then I’d have to tear your ass up when you took off. Now, is that really how you want our relationship to start? With me whupping your ass for not listening?” His eyes narrowed and he gave her a shake.

She barely noticed it because she was stuck on what he’d said. No one had ever hit her, not even as a child. Even her playmates knew better than to do anything that could be considered violent. The punishments were too severe. That was why she’d been so shocked when she’d fought her advocate off and accidentally hit her in the face.

Now this man was just casually threatening to beat her and for the first time she realized how much trouble she was in. “You—you wouldn’t do that,” she said. Her voice was empty of any confidence.

“Try me,” he said, with a snort. “This isn’t the colony. Life is dangerous out here, and people who don’t listen die. Trust me, there’s a lot you don’t understand yet. I don’t want to be chasing all over saving you, so I’m going to make it plain. Listening?”

She nodded slowly; mouth closed tight to avoid saying something she’d regret.

“Good. You obey me and we’ll get along fine. If you don’t, I’ll strip you down to the fur, bend you over my lap, and blister your ass until you can’t sit down. I tell you to jump, you jump. I tell you to stay still and you freeze like you’re made of

ice. We clear on that, *Mara*?" He put just enough emphasis in her name to make it obvious he was mocking her.

She swallowed hard and nodded, but this time it wasn't good enough.

"Say it out loud," he snapped.

"I—I'll obey you."

"Or what? I want to make sure you understand."

It took her a few frantic seconds to realize he wanted her to repeat his threat and she could feel embarrassed heat rising to the surface, underneath her short pelt. "You'll—" she got stuck on the words and it was a struggle to continue while he looked more and more impatient.

"Maybe you need your first lesson now, then?" he suggested.

That was enough of a threat to get her talking. "If I don't obey, you'll beat my ass," she blurted. In truth, she wasn't even sure what that would consist of, but she knew she didn't want to find out.

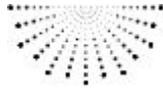
"Good girl. I know it's a shock, but that's how it is out here. You belong to me, and I'll teach you how to survive. Just keep in mind I only give one warning, and I don't make idle threats," he said.

A shiver rolled down her back because she absolutely believed him, but she also knew she had to try to escape the first chance she got.

He watched her for a second, like he was looking for some sign that she was going to behave. "By the way, my name is Jahk."

Jahk. It was rough, harsh, and she decided it suited him.

CHAPTER FIVE



In retrospect, she should have listened, or at least waited until she learned her way around, but she'd been afraid to stay. Not afraid of him, at least not exactly. He wasn't the monster his first impression had made him out to be and when he'd taken her back to his cave, he'd actually treated her like a person.

It seemed as though he'd felt it necessary to scare her first, but once she seemed to be complying, he was able to relax. The cave was warm and well-insulated. It was clear he'd lived there a long time. Everything was organized and tidy.

He settled her by a fire pit, and within a couple minutes had stirred the coals to life. He put a pot of water on to boil and while it was heating, he dug through the coals and embers to produce some roasted tubers that were steaming hot and already cooked through.

Her stomach growled and she eagerly took the wooden plate he offered. She couldn't wait until it cooled enough and burnt her mouth on the first bite. "This is *so* good," she moaned. It had only been three or four days without real cooked food, but she couldn't remember ever eating anything that was so simply prepared, yet so delicious. "Yadri root, right? Never seen one so big and it has a sweetness," she mumbled through a full mouth.

He seemed surprised she'd recognized it. "Yeah, things grow better when they aren't locked away in a dome."

She gave him a side-glance. "People too, I guess." He was at least a foot taller than anyone from the colony. She was taller than most, but he still dwarfed her by nearly a foot.

"Guess that's true too." He laughed and knocked a tuber out of the coals for himself. He skipped the primitive plate and tossed the food from hand to hand to keep it from burning.

It was comical to watch and she found herself relaxing. She snuck glances at him from time to time as she ate and from the fleeting looks, she was able to put together an image of a handsome male, though rough looking and scarred. His pelt seemed darker than hers, though in the flickering firelight she couldn't tell for sure.

He appeared to be older than she was, but living rough might have aged him. She wondered what his story was. Hardly anyone was exiled anymore, so he'd clearly been out there a long time. Her sneaky looks weren't as subtle as she'd hoped and eventually, he called her on it.

"Like what you see?" he asked. There was a hint of mocking in the words and she quickly dropped her eyes.

"Sorry, I was just curious." She hesitated and then, "I guess you've been out here a while."

"I've never lived in your colony. I was born out here," he said, shrugging.

Her head jerked up in surprise and she stared, "But ..."
The word trailed off into silence as a flood of questions filled her mind.

"But?" One eyebrow rose in question.

She swallowed hard. “I thought—they said exiled men were sterilized. To—to keep them from being, uh, aggressive.”

He stared at her and then snorted. “You should probably know by now the people running things over there lie a lot.” He paused, seemingly considering it. “Might be that they sterilize a few. I couldn’t say, but a lot of the people live out here on the fringe by choice. They left the colony intact. Plenty of families around. My parents came here on the ship and they didn’t like the direction things were going, so they left.”

“I would never risk having children out here.” The words exploded from her mouth in shock. She couldn’t even imagine.

He gave her an amused look. “You think you’ll get a choice on that? What are you going to do when the birth control runs out and you go into heat?” He chuckled.

She set her plate down, the last bit of food uneaten, and sat back to roll that new information over in her mind. It had never occurred to her that she might end up facing pregnancy, without the doctors and clinic to keep her safe. She pictured herself giving birth in the dirt and found the idea horrifying.

But he was right. Birth control implants had to be replaced yearly. Without one to control her cycles she would eventually revert to a normal heat cycle and then she’d breed whether she liked it or not. All of that was suppressed in the colony of course. Pregnancies there were planned and rarely did the implants fail between, but hers hadn’t been replaced on her birthday.

The clinic would have removed it from her thigh, but she might already be fertile. Even if she wasn’t, it was only a matter of time. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she said.

“Sorry, wasn’t thinking it might shock you. I forget sometimes how naïve you colonists are—no offence,” he added.

She couldn’t really be offended because he was right. There was so much she hadn’t considered, but it wasn’t like she’d had a choice. She hadn’t made the decision to leave; she’d been thrust out.

“I was exiled because I refused to go along with their breeding program. Ironic really, when you think about it. Maybe I should have just let them do it.” She sighed and wiped the back of her mouth with her hand.

“You can’t fight nature, Mara.” He sounded like someone who had tried and was now resigned to just accepting the way things were.

She might end up feeling that way too, but she wasn’t willing to give up yet. “When you said you were claiming me, I assumed you would force me to mate with you.” She avoided looking at him, and her hand went up to push her hair back out of her face in a nervous gesture. “I thought at least there wouldn’t be any worry about pregnancy because you would be sterile.”

“I’m sorry I was rough with you earlier. I meant what I said about punishing you if you don’t obey, don’t mistake me on that,” he cautioned her. “But I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget how to deal with people. I claimed you, but I should have explained what it meant.

“Claiming’s an old thing. Our people abandoned it long before we started to colonize, so my parents said anyway. But we do it different here. It just means I’m taking responsibility for you, and—” He paused for a long moment. “Any children.”

She jerked. Her mouth already opening to protest, but he shook his head and held up a hand to silence her.

“Look, I know. I get it. I’m not going to force mating on you. I like my women willing and eager for it anyway. But sooner or later your body’s urges are going to kick in and we both know it. Claiming females keeps them safe, and then later, if there are children, it protects them too. If it wasn’t me who claimed you, it would have been someone else, and they might not be as nice about it.”

“But I don’t *want* any of this,” she protested. Maybe if circumstances were different, he’d be what she wanted. She could already feel the growing attraction between them, but she didn’t want a mate. And after being exiled over refusing to have children, she wasn’t going to give in now when it would be even more of a hardship.

“Yeah, but you’ve got it and there’s not much either of us can do about it. I’m not letting you run off and get yourself killed. Life is harsh out here and one wrong step can be deadly. You’re going to stay right here and obey me, so you can live and keep fighting.”

Her eyes stung with tears, but she blinked them away angrily. None of it was fair, none of it. There wasn’t much to say after that. She stayed quiet, huddling near the fire. He offered her more food. The thick meat broth, that he warmed by dropping sizzling hot stones into it, smelled delicious and she couldn’t resist. Besides, she figured she better fill up while she had the chance.

Later she watched him as he slept on the far side of the fire. He’d been so heavy-handed when they’d met, but it hadn’t lasted. In his own way he was trying to be kind and she could see that now. That didn’t mean she was okay with the

whole ‘females must be subjugates’ attitude that seemed to be in force outside of the colony dome.

She had mixed feelings about the dominant way he’d taken control and told her what she had to do. On one hand it stirred something primal inside of her. Having someone take care of her and keep her safe was oddly appealing. But she also didn’t like being told what she could and couldn’t do. It grated on her.

As a child she’d broken more rules than most, and it seemed like every day she was being scolded for something else. She’d outgrown the rebellion, for the most part. At least she thought she had. Now, she began to wonder if she hadn’t just submerged that part of herself to fit in better.

And how much of that had been the drugs they’d been feeding the colonists too? Was that why obeying seemed to be so much easier for all her agemates? She’d never understood why she seemed to be the only one who had trouble following the rules, but if that came from the same drug resistance it made sense.

As for Jahk, there was an attraction there she couldn’t deny, and part of her wanted to stay with him, but that was the problem. If she did, it wouldn’t be long before her body would make a choice for her. If she didn’t want to end up bearing his offspring she couldn’t be there when it happened.

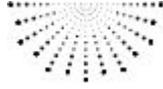
She’d never been through heat, no one she knew had. The implants suppressed all the messiness until it was time to breed, but she’d read about it. She knew the urge to mate would be overpowering. If she was anywhere near a male, she would have no choice. Neither would he.

The biological imperative to breed was strong in her people, and she wasn’t going to fool herself into thinking she

had the willpower to hold it off. Her best bet was just to be far enough away that nothing could happen.

When she was sure he was deeply asleep, she quietly got to her feet and retrieved her pack. She slipped out of the cave and started walking towards the trees. If she were lucky, she'd have a couple hours head start before he woke. If not—she'd find out if his threats were a bluff or not.

CHAPTER SIX



Mara was chilled, and her feet were sore, but she forced herself to keep walking. It was the only thing keeping her warm, and she needed to be far away before Jahk woke up and started looking for her. The moment he saw her pack was gone, he'd know she hadn't just stepped out to answer a call of nature, and then he'd come.

She didn't know how well he would be able to track her. The ground was dry; it hadn't rained recently so she left no footprints, but he was a hunter and there had to be some tracking ability involved in that. She had no idea what signs she was leaving behind as she passed. All she could do was try to move carefully.

As the sky started to brighten, the urge to hurry made it harder to move with slow, deliberate steps. Every broken twig and flattened plant made her wince, as she imagined a wide swatch of destruction pointing the way to her.

She was hoping to find some place hidden to shelter, so that once the rising suns were fully up, she could settle in and sleep through the day. It would make it harder for him to find her if she wasn't moving, she hoped. More important, she was exhausted and badly needed some solid rest before she dropped in her tracks.

Respite came in an unexpected way, when a misstep sent her crashing through the ground into a deep hole. There was no chance to save herself and she landed hard on the bottom with all the air knocked out of her. She lie there dazed, as she stared up at the sky through a broken latticework of roots and branches.

She sat up slowly and started a careful assessment of her body. Luckily, she hadn't broken anything on the way down and the dirt bottom wasn't hard as it could have been. There were an assortment of bumps and bruises, but she couldn't feel anything worse, so she got to her feet slowly.

The walls of the pit offered no hand or footholds, nothing she could use to pull herself up and the rim was far out of reach. The floor, when investigated, offered no tools that she could use either. There weren't even any rocks she could pile up to stand on. It hadn't occurred to her, at first, but now she wondered if she was in a purposely made trap.

The way the branches and vines crossed each other to cover the hole seemed a little *too* designed to be natural. And while the walls of the pit weren't entirely smooth, she couldn't imagine what would have created it by accident. It occurred to her that perhaps it had been made for trapping animals; if so, that meant someone would probably be along eventually to check.

The only problem with that, was that she wasn't entirely sure she wouldn't be considered prey too. A different kind, perhaps, but still. Jahk had warned her that other males would try to claim her, and they wouldn't be so nice about it. She believed him and her decision to creep away in the middle of the night seemed incredibly stupid now.

The one upside was that while she was trapped and wouldn't be able to escape without help, she was also safe for the moment. No animals would be able to get to her without trapping themselves as well and the broken lattice at top would probably keep them from making the same mistake she had. With nothing else to do, she curled up in the shadows against the wall, and went to sleep.

She had no way of knowing how long she slept. The limited view of the sky didn't give her the ability to estimate by looking at the suns' progress, but it had been long enough that she no longer felt bone-weary. It was her growling stomach that woke her, and she sat up, yawning, and pulled her pack over so she could retrieve one of her precious ration pouches.

She was careful with the food she had left, and only allowed herself a few bites. She had enough for a few days if she was careful. What she didn't have was any water, and she knew that thirst would become an issue long before hunger did.

At this point, her only hope of surviving was that someone would find her, even if that someone had their own agenda. She'd just have to worry about what they wanted from her later once she was free. At least then, she'd have a chance of getting away.

She tried shouting, in case anyone was within hearing range, but she didn't hold out much hope of that. The planet was vast, and while she had no idea how many exiles were living in the wilds, she doubted there would just happen to be any nearby.

Either someone had built the trap she was in and would come check, or she would die there at the bottom of the pit

from dehydration. She felt oddly resigned about it. Her emotions had overloaded and shut down, and now she wasn't feeling any of the terror she should be. *It's a pity that hunger and thirst don't turn themselves off the same way*, she thought.

When it started to rain, it was a mixed blessing. She tipped her head back and drank every drop she could catch eagerly enough, but the bottom of the hole quickly turned into a muddy sludge that soaked through her clothes. When it stopped, maybe an hour later, she was left shivering from the wet. Because only a small amount of sun reached her there, she stayed that way.

She began to consider what would happen when the suns went down and the temperature dropped; it wasn't a happy thought. She doubted she'd be able to move enough to keep her body heat up either. As unlikely as it was, she started yelling for help again, and continued in short bursts until her voice gave up. No one came.

Long before it actually grew dark, she was having to jump to her feet and run in place to warm herself. Her damp clothes clung to her skin and seemed to make it worse. She debated whether stripping down to the fur might actually be warmer, but in the end, she couldn't bear the thought of sitting naked in the mud waiting for someone to come and claim her. It just felt too vulnerable.

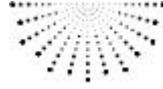
She curled up to conserve body heat instead, wrapping her arms around her knees and huddling there. It got worse as the day went on. She never fully dried out and when the shadows crawled across the bottom of the pit, she knew she was in trouble. She had already been shivering, but the little bit of warmth that managed to find its way down to the bottom of the hole left with the light.

Shivering turned into violent shaking and she started to feel feverish. She ran out of energy for her little bursts of exercise, and by the time there was true dark, she just lay in the mud moaning miserably. The night felt endless. Sleeping wasn't a possibility, which meant she had plenty of time to think over her decisions and regret her actions.

Jahk's cave appeared in her mind, and she tried to envision herself by the fire, warm. She thought about the steaming meat broth he'd fed her, and her mouth watered. She risked another few bites of rations, hoping that would give her body enough energy to keep going, but her mouth was so dry she could barely choke it down.

It got worse. The cold seemed to settle into her bones. She couldn't even remember what being warm felt like. She began to feel groggy. Everything hurt, and when she tried to stand up, she realized she didn't have the energy for another round of running in place. She barely made it to her knees before collapsing. At that point, it was too much for her body and she succumbed to unconsciousness.

CHAPTER SEVEN



After that was a long period of confusion. Her head felt fuzzy and confused. Nothing seemed to make any sense. She vaguely remembered someone lifting her up and then there was a swaying sensation of being carried. It was comforting, and so was the warm body she was pressed against.

She couldn't make her eyes open to see what was going on. Her eyelids felt excessively heavy. She heard someone muttering angrily and she automatically apologized, even though she wasn't sure she was the one they were angry at. There was silence for a second and then she thought she heard a comforting voice telling her to sleep.

The wooziness made her feel slightly queasy and the rocking of her body as she was carried didn't help, but sleep sounded like a good idea. She snuggled into the warmth and gave it a try.

Over the next little while she had brief moments of lucidity. Sometimes she even thought she knew what was happening, but she couldn't tell what was real. The hallucinations were so vivid that she couldn't separate them from reality.

What she did know, was she was very sick. Her body ached, and a heavy congestion had settled into her chest. She

had moments of being too hot, and then seconds later would be wracked by chills. She was surrounded by people she knew; only she was pretty sure they weren't really there. Especially when her mother, who had died when she was just a child, showed up to lecture her about breaking rules.

The only one she knew was real was Jahk, because he didn't dissolve when she reached out to touch him. She clung to him every chance she got, until he had to unwind her arms from his neck so he could care for her. She couldn't have asked for a more attentive nurse.

He spooned soup into her mouth because she was too weak to hold the bowl. He bathed her feverish body and fed her foul-tasting medicines every few hours. And when she whimpered with embarrassment over admitting she had to pee, he carried her outside and held her while she took care of those needs too.

Days must have passed before she started to feel a little more coherent. He kept careful watch to make sure she didn't overdo things, but finally she was allowed to sit up and feed herself. It felt like a win. They talked a little, comparing their lives and experiences. She got to know him, and she liked what she learned.

But it drove her crazy that she had so little reserves of energy. One moment she'd be feeling strong enough to wash herself, but the act would take everything and ten minutes later she'd be fast asleep. She'd never been so sick in her life. Maybe once or twice, as a child, she'd been ill. But a quick trip to the medical center fixed her up and she couldn't remember it ever lasting more than a day.

"I warned you that things were different out here," he answered, shrugging. He continued to cut up chunks of meat

and dump them into a pot that he'd positioned among the coals.

“But shouldn't I be over it by now?” She knew she sounded like a whiny child, but she couldn't help it. Being exhausted all the time was awful, and depending on a male she barely knew to help her with every intimate detail was painfully embarrassing.

He stopped and looked up. “You're lucky you're not dead. If I hadn't found you when I did, you wouldn't have made it until morning. I thought you *were* dead at first. Your skin was so cold, I was sure you had to be.”

Her mouth opened but nothing came out, and then it snapped shut as she considered that. She hadn't realized she'd been *that* sick. “I guess it was the rain that caused it. I was chilled and couldn't get warm, and then the temperature dropped.”

“That would have been enough, I'm sure. But out here beyond the dome there's a sickness we call 'the burning'. New exiles and the weak are especially prone to it. There's a bitter herb that helps.” He gestured to the pot with the tip of his knife. “I always put it in my soups. The meat helps disguise the taste. If you'd stayed another day or two before running off, you probably would have had enough in your system.”

But she hadn't. He didn't need to say the words, she already knew she'd made a mistake and up until then the topic had been hanging over her head ominously. She was almost glad he'd brought it up.

She ducked her head, heat rising in her face. “I'm sorry. I thought—”

“You didn’t think. You just reacted, and out here that will get you killed.” There was no emotion in the words, but she could almost feel his anger underneath them anyway.

“I didn’t want to be forced into something. It’s unfair,” she said. Then she sighed and her shoulders slumped.

“You keep using that word fair like it means something. Maybe ‘fair’ mattered in civilized society but out here it’s just a matter of survival, and you do what you have to do to keep living. It might not be *fair* that females have to go through heat cycles, but biology doesn’t care about what you want.”

She was reminded again about how protected she’d been in the dome, and how different things were out here. She wouldn’t say fairness had much to do with the colony; being drugged into obedience was proof of that. But the unfairness had been hidden under manners and smiles.

“I’m sorry I ran.”

“I am too; unfortunately we still have a problem.” He regarded her for a moment, looking thoughtful, and then shook his head. “Honestly the sickness is probably punishment enough, but ...”

She’d forgotten about his earlier threats, but now she swallowed hard and looked up at him anxiously as she waited for him to continue.

“I can’t have you thinking you can disobey me again, Mara. Going to have to give you a lesson that sticks,” he said. He paused for a few seconds. “But not yet. You need time to recover first. I suggest you work really hard on obeying me until then. You don’t want to make it worse.”

There were so many things she wanted to say. What gave him the right to think he could punish her was at the top of the

list. But she bit back the words because it was obvious what gave him the right. He was experienced in living wild, and he'd saved her life. She was his by some obscure claiming law that she didn't fully understand but was forced to accept.

What made it hard was that she genuinely liked him. He was an attractive male. He had a sense of humor and he'd cared for her with gentle hands as she worked through the worst of the sickness. It was the situation she didn't like.

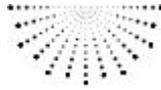
It was almost two weeks before she started to feel strong again, but it coincided with certain symptoms she strongly suspected were signs that her heat was coming. Her nipples felt hard and tight all the time, almost painfully so. Her dreams, when she could sleep, were filled with sexual images that left her feeling needy and raw when she woke up.

She found herself being hyperaware of his body whenever he was near. He smelled good, like woodsmoke and outdoors. His eyes were a beautiful vivid green and when the slit pupils retracted to a thin vertical line and she could see the whole iris, she found that there were tiny amber flecks scattered there. It was hard to force herself to look away before she lost herself in them.

But the return of her strength, and the change in her body led to rebellion when it came to obeying him, and she soon discovered he had no patience for it. The second time he caught her outside instead of resting, he got out the rope.

A half-dozen different ideas of why he might need rope flashed through her head. All of them were terrible. All of them were wrong. What he did was worse.

CHAPTER EIGHT



“In,” he said, pulling her back into the cave by her hair.

She found tying her long mane back behind her head was the only way to keep it from getting tangled in things, but he seemed to think it was a useful handle for dragging her around whenever he caught her out of place. She hadn’t tried to run again; she’d learned her lesson on that, but she was curious and liked to poke around and explore as far as her slowly recovering body would allow.

It was the second time he’d told her to go rest that day, and then found her up and around. Apparently, that was once too many.

“Strip.” The order was delivered in a sharp tone that demanded obedience.

She gaped at him. “What?”

“Strip. Out of your clothes now,” he said.

Nudity had never been a big thing with her people. Having a permanent layer of fur to cover themselves probably helped. And she’d lost what little body modesty she’d had with him. There had been no choice with him being her caregiver when she was too weak to do things for herself. But everything was feeling sexually charged to her right now. Even the order to

strip had caused certain reactions in her body. She could feel the low pulse of need between her thighs, but that didn't mean she was looking to mate with him.

“Why?” she asked.

“Take them off, or I'll do it for you, and I can't promise they'll still be wearable after that.”

That got her moving, but she stripped off her tunic and the loose-legged trousers as slowly as she could, sneaking worried glances at him constantly. “Are you going to make me stay naked because I wouldn't obey?”

“Not a bad idea, but not exactly what I'm going for.” He pulled her over to the stump he used as a seat and positioned her in front of him. “Stay,” he ordered as he wrapped the rope around her waist.

She watched with wide eyes, wondering if he was just planning to tie her up so she couldn't move, though why she'd need to be naked for that she didn't know. Still there were worse things he could do if he had a mind to, and she decided just to keep her mouth closed.

But his plan was more insidious than that. After looping the rope around her waist once, he tied a knot in the back just above her tailbone and then before she knew what was happening, he'd brought both ends down between her legs. He tugged them up tight, gathering the extra lengths in front so that they parted her swollen labia and pressed into her most intimate places. She made a panicked squeaking sound, but he wasn't done yet.

He fiddled with the placement, sawing it back and forth against her overly sensitive flesh until she squirmed and tried to pull away desperately. “Stay still.” The order came out

distracted as if he were too busy getting things right to really pay attention to her.

“What are you doing? I don’t like this,” she said. The words trailed off into a whimper, but she’d lied. Some part of her liked what he was doing *very* much. Her clit was tight and throbbed with need. The rope kept grazing it when she moved, but never enough to push her over the edge into climax.

And then when he had the cords placed right where he wanted them, she discovered another knot now positioned right against her clit. At first, she didn’t think it was anything but a way to embarrass her. But he continued to move the ropes across her body, twisting, wrapping, knotting them according to some plan she didn’t understand. It became a complicated harness that crisscrossed over most of her upper body.

She looked down and thought it was almost pretty, the way it constricted and decorated her body, but she still didn’t understand the point of it yet.

He turned her all the way around slowly, checking each line and knot and then he sat back looking satisfied. “Perfect.”

“I don’t understand what it’s for. If it’s just for decoration you could have done it over my clothes. It’s pressing into some delicate places.” She frowned and tried to tug the ropes down with both hands, to relieve the pressure. It didn’t work. Everything was too tightly knotted and wouldn’t move.

“It’s not for decoration, though I’ll admit, it looks nice on you.” He tilted his head examining her, and she flushed. “Does anything hurt?”

“I—It’s just uncomfortable. There’s a knot pressing against my—my—” She couldn’t make herself say it, so she stopped

there.

He gave her an amused look. "It's supposed to be there."

"But why?" she asked.

The amusement grew until he wore a broad grin, but he just shook his head. "You'll find out. I have some hunting to do before dark. Stay close to the cave." With that last order he grabbed his game bag and left her to discover what he'd done.

It didn't take long. She crossed the cave to watch him go, and as she moved, she could feel the sensation of the ropes rubbing and pulling. The knots seemed especially well-placed to create friction and she found herself growing excited. But she knew if she walked too much, the rubbing would become unbearable in her near-heat state.

She ended up returning to her bedding and staying there for the rest of the afternoon. Which was exactly what he'd wanted, of course. She had to admit it was a creative way of getting her to rest, but she wasn't entirely sure how productive it was since it left her feeling agitated from the arousal that never went away.

Napping failed and only the thought of him coming back and catching her at it, kept her from taking the edge off with her fingers, while she was lying there. It would get worse when her heat was fully on her. When that happened, she could masturbate all day and it would do nothing to satisfy her. Only a male would be able to do that, and Jahk was the only male around.

Being with him in that way wouldn't be the worst thing ever. He was kind and caring, at least when she obeyed him, she thought, as she gave the confining ropes a tug of annoyance. He'd be a good parent to her children if the mating

was fruitful. The only problem was he wasn't actually a choice, because she had no other options.

She shouldn't blame him for what her body was doing, but she did in a way. She blamed the colony more and her own biology too, but there was enough left over. He made her stay by him when they both knew what it would mean. It wasn't logical and she knew it. She couldn't take care of herself now, not when she was so weak.

She hadn't done so well on her own even before she'd gotten sick either. She was used to being a confident adult, but now she felt like a child. It made her resentful of the way he tried to keep her safe. She had to admit though, that his punishments were far more enjoyable than what she would have received in the colony and their rules were just as strict.

But everything he did had a sexual tone to it. It reminded her of her femaleness and stirred up her biological instincts in a way that made her crave things. It was ironic that the colony had wanted to use her as an incubator but had pushed her in the opposite direction.

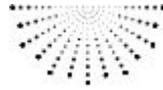
Jahk, without even trying, seemed to make her *want* the mating. She wondered what it would be like with him, that frantic coupling that couldn't be avoided. She'd had sex before, of course, most teens and early adults played with such things in their off hours. It was an enjoyable way to spend time together in a dome that held few entertainments.

But those were not true matings, and from what she'd read that was a very different thing. The birth control suppressed all of the intensity, so the passion never went beyond satisfying. Once her body was ready, she would lose all control of herself. She would be desperate for what only he could give. It was an awful thing to contemplate and she hated it.

That was a lie. She loved the idea. It invaded her dreams and made her want to jump on him when she woke up. He knew it. She could see it in the way he looked at her. There was hunger in his eyes, and it was all for her, but he was waiting for her to make the first move.

In some ways she thought it would be better if she threw herself at him; it would ease some of her sexual frustration and make things more tolerable for a bit longer. More importantly it would be an actual choice she made, rather than something her biological needs forced on her. She thought about it, pictured herself doing it, but in the end, she just didn't make up her mind in time.

CHAPTER NINE



He looked pleased to find her curled up in her bed when he returned. The knowing smirk on his face made it clear that he knew why she was stationary instead of moving around. As soon as he took care of the game he'd brought back for their dinner, he motioned her over and began to release the ropes from her body.

“Looks like you got some rest. How do you feel?” he asked, as his hands moved skillfully along the lines, undoing knots.

“I guess you could say that. The ropes weren't exactly comfortable. I'll be glad to have them off,” she replied in a tone that was a bit sulky.

“I would say discomfort is the point of it. It's to remind you not to move too much, so your body can rest.” He paused and then grinned. “Among other things.”

She scowled at him, narrowing her eyes. “What other things?”

He tugged the rope and it slithered between her legs and made her gasp as it came free. She was positive he'd pulled it in just such a way to make it stroke her hard bud of a clitoris and she had to close her eyes for a second to keep from jumping him on the spot.

“Well, you know historically this kind of restraint was used to keep naughty mates in line during the time leading up to their heat. It was important to keep them close for safety, but also the stimulation could make for interesting times in the bed.” He looked up at her as he coiled the rope neatly and then frowned. “You didn’t know that?”

She could feel her face getting hot under the short fur and shook her head. “I’ve never seen anyone tied like this. It’s not... I thought it was something you made up to punish me.”

He laughed. “When I punish you, you’ll know it,” he assured her. He hung the rope on a hook and started to prepare a meal. He motioned her over. “Come watch, you’ll need to learn how to do this,” he said.

She went over reluctantly and tried not to look queasy as he efficiently cut the meat into small chunks and tossed it into a pot. It was a bloody job, and she had no interest in food preparation, but the more she learned about surviving out here, the less she’d need to depend on anyone else. “If you’d let me out, I could find edible roots and plants to go with the meat. Then I could help too,” she pointed out.

“And how will you know what plants and roots are edible?” He looked interested as one eyebrow went up in question.

“In the colony I was a botanist. Growing plants, modifying them, and creating new ones was my job.” She said it with pride and expected him to look impressed.

He didn’t. “Good, then I won’t have to teach you everything.” It was clear he didn’t have much respect for anything the colony did.

She couldn't entirely blame him. Her respect for the colony had gone downhill rapidly since she'd discovered they'd been drugging everyone into compliance, and that the option to not breed wasn't really available to everyone. It was funny how different it had all seemed, as a child. The stark reality that hit her, as an adult, had been painful to accept.

It wasn't the only difficult thing she'd have to learn to deal with. The next morning when he went out to check his snares, she decided to show him that she knew more than he thought. She was feeling a little stronger each day, and after a good night's sleep, she thought she could manage a short walk into the woods to find food.

It was harder than she'd expected, and she hadn't gotten far before her energy levels started to drop. She ignored it and made herself keep going, stubbornly determined to pull her weight. She'd slung a leather sack over her shoulder when she left the cave, and as she walked, she stopped now and then to add things to it.

It was the wrong season for many of the crisp greens, and the fruits, but with a little effort she was able to dig up various root vegetables and tubers with a stick. She shook off the dirt and popped each one into the sack, thinking how surprised he'd be when she brought back enough to supplement the meat for days. But while concentrating on the search for edibles, she ended up going much further from the cave than she'd intended.

Suddenly her energy vanished, and her legs started to shake. She was forced to sit down abruptly before she fell. She'd gotten used to the sudden lethargy by now and knew her strength would return after a short rest, but it did mean her little adventure took longer than planned.

Jahk returned to the cave and found her missing. It didn't take him long to track her down, and when she looked up to see him coming towards her, she made a small sound of dismay. He held the coil of rope in his left hand, and there was a grim look on his face that she didn't like.

She started to explain immediately. "I wasn't running away again, I promise," she blurted. "I just wanted to see if I could find food nearby." The words came out in a frenzied rush, trying to convince him before he did something she would regret.

"I warned you," he said simply. "If you keep pushing yourself you *will* relapse, and the second bout of fever is *always* worse."

"I just wanted to be useful," she said. Her bottom lip quivered with upset.

He crouched down in front of her and she could see the anger in his eyes. "Having to care for you when you get sick again will *not* be useful. Having to pull you out of another hole in the ground and carry you back home again will *not* be useful. If you want to help you will let yourself recover fully and stop trying to push," he said.

There was a coldness to the words, and she ducked her head, embarrassed. He was right, of course. She hated the idea of being coddled just because she was female, but being taken care of because you were sick was different. She just had trouble separating the two in her mind. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You will be," he promised her.

She flinched at the ominous threat but had no intention of looking up to see the anger in his face. The silence grew

between them, but she had decided it was better to be quiet before she got herself in more trouble.

After a minute or so went by he sighed. “Are you well enough to walk back now?”

She nodded, silent.

“Good,” he said, as he helped her to her feet. “Now, undress.”

That got her attention and her head snapped up with a horrified expression across her face. “What?” Her eyes dropped to the rope in his hand and she shook her head quickly. “Oh no, not that again. You can’t!”

“I can, and I will. You walked all the way here; you can walk home, but you’ll do it wearing the ropes. I told you it was very affective for females who couldn’t behave themselves. *This* is punishment by the way, just so you know the difference. It’s not the only punishment you’ve earned, but it’s a start.” He jerked his head in a silent demand to undress.

She stared at him, a pleading expression on her face but he didn’t soften. He folded his arms across his chest, making the muscles bulge. She wasn’t sure if it was a reminder that he was stronger than she was, but it served as one. The clothes came off slowly and she pushed them into the gathering bag as she stalled for time.

“Put the boots back on,” he said, when she was done.

Finally, she stood up, bare to her fur. Except for the boots, of course, which somehow managed to make her feel more naked. She kept her amber eyes down on the ground, refusing to look at him, but she had a good view of his hands as he started with the ropes again.

As he tied them in place, he told her a little bit about the history of the ropes. “Many generations back, before our people had formed a civilized society, the females often became dangerous and feral during their breeding seasons. So much so,” he explained, “that the males had trouble controlling them. The women were often the tribal leaders, the wise ones, but that came later after their fertile years ended.”

That made sense, it was how the colony was still run now. Most of the authority rested among the women. Of course, there were no heat cycles under the dome, thanks to the birth control and controlled breeding.

“Going into heat often made the women reckless and prone to acting suddenly because of emotions. They went wild and were impossible to contain. At times they could even be dangerous, so the rope harness was used to train them while the primal instincts were in play. The patterns are complicated, and the knots are mostly tied out of reach to make it difficult for the female to get out of them, unless she just cut them off with her claws.”

None of this history was discussed or taught in the colony. They did learn about their origins, and how they’d been more violent in the past. Once they’d been feared predators with sharp claws and teeth for hunting. Most of those characteristics had been deliberately blunted by scientists many generations ago, but she’d heard nothing about this. She had to wonder if he was making it up.

“What happened if she cut them off?” she asked, curious because she’d considered doing that herself the day before.

Tug, slither, pull—the ropes stretched across her fur as his fingers moved with quick efficiency. “It’s called Severing. Cutting the ropes meant you were severing the relationship

with the male who put them on you. After that he no longer thought of her as his, no longer was responsible for her or her children. And unless she had another mate lined up, she often found that others were unwilling to be with her after that.”

That wasn't really a concern she had, and she had a feeling that even if she cut off the ropes, he wouldn't let her go. “I still don't understand it. If they just wanted to restrain her, there had to be easier ways than this.” She gestured at the complicated web that now surrounded her body and then regretted it. Every movement caused a flair of excitement as the ropes moved.

He was silent as he tugged everything into place with one last knot. Then he stood up and looked her over, testing the ropes here and there. “It's not about restraining,” he said finally. “It's about harnessing the female's own sexuality to teach and train. The heat cycle was stronger back then and it lasted until pregnancy occurred, no matter how many matings it took. Things could get... dangerous.”

She looked down at the ropes, snugly pressing into her fur, and then back up at him. “And this worked?”

“Yes, or so I was told. That was many generations ago, so who knows. But things out here are wild, and in some ways we've regressed, I suppose. Females are no longer as violent during their heats, but the males find the ropes work for other reasons.” He turned her around so her back was to him and she felt him adjusting something.

She twisted to look over her shoulder to see what he was doing, but that movement made the ropes tighten. The ones between her legs suddenly pulled up and stroked right across her clit roughly and a small whimper escaped her. She turned

back hurriedly to release the tension. She was about to ask what he was doing, but it became clear a few seconds later.

“Walk. Back to the cave,” he ordered. She took a hesitant step, and then another, adjusting to the feel of the ropes. As she’d learned the day before, they had a strange effect on her body. It heightened her arousal and sent alternating waves of pleasure and frustration through her as she moved. The knot pressed so intimately into her cleft quickly became slippery with her juices. It slid and caressed with every step.

Her legs grew shaky and it became harder to continue, but the first time she stopped, she realized what he’d done behind her. He’d attached a leash to the harness and when her steps ceased, he gave it a tug and the ropes pulled tight. It pinched her delicate places and that was enough to get her moving again.

The trip back to the cave wasn’t pleasant for her. If she went too fast, he pulled her back with a quick jerk of the leash. If she stopped, he pulled until there was tension in the line and the ropes began to constrict painfully. She was especially vulnerable to the bite of pain between her thighs with her body being overly sensitized.

The most frustrating part of it was that the pain should have overridden the arousal, or at least backed it down a touch. It didn’t. By the time they reached the cave she was a mess. The fur on her inner thighs was sticky from her own juices and she was so in need of release her whole body was trembling.

He unknotted the ropes and pulled them free as soon as they got inside, and just the sensation of the smooth coils slipping and sliding against her clit was enough to send her over the edge. She grabbed onto him and clung as a wave of pleasure rolled through her and her knees went weak.

He held her until it passed and then, when he saw that her legs wouldn't hold her, he scooped her up and carried her to the bedding. The powerful orgasm should have been enough to calm her, but it wasn't. She felt empty, and something inside pulsed with need. She wanted to feel him inside of her so badly that she clutched at him when he tried to move away.

“Please. I need you. I want—” She cut herself off in mid-sentence. She didn't want to say it, to admit it. She just wanted him to understand and take her.

He pressed in against her neck and inhaled deeply. “I can smell what you need, Mara. Poor kitten, so desperate to feel a true mating. But you've been a bad girl, and I'm not going to give you what you want just yet.”

He ignored her soft whine of frustration as he pulled away. “This is why the ropes work. They bring you right to the edge, and this close to your heat nothing you do will be enough. The only one who can fill that need is me. Pretty soon neither of us will have a choice, but for right now I don't need it nearly as much as you do. So, you'll just have to behave, won't you?” He gave her a smirk and she cursed silently because he was right.

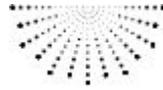
She'd been dreading losing control of herself when her cycle was fully on her. It seemed so unfair that biology had penalized the women, and not the men in this way. But now part of her was almost eager for it to come. He was right, she did want to know what it was like.

The emotions and the physical feelings that had come with the surging hormones were unlike anything she'd experienced before. Sex had been a pleasant diversion, but this was... this was turbulent. She felt like a small boat on the open sea, being tossed this way and that with every wave. And the closer her

body got to that point of abandon, the more she wanted it. And him.

His body made her hungry. She watched him move around the cave like he was her prey, but she knew that it was all an illusion. She was the one who had been hunted and captured, and she was the one who would have to submit to him. It would be soon, she thought. She had no experience of knowing, she just felt like she couldn't take much more without losing her mind.

CHAPTER TEN



She'd forgotten what he'd said about being owed more punishment. Well, not forgotten exactly, she just thought that denying her his body was the other half that he had promised her. It wasn't. There was no way she could have guessed what he planned to do. It happened in the morning.

It was hard to sleep late in the cave. The fire would die out, leaving nothing but the coals and the stone always absorbed the chill of the cold nights. She found that she usually woke up shivering an hour or so before dawn. With that would come an irritating need to pee.

She'd developed the habit of quickly trotting outside to take care of that, and then rushing back to dive under the covers and get warm again. On the way she'd toss a few more logs on the fire so that the coals had something to feed on. Then she'd go back to sleep for a couple of hours and wake up after the sun was out and the world was less bitter.

There was nothing different on that day, except that when she finally sat up and stretched, she looked over to see him doing something odd. He had taken a thick strip of leather and was running the edge of his knife back and forth across it. He didn't seem to be cutting the leather, so she wasn't sure what the purpose was.

“What are you doing?” she asked curiously, as she pushed back the bedding.

“I’m sharpening my knife for shaving,” he said. He shot her a quick look that she couldn’t decipher.

“Shaving?” She frowned, eyebrows nearly meeting in the middle of her forehead. “Shaving what?”

“You.”

The answer was short, and it confused her. “I don’t understand. Why would I need to be shaved?” She looked down, examining her fur with confusion. While they did cut the hair on their heads, their pelt didn’t need to be maintained. It was naturally just the right length. The only time she knew of someone needing to have a patch of fur shaved, was when they were being treated for an injury.

“It will be part of your punishment for disobeying me and running away. And for yesterday too,” he added.

She started to laugh, but he looked up with such a serious expression that the amusement died. “You’re not serious... what kind of punishment involves making me bare? Do you want me to freeze?” she demanded.

He went back to watching the leather. “You won’t freeze and I’m not shaving all of you. Just your backside.”

“My...why in the universe would you want to shave my rump? That has no purpose.” She was completely confused. As infants and toddlers their rumps were bare of fur. It made it easier to take care of a child until they were trained to use the toilet, but by their fifth year their pelt was complete and covered most of their body.

“It’s a common punishment out here. Well, it’s part of the punishment. Shaving your fur to bare your skin is meant to be

a humiliation, but it's also useful for the second part.”

Throughout the conversation he'd continued to draw the knife back and forth at an angle and her glance was pulled to it as though she were being hypnotized. She didn't want to know what the second part was; she really didn't, but she heard herself asking anyway.

“I think I'll let that be a surprise.”

She didn't press, instead she burrowed back under the covers and tried to ignore the steady scraping sound until he finally stopped. She thought he might come for her then, but he didn't. Instead he began to prepare a thick grain gruel for breakfast. She supposed that meant her punishment would come later. She shivered. Part of her was terribly curious, but the rest was happy for the reprieve.

She was careful not to annoy him further and make things worse. She ate when he passed her the roughly carved wooden bowl, even though she'd lost her appetite. The porridge was hot and filling, with small chunks of spicy nuts and some dried fruits to give it flavor, so it was no hardship to finish.

He left soon after for his morning trip to check the traps, and while he was gone, she took care of the few small chores that he'd deemed suitable for her in her weakened state. By the time he returned, she was curled back up in her bed resting. He gave her an approving look as he passed.

But once he'd taken care of the game and cleaned up afterwards, he turned to her with a look of determination. She knew it was time for the punishment he'd promised. She resisted the urge to hide under the covers, knowing it wouldn't do her any good.

He crooked a finger at her. “Come here,” he said. It was simply stated with no hint of a threat, but she knew she’d regret it if she disobeyed him.

She got up slowly and dragged herself over to his side. “Jahk, I don’t want to be shaved. Please don’t,” she said, as if the request might make him change his mind.

“You won’t like what I do after, either,” he assured her. “Strip.”

She was getting used to being ordered out of her clothes and she automatically began to undress even as she continued to plead with him. “It will grow back patchy and look weird. Can’t you think of some other way to punish me that won’t be disfiguring?” It was a huge exaggeration of course, and she knew she was overreacting, but thinking of herself with her backside hanging out bare and naked was so humiliating.

He gave her an amused look and shook his head. “It won’t grow back patchy and it definitely isn’t going to disfigure you, Mara. It’s just fur. Within a month or so you’ll never know it was gone, but until then it will be a reminder for you to behave yourself.”

“I don’t need a reminder, I promise. I’ll remember without this.” She could hear the catching in her voice that indicated tears were on their way. It felt like he was reducing her to a child. First making her rest all the time, and now taking away her fur so she’d look like a toddler.

The clothes they wore were basically utilitarian. There to keep them warm and dry, to protect them from rough surfaces, or even to provide them with pockets to carry things. It was still embarrassing to be ordered to strip, and it did feel more vulnerable, but it was bearable. To lose her fur was a whole deeper level of humiliation.

When he reached for her, she couldn't help trying to push him away. "No, no, don't!" She twisted in his arms and tried to run, but he seemed to be expecting that.

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her across the cave and when he set her down, she saw that he'd prepared everything for the event. There was a bucket of water on the floor and on top of the rudimentary table next to it, lay the knife he'd been sharpening so diligently, with a pile of shaven lather root.

As a botanist she was totally familiar with the useful plant. It was one of the specifically planned growths they'd seeded the planet with before she was born. Now, it grew wild along streams and rivers. It was extremely useful because when ground or crumbled it produced a simple form of soap with a good strong lather. In the colony they used it to make something a little more sophisticated, but the wild version worked just fine in a pinch.

But even if there had been some doubt about what the plant was, she would have recognized it, because he'd set her to shaving a large basket full that morning as one of her chores. She wondered now if there was some significance to that. It made her feel like she was contributing to her own punishment and she scowled at the shavings she had worked so hard on.

He pulled her attention back to him with a sharp tug on her arm. "Listen to me, Mara. You're going to be good while I shave you, and you're not going to fight me. The knife is sharp, and I don't want you to get hurt because you won't stay still. So, if you fight me, I will show you another use for the ropes and believe me, you won't like it at all," he warned her.

She glared at him. “If you don’t want me to get hurt, then maybe you shouldn’t do this at all.”

“When I make a threat I always follow through, girl. You’ll learn that about me. For now, I want you on your hands and knees in front of me. That’s the easiest way to do this.”

“I don’t want—”

He cut her off with a sharp gesture. “Now.”

She could have fought, could have argued longer, but they both knew eventually he’d win. She dropped to her hands and knees facing away from him and tried to ignore what was happening. It didn’t hurt. There was never any physical pain, but it all felt strange.

She didn’t want to look back to see what he was doing because she knew she wouldn’t be able to stay in place if she did, but she could hear as he dunked his hands in the water. She smelled the fresh scent of the root shavings as he wet and lathered them in his hands. And the cool sensation as he soaked her bottom fur and then began to massage in the froth made her shiver.

But she wasn’t expecting to enjoy the feeling of his hands kneading her rump as he worked the lather into her fur. She blamed it on her coming heat. Maybe everything felt sexual because of that, but she liked the firm touch of his fingers as they worked through the short coat that covered her backside.

Her body began to ache and throb for more and she found herself pressing back hoping he’d explore a little further down, and he did, but only to be thorough with the soap. Once her cheeks and the upper part of her thighs were wet and matted with lather, he picked up the knife and began to shave. She

could hear small clumps of soapy wet fur splatting to the stone floor as he stripped her dignity from her one stroke at a time.

He paused at times to make more lather, or to tap the back of the knife against the side of the bucket to clear the blade. At one point she thought he was finished, but then he started over again to make sure he'd bared her all the way down. She'd never felt so naked in her life and the air blowing across her wet bare skin felt very odd.

She twisted and turned, trying to see what it looked like and how obvious it was. *At least, she thought, the skin is the same shade as the fur so maybe it won't stand out too much.* She did have the comfort of knowing that with her clothing on no one would know. And that bright thought made her feel better.

It was enough that she was able to face him with a confident look. "That wasn't as bad as I expected," she said, trying to sound like his punishment hadn't bothered her. It was dangerous. It probably would have been smarter to go the other way and act completely miserable about it, but she found her pride wasn't willing to do that.

"Don't worry; it gets worse," he assured her. It almost sounded like he was amused, although when she shot him a look, she couldn't see the slightest hint of it on his face.

She wondered what he could possibly have planned that would be worse than he'd already done. He didn't make her wait long to find out. He moved the bucket of water and the table out of the way and sat back down on his stump. Before she could ask what was happening, he took her by the wrist and pulled her right over his lap.

It felt awkward and ungainly to be sprawled across his thighs and she started to struggle. "What are you doing?" she

demanded. But she knew exactly what he was doing. As much as she tried to make herself forget, she very clearly remembered that early threat to beat her ass. She'd hoped that the shaving was unconnected, but deep down, she'd known.

"I'm about to give you the spanking you deserve for running into danger and nearly getting yourself killed. Maybe after this you'll take me seriously when I tell you that your soft colony life hasn't prepared you to be out here on your own." The voice was cold, and the words had a bite to them.

She deserved to be lectured for what she'd done, and she realized she'd never really shown him any gratitude for pulling her out of the pit and nursing her back to health. She'd just been too angry at being pulled back against her will and bossed around. The one bright spot about being exiled, she'd thought, would be that she would finally be able to do what she wanted.

"I know I owe you for saving my life, but you don't understand. I didn't want to be here when my heat came on. I didn't want to be forced to breed." She'd told him that before and it was probably pointless to repeat it, but she felt like he kept ignoring the fact that she had a very good reason for leaving.

"Mara, do you know what happens when a female goes into heat and there's no male to breed with?" he asked, and it sounded like he was trying to be patient.

"I..." She stopped and frowned. She didn't have any idea. It was something that had never been taught. What she knew about heats mostly came from the animals they raised and bred for food. "I figured it would last a few days, maybe a week, and then stop. Isn't that what happens?" she asked, sounding unsure.

“No, Mara. That is *not* what happens.” He blew out an exasperated breath and she heard him muttering something about colonists being uneducated. It took him a minute to calm down before he explained. “If there’s no male around the heat doesn’t stop. Ever.”

“What? Never?” She jerked up and twisted to stare at him over her shoulder. She wasn’t even in full heat yet and she couldn’t wait for it to be over. The thought of it being a permanent part of her life made her sick to her stomach.

“Never. Your body is pumping out hormones like crazy to attract a mate and if you don’t get one, it just keeps going, until you get desperate. So desperate that you would leap on the first male you see. It wouldn’t matter if you liked him. It wouldn’t matter if he was cruel, or someone that would discard you when they were done, you would have no choice.”

“But they never told me that!” It really seemed like it was essential information to have, but then, if she’d remained in the colony she’d never have needed to know. His hand settled on her newly bared backside and the warmth of it caught her attention. The skin seemed so much more sensitive without the protective layer of fur and she tried hard not to think about what that would mean for the punishment.

“I was trying to tell you there was a lot you didn’t know yet, but you wouldn’t listen. Your plan to run off so far away that there were no males around would most likely have killed you. And that’s the best scenario. The heat would have taken over and driven you to keep moving until you found *someone* to breed with. There would be no stopping to eat or sleep. So, either you would find a male, or you’d just keep looking until you got sick and died.”

So, she'd almost killed herself twice then. Even if she'd gotten far enough away it wouldn't have mattered when her own body was the enemy. Her eyes prickled with tears and she covered her face with both hands so he wouldn't hear her snuffle.

“Does that sound like fun, Mara? Being in such desperation to mate that you can't rest for a minute and then having to couple with the first male you find?”

She didn't say anything, but apparently silence wasn't acceptable. His hand slapped down on her bare cheek with a loud smacking sound. She jumped and let out a muffled yelp behind her hands. She could feel the print his large palm had left on her skin. It stung so vividly.

“Answer me.”

She didn't need another slap to make the connection and she answered quickly to avoid a repeat. “No, it doesn't sound like fun.”

“Did the colony teach you to run off into a new situation without learning anything first? If that's what colony life is like, I pity all of you.” The words were practically dripping with derision.

But for all the colony's faults, she had to admit this one was on her. She'd had a decent education, and while there was apparently a lot they'd left out, she had been taught to gather facts *before* making decisions. She'd failed at that this time and had let her emotions about feeling trapped do all the deciding for her.

“No, Jahk. It was just me being stupid.” She sighed.

His hand flashed down hard to land on the other cheek and her legs kicked up in surprise. “Stop that. You're not stupid.”

You just made some bad decisions because you didn't like the choices you were given. But sometimes life just isn't fair and there's nothing to be done but go along with it anyway."

She sniffled again and nodded miserably. He must have decided that she'd been lectured enough because he put that aside and began to spank without words. It wasn't especially long. She knew because she counted each one out in her head. It helped to keep her calm as the burning and heat built to overwhelming levels.

Seventeen slaps that landed with no discernable pattern or balance. The odd number bothered her so much she almost asked for another one to even it out, because it seemed wrong to end on such a strange number. But it had been enough to make his point.

When he let her up, both hands flew back to rub frantically at the scalded skin. The only thing she could compare the sensation to, was when she'd once accidentally sat on a nest of *jabins* as a child. The biting insects had swarmed inside her pants and bitten her all up and down the back of her legs. She hadn't been able to sit comfortably for days.

This wasn't nearly as painful, but the stinging ache was similar. And the smooth bare skin felt odd as it pulsed against her fingertips. It was so strange to be bare there; she couldn't get over it. She found herself reaching back to touch frequently, though she tried to hide it when she saw him watching with amusement.

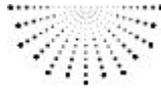
The effects of the spanking were gone by the next morning, but her bare backside remained as a reminder. She understood then. It wasn't a reminder that she had *been* punished. It was that her bottom could be punished *again* easily at any time. He rarely missed a chance to slap her ass as

she went by and that kept her constantly aware of the missing cushion that her pelt had provided. She couldn't wait until her fur grew back.

As the days grew colder the signs of her heat became more extreme. She was no longer dreading the moment when he finally took her, on the contrary she wanted it. There was a hunger inside that she'd never known before.

But he didn't seem like he was in a hurry. He teased her with the idea of it. A gentle stroke, a light touch, a whispered reminder that it would be soon... but he waited.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



She woke in the middle of the night and felt strange. Her skin seemed alive with little prickles of sensation, suddenly even the heavy bedding was too much, and she pushed it off. It was cold enough in the cave that she could see her breath, but somehow, she didn't feel the chill. If anything, she was feverish. Her body felt tight and swollen.

I hope I'm not getting sick again, she thought, as she sat up. But she didn't feel sick. Energy was surging through her body, making her want to get up and move. She began to pace the cave restlessly.

Halfway across on the third or fourth trip—she'd lost count—she stopped short and inhaled. Something smelled delicious and her stomach growled in response. Then she realized it wasn't her stomach making that noise it was coming from her throat. It didn't strike her as odd, though it probably should have.

She snatched up a handful of salted meat and gnawed the strips to fill the emptiness inside of her as she stalked across the stone floor looking for the tantalizing aroma that was calling her. She found it by the fire, but it wasn't food. It was him. Jahk. She crouched down by his side and watched him sleep.

When had he started to smell so good? She couldn't resist leaning close and sniffing near the pulse point below his ear, but he woke as she did. She pulled back, embarrassed.

“Sorry! I don't know what I was... You just smelled so good.” Was that her voice? It sounded lower than usual and there was a roughness. “I feel so strange. I don't understand it.”

A slow smile spread across his face, wide enough to expose the sharper canine teeth at the sides. “I do,” he said. He reached up, slid his hand into her hair and tugged her down until their lips almost touched. “You're in heat, kitten.”

“I am?” She was having trouble thinking clearly. Every part of her body seemed to be trying to get her attention at once, and she was being overwhelmed by her heightened senses. She felt unprepared.

She closed the gap between them, pressing her mouth hard against his. He tasted as good as he smelled, and she lost herself in exploring his mouth. A low growl built in her throat and she grew more aggressive, crawling over his body and rubbing against him with frantic need.

She bit his bottom lip and a sweetness filled her mouth. She wanted more and sucked it between her teeth, but suddenly he was pushing her away.

“Oh, no you don't, Mara.” He wiped at his chin with the back of his hand, but he didn't look angry about the bite. The slit pupils in his eyes had expanded until they covered the iris in black. She could read the heat and hunger in them as he looked at her.

“Please, don't make me wait anymore.” The words were breathy and filled with desire. She reached for him.

“No, no more waiting, kitten. But you’re going to have to behave yourself. It’s your first heat and the hunger can get a little confusing. I don’t intend to be your dinner so…” He dragged her back against him and then rolled her over onto her belly.

“That’s silly. I would never eat you,” she insisted. She tried to sound scandalized at the very thought, but the truth was, she could still taste his blood in her mouth, and she wasn’t entirely sure he was wrong. She felt a flash of rage that he knew more about her body than she did. The sheer power of the emotion threw her off and she actually snarled.

“Uh-huh. We’re going to do this my way.” He pulled her back, lifting her by hips until she was on her knees and then he spread them so he could reach between her thighs.

Finally, after all the holding back, he actually touched her the way she ached to be touched. His fingers slid easily between her folds, searching for the hard bud of her clit. He stroked and teased it until she buried her face in the bedding to muffle the keening sounds. It felt good, but at the same time she was so overly sensitized it was almost painful too. She both loved and hated what he was doing.

She didn’t need the preparation; arousal was obvious at that point since her fur was soaked with it. He pushed a finger deep inside of her and then another and he began to pump them in and out slowly. Her body shook and trembled, but it wasn’t enough. There was a throbbing need inside for something bigger than his fingers.

“Please!” She didn’t mean for it to come out like a demand.

He chuckled. “You want something, Mara?”

“Yes, yes please.”

“Tell me what you want. Tell me what you *need*,” he said, coaxing her in a low crooning voice.

Where was her pride to hold her back? It was gone along with her dignity, and she didn't hesitate to comply. “Fuck me, Jahk. Hard, now.” He switched the angle of his fingers and began to move them a little faster.

“No orders, Mara. You're in no position to be making demands. Let me hear you beg for it.” He used his other hand to scratch his nails over the bare skin of her shorn cheeks.

She wasn't sure if it was meant as a threat, but she was close to screaming with frustration. “Please, Jahk. P—please take me. I need you so badly. It feels like I'll die if you don't fuck me right now.” Maybe it was an exaggeration, but it didn't feel like one.

“Good girl. It's about time I show you what a real mating is like.” He pulled his hand free and moved directly behind her.

She felt his shaft sliding through her slippery juices, stroking her to a feverish pitch. It was hard to hold still with what she needed so close, and then he was lined up and slowly working his way into her, one inch at a time. His hands settled hard on her hips and stilled her attempts to thrust back and take him all at once. She wondered if he took sadistic pleasure in making her wait.

“You're mine, Kitten. I'm claiming you right... now!” With the last word he snapped his hips and plunged home with a snarl.

It felt so good that the air was knocked out of her, and for a few seconds she struggled to exhale. When she was finally

able to breathe again, it went out with a cry of pure animal pleasure. Her hands fisted in the blankets as she clutched them for some sense of stability. She buried her face to muffle the sounds that kept coming. Silence was impossible.

He began to move, pulling almost all the way out before he slammed home again, and each time she was rocked forward hard enough that she thought she'd go shooting across the cave. But his fingers, digging into her hips painfully, yanked her back again.

She had no idea how long it lasted. Seconds, minutes, hours? There was no way of knowing. She was lost in a haze of pure pleasure and need. When it finally crested, every muscle in her body tightened. She was frozen in time. He was deep inside of her and she clenched around the length of him with a strength that demanded he release into her body.

It was one order he couldn't reject, and she felt the flood of his seed pouring into her. That was what she'd needed. It was the only thing that could satisfy the demands of her body. With his climax came her own, and it seemed to go on forever. Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her until she was writhing mindlessly in the bedding without a conscious thought in her head.

He collapsed next to her with a groan and she didn't even look at him. There was no energy left for that. She only whimpered and tried to pull her scattered senses back. They slept, sprawled next to each other, and not even being uncovered in the chilly cave was enough to wake them.

But towards morning her body began to stir again. She couldn't believe it at first. *It has to be over*, she thought. But it wasn't and it continued to grow worse until she was pawing at him needily. "Please, Jahk. I need more," she said, humiliation

colored the words and she couldn't even look at him for the shame.

He came awake immediately, and with one questioning look, he knew exactly what was needed. He pulled her into his arms and forced her to be still while he kissed her thoroughly. She enjoyed it but it didn't help and soon she was squirming against him, practically humping his leg.

He laughed and gave in. He thrust into her without any more foreplay and that was the only thing that soothed her. Whatever variations he tried over the next couple of days didn't matter. Nothing helped but for him to take her hard and spill into her. The pheromones she was putting out had the effect of an aphrodisiac, so he was able to meet her demands, but it was a grueling time for both of them.

Every few hours her body would demand to be serviced. He forced her to wait, asserting his dominance and making her eat and drink. But her heat didn't just affect her, it spurred him on too and the cycle continued. When it finally ended, they were both too exhausted to move, and stayed in bed, cuddled against each other recovering for almost a full day.

She tried to imagine what it would have been like to go through that on her own, and she shuddered and clung to him. He was her mate now, and not just temporarily. After what they'd endured together, she couldn't imagine leaving him and doing *that* with another man. The primal feelings that had been invoked were possessive ones too, and the very thought of him being with another female made her growl low in her throat.

The civilized veneer was very thin, it seemed. She'd learned plenty about herself since her exile, and not all of it was comfortable to know. But she would live with it. Jahk thought he'd claimed her, but she'd claimed him too. The

surging hormones of her heat hadn't made her want children. It had only made her want him. If there *were* children...

Well. Maybe breeding with him wouldn't be so terrible. He would be a good father, a good protector. But she still hoped that there wouldn't be a pregnancy. She didn't feel ready to raise offspring, and more importantly, she really wanted Jahk to herself for a while.

She'd learned a lot about herself; now she wanted to discover more about him, and what they would become together.

The End

ABOUT SADIE MARKS

Sadie Marks, and her lighter side, Kessily Lewel are two halves of the same author. All of their books fall under the category of power-exchange romance. Kessily's books tend more towards sexy romance with a side of domestic discipline, while Sadie has been sticking to sci-fi with lots of spanking and other kinks.

She has been in love with fantasy, sci-fi and horror since she was a child. She grew up reading Stephen King, Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and others, so it was only natural that one day she'd write her own worlds—though hers *do* seem to have a lot more sex and BDSM in them.

You can find Sadie and Kessily here:

[Website and Blog](#)

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Plus, rotating free stuff to make it even more fun. Right now, you'll get a free copy of Kessily Lewel's *Architect of His Desire* just for signing up. So, grab it now before you miss your chance.

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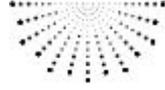
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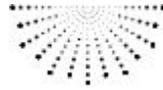
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Rose, Renee

Deathless Love

This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

CHAPTER ONE



The figurative roof was on fire by the time the Morphs finished their last set at the house party. Kate sang the last note while watching a huge throng of people jumping up and down, cheering. It was amazing that the cops hadn't shown up to shut them down for noise.

Kate gave Fox a satisfied grin as he unplugged his guitar from the amp. "That was good, eh?"

"You rocked it," he said in his faint British accent. "You okay to hang for a while?"

"Ah..." she bit her lip. Unlike most of the general population, she was actually more comfortable *on* stage than off, and she didn't really know anyone at the party. But she knew Fox had been flirting with a guy all night and she didn't want to cock-block him. He deserved a good wing-man for once, considering how much he always did for her.

"Yeah, that's cool," she said.

She helped the rest of the band pack up their equipment as Fox disappeared into the house. She wandered inside and found herself cornered by a rough-looking guy with a tattoo sleeve. He was nice enough, but she definitely wasn't interested. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for Fox or her other band-mates. "I gotta go find my friend," she

muttered to the guy and slipped away without making eye contact.

“Has anyone seen Fox?” she asked the crowd of people standing in the dark kitchen. She pushed through the drugged-out crowd in the living room and made her way down the hallway. She tapped on a bedroom door, and hearing music, pushed it open.

“There you are!” she exclaimed.

Fox was making out with the guy he’d been flirting with earlier. He had him pushed up against the wall and was sucking on his neck. He whirled around when he heard her—and her heart stopped. Fox had blood dripping from his mouth—from his *fangs*, actually—and more was running down his neck.

Vampire! Oh my fucking God!

She let out a blood-curdling scream and suddenly Fox was right in front of her with a hand over her mouth.

“Shut up!” he hissed. She stumbled backward, her eyes popping out of her head, trying to get away from him and his bloody fangs. He lunged forward to keep his hand on her mouth and kept following until she slammed into the wall behind her. “Shhh. Shut up, Kate.” He looked into her eyes and she suddenly found she couldn’t make a sound. He disappeared and reappeared in front of the unlucky guy, who had whirled around in confusion and was staring at Kate stupidly.

She wanted to run, but she was rooted to the spot, horrified and transfixed, waiting to watch the guy she had thought of as her best friend kill the boy-toy he had picked up. He grasped the guy’s neck and bent his head down again, but instead of

fangs, his tongue extended from his mouth and he licked the blood from the man's neck, as if he were cleaning the wound. The blood stopped trickling out and soon she could hardly see where he had been bitten. Fox murmured something to the guy, who smiled dazedly, gave him a kiss and turned to walk out. Fox gave him a slap on the butt as he left. Then he turned back to her.

She was crying, silently. She felt as though she must certainly be in a nightmare, because vampires didn't exist, especially not in her world. Not her best friend. He flashed back in front of her again.

“Shh, Kate, it's all right. But no screaming, okay?”

She just stared at him, but her voice came back and her cries were no longer silent.

“Did I hurt you? Are you okay?” He was grasping her shoulders, but his touch was gentle. The fangs had retracted and he looked like he always did. She shook her head, confused enough to wonder if she had really witnessed what she thought she had just witnessed.

“Where's Fox?” she asked between sobs. It was a stupid question, since he clearly was Fox, but her mind couldn't wrap around what was happening.

“Shh... I'm Fox, baby. I'm the same guy you've known for the past three years. I just have a secret, that's all.”

She shook her head.

“Calm down.” He tipped her chin up to his face and when she met his eye, she felt a wave of calm spread through her body. Except it felt all wrong, because her mind was still frantic.

She tried to shove him away, but it was like trying to push a bus. “Don’t do that!”

He held up his hands, palms out. “Okay, I won’t. Look at me and I’ll undo it.”

She didn’t trust him. She looked at his pierced earlobe instead of his eyes.

“Kate, it’s me. It’s Fox. Have I ever hurt you? I haven’t, have I?”

That was true. Fox had been nothing but a friend to her since the day he asked her to be in his band. And if he had been a vampire for the past three years and had never harmed her, she probably was safe with him. She met his eye and felt the adrenaline return to her body, her heart pumping double-time. She took several deep breaths to calm herself.

“Come on,” Fox said, grabbing her hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

Fear surged through her again and she dug her heels in. “Where are we going?” she asked suspiciously.

“I’m taking you home.” When she still resisted him, he turned and took hold of her shoulders again. He peered at her with sympathy. “Kate,” he said gently. “Do you want me to erase it from your memory?”

She blinked at him, then shook her head vehemently.

“You’ve seen this before.”

She felt dizzy at that. “I... I have?”

He nodded, soberly. “I’ve erased your memories. But it’s getting to the point where I’ve erased too much. I don’t want to cause any psychological damage.”

It was an odd mixture of relief and fear that washed through her. To know that she had seen this before was proof that she was safe with him. And yet knowing that he'd tampered with her mind was profoundly disturbing. She started walking, willing at least to let him take her home.

When they were in his car, she asked, "So were you going to turn him?"

Fox chuckled. "No, love," he answered with the charming British accent that helped keep him in boy toys. "We don't turn people and we don't kill for blood. I was just feeding. It didn't harm him a bit and he won't remember a thing."

"We...?" Her mind raced ahead. "Oh. Stella and Dom. Right?" Fox lived with the owner and manager of one of the nightclubs where their band played. She had always thought it was strange that three adults—none of whom were in a relationship with each other—would live together when they all could clearly afford their own places.

He nodded.

"Wait... are you telling me that vampires don't turn people?"

"No. I'm telling you that *we* don't. You can think of us as rogue vampires. That's why we're in Tucson, Arizona—it's the last place most vampires would want to be."

"Because of the sun?" She knew she was being slow on the uptake, but her mind couldn't process all this at once.

"Right."

"So there aren't other vampires here?"

"Nope." Pulling up in front of her place, he turned in his seat to look at her. "So, listen, Kate. I'm going to make it so

that you can't tell anyone about this. It's for your own good. Mortals who know about vampires usually either get turned or sucked dry."

She felt like she was going to cry again. He tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear. "Kate, I promise you're safe with me. There's nothing to be afraid of. Can you believe me?"

Call her crazy, but she did believe him. She nodded.

"Good. Look at me," he commanded softly. She felt a little wave of something, or perhaps she just imagined it because she knew he was hypnotizing her.

"Do you want to just leave your keyboard in my trunk until tomorrow?"

She nodded.

"Okay, good night. Call me if you need to talk more about it, okay?"

"Okay, goodnight," she said.

She went into her little adobe casita and made a cup of chamomile tea to calm her nerves.

As the fear wore off, she felt little shivers of thrill running through her. *Dom was a vampire*. Dom—the extremely good-looking nightclub owner who was the object of almost all of her fantasies—got even hotter in her mind.

"Mmm, yummy," said Stella, Dom's bar manager and fellow fang, lifting her eyes toward the door. Kate Strand, the lead singer of the Morphs, had just come swinging through it. She was dressed tonight as Marilyn Monroe—complete with a 50's

style dress and platinum curls. Kate's look changed from week to week and she could pretty much rock every look she tried.

"I'll say," Dom agreed, watching her approach the bar in her black stilettos. She was a lithe little thing—slender with small breasts and hips and more presence than three women combined.

"Oh yeah, she's retro this week," Fox said absently. It was Fox who had "discovered" Kate and invited her to sing for his band, the Morphs. He was the third vampire in their Tucson nest, and his interests didn't lie with the female sex. Otherwise, he too would surely have been gawking. Pretty much everyone in the bar was rubbernecking her right now. Although she could have been wearing her Spiderman shirt and jean shorts and they'd still be looking.

"Hey, Kate," Dom said, filling a glass of ginger ale with lime for her.

"Hey," she said breathily, swinging onto the bar stool next to Fox and beaming at Dom for the drink. "Thanks."

"Hi gorgeous," Stella said, sidling over and leaning across the bar to kiss Kate's cheek. "I like the Marilyn thing."

"Do you? I wasn't sure," Kate said doubtfully, her personality as enigmatic as her look. To watch her, you'd think she was full of confidence, but when you actually spoke to her she was completely unassuming.

"No, you look hellagood," Stella said, making a show of licking her lips. Stella went both ways and made no bones about her interest in Kate.

Kate laughed. "Thanks."

"Looks like a good crowd you have here tonight." She was talking to him, looking nervous about making small talk.

“They come for you, sweetheart. They come for you,” he said easily.

She looked up at him and he could have sworn her eyes went straight to his canines. “Ha. Yeah, right. Thanks for the drink,” she said, not meeting his eyes before she slid off the stool and headed toward the back. It would be an hour or two before the Morphs went on stage.

“She wants you,” Stella said. “And you want her back. Why don’t you jump on that?”

“I don’t do mortals.”

“You don’t do anybody, and that’s your problem. If you don’t go for her, I will.”

“Yeah, you’ve been trying for her since the day she started singing here. Look how far it’s gotten you,” Fox muttered. “She doesn’t really do *anybody*, so back off of her.”

“She knows, doesn’t she?” Dom asked Fox, a serious edge in his voice.

Fox whipped his head up to meet Dom’s eyes. Guiltily. He nodded slowly. “Yeah, but I didn’t tell her.”

“You didn’t clear it from her mind, either.”

“Look, I’ve cleared her too many times already. But I made it so she can’t tell anyone, so it’s cool. And Stella, she’s totally afraid of the fangs, so drop any ideas you have for her.”

Stella shrugged.

“I don’t like it. I’m holding you responsible for her,” Dom said. Fox had broken one of his important codes: laying low with the mortals. He didn’t want any more needless deaths. He had left that life behind him.

“I know, I will absolutely take the check on this.”

Raised voices and an increased throng of bodies alerted him to a skirmish in the middle of the club. Dom called over to the bouncer at the end of the bar. “Jim.”

“I’m on it,” his bouncer said.

“Get them out. But don’t make a scene.”

“I know, I know, Jedi mind trick, right?” Jim grinned at him, tapping his temple.

“That’s right.”

He didn’t like to have any kind of drama go down in his club. He’d taught the bouncers to treat offenders suavely, giving them the greatest possible chance to leave with dignity, even if they did have their arms held by two huge ex-military guys while they walked out. He watched as Jim and James—yes, his two regular bouncers had the same name—cut through the crowd, separated the two belligerents and led them out, one through the front door and one out the back. He could only hope they’d wait to be sure a fight didn’t pick back up in the parking lot. The last thing he needed was the kind of trouble a drive-by cop car would spot.

The stilettos were driving her nuts. What had she been she thinking? Standing in the women’s bathroom, putting lipstick on before her first set, Kate was having a hard time balancing. Stressed out with writing the proposal for her master’s thesis, she’d ingested three Starbuck’s Venti Lattes earlier in the day and now she was having a near panic attack from all the caffeine.

She rubbed lipstick off her canine tooth. Her fang. She shivered, remembering seeing Fox's bloody fangs last week. She had ended up calling him several times that week, firing questions at him like, "How old are you?" (179 years old) and "How old were you when you were turned?" (20) and "Why are the three of you rogue vampires?"

That was the most interesting answer. "Dom had a spiritual crisis in the 1970's and swore off killing," Fox had said. "Then he packed up and moved to Tucson."

"And you and Stella followed?" she'd asked.

"Yeah. I like the way I feel when I'm with Dom. I feel more like my mortal self. Less soul-less," Fox had explained.

She wanted to grill him more about Dom, but didn't want to make her interest that obvious. Now that she knew, she could see how all the clues had been there: Stella, Dom and Fox's relationship was so odd for one thing, with all three living together in one compound like a family. Tighter than family, really. They had pale faces and felt cooler to the touch. And Fox could never rehearse before dark.

The main clue was their pointy canine teeth, and now that she thought about it, she remembered that sometimes those teeth had seemed longer than at other times. Last night she'd been paying attention and had seen Fox's grow before her eyes when he saw a guy he was digging on. And all three were drop dead gorgeous, especially Dom. He was all lean muscle and not too tall, which made sense since he was born in a different century. He had wavy brown hair that fell just to his shoulders, and black-lashed hazel eyes—the kind that popped against his darker features. Looking into his beautiful face was an almost unsettling experience, which was why she was most often tongue-tied around him.

She'd told Fox the idea of being bitten creeped her out, but the truth was, there was something extremely intoxicating about the idea of vampires. She'd spent the entire week imagining Dom biting her neck. He was the fodder for most of her fantasies, although she would never act on them. God, she couldn't even look him in the eye when she talked to him.

Someone grabbed both of her breasts from behind and she shrieked and whirled around. Stella was grinning a toothy grin at her. Kate had never been with a woman, but if she could pick one, it would be Stella—especially now that she knew Stella was a vampire. She could just picture her dressed up as a dominatrix, spanking her with a riding crop. She shook her head and pushed that crazy thought out of her head. Stella stepped past her into a stall, blowing her a kiss.

Kate went to the bar and ordered a shot of Herradura, to take the edge off the caffeine buzz she had going. She threw it back and bit into the lime as a shudder ran through her, then took her place on stage, kicking off the damned stilettos. The caffeine/alcohol mix made her want to jump around, so she veered from their agreed upon set and called for some of the punkier songs they knew. The great thing about the Morphs was that the guys could usually pull any cover song she named out of their asses.

The first set went well, and the effects of the shot seemed to have taken the edge off. The bar was way too crowded now for her to squeeze in there to get a drink, but Nanette, one of the cocktail waitresses, came right to the stage as they finished to take their orders. "Ginger ale and lime?" she smiled.

"Yes. And another shot of Herradura."

"You got it. You were great, by the way. As usual!"

Kate smiled her thanks and hunted for the stilettos. There was no way she was walking through the bar in her bare feet. Fox had waited for her at the edge of the stage and he took her hand to help her through the throng. He was good like that. Sometimes she got overwhelmed by people trying to get her attention when she came off the set, and lord knows drunk people weren't good about picking up on her subtle cues to back off. She wasn't good at being rude. Or even firm, really. On-stage, Kate was a rock-star—a sassy, confident bad-ass—but once she was done with the set, she was only good at smiling and saying the things she thought people wanted to hear.

She gripped Fox's hand tighter when she was groped by some random person while she was squeezing through the crowd. Fox pulled her in closer to him and gave the throng behind her the stink eye. She gave him a peck on the cheek. He really was her best friend. She loved that he was not even slightly "vagiphobic" as some of her gay friends called themselves. He had no problem fronting as her boyfriend to take the pressure off her and she had no doubt he would defend her with his fists (or fangs?) if it ever came down to it.

Dom was in a booth with a couple of regulars and Fox pulled her over that way. "Can we squeeze in?" he asked. The regulars bumped fists with Dom and got up to make room for them.

"You're on fire tonight," Dom said.

She grinned and her face went warm. She met his eye for a brief moment.

"That was more like a second set kind of pace. I wasn't sure if they would go there with you at first."

Shit. He hadn't liked it. "I'm sorry—it was too fast for ten at night, wasn't it? Do you think it was okay?"

He shrugged. "You pulled it off." He waved out at the audience. "They were dancing."

She felt like crawling under the table or crying or both. She was always fragile when she first came off stage. To open herself up and perform with her whole heart made her feel both euphoric and vulnerable. For an hour or two afterward as she came off the high of it all, she could easily plummet into depression if she felt like she'd screwed it up.

She looked up and was dismayed to see that Dom was studying her with what suspiciously looked like comprehension. He covered her hand with his own—it was cooler in temperature, like Fox's. "That wasn't a criticism. You were great."

Her eyes filled with tears then—because it was Dom and she was embarrassed. She was saved by Nanette, who arrived with the tequila shot. She immediately threw it back and sunk her teeth into the lime. "One more, please."

Dom frowned.

"I'll pay for it," she said quickly. Everyone got a free shift drink, but maybe he thought she was abusing his generosity.

He shook his head. "No, it's on the house. You sure you can handle two shots in a row like that?"

She shrugged. But he was right to doubt her drinking capacity. She was a lightweight—five feet, three inches, 115 pounds. One drink usually had her tipsy, two and she'd be drunk. The fire of the Herradura was relaxing her limbs, and it helped her forget the awkward moment with Dom. She

sneaked a look at him and felt that thrill of danger imagining what it would be like to be with him.

“Let’s keep rockin’ it,” she said when they were back on stage. She kept the vibe up at a fevered pace again—giving everything she had to her performance, trying to make up to Dom for the shortcomings of the last set. The mixture of the alcohol and caffeine now had her in an anything-goes kind of mood and she was going to use it to its full extent.

The Marilyn dress wasn’t working for her, though, especially not in this mood. She was wearing spanky shorts on underneath in case the audience looked up her dress while she was on stage, so she made a big show of ripping the dress off and twirling it overhead like she was a member of the US Women’s Soccer team and just won the title. She threw the dress out to the cheering audience and then posed in her black and hot pink bra and spankies, throwing her arms up in the air. The crowd screamed. Her all-male band-mates were laughing.

“How about ‘Tainted Love?’” she asked, standing behind her keyboard and adjusting the mic. Fox grinned, plucking the melody on his electric guitar. The rest of the band got on board after trying out a few bars and she gave a nod and started in for real.

She sang it strong and sultry. “Sometimes I feel I’ve got to...” she snapped her head from side to side for the accent beats of the keyboard: *bong-bong*, “...run away, I’ve got to...” snappy head: *bong-bong* “get away from the pain you drive into the heart of me...”

Dom was all about women ripping off their clothes whenever they felt like it, but this particular time didn't feel right to him. And it wasn't because he didn't love to look at Kate Strand's hot little body. Watching her now, he could see the pulse of her heart beat under her pale skin, the veins looking plump with oxygen. His eyes traced the blue lines, following the one that plunged down into her bra, then moving to the one at her inner thigh, watching the quiver of that lush femoral artery that was exposed by her short shorts. He shook his head to clear it.

It wasn't that he didn't want everyone else looking at her hot little body, either. Well, maybe some of that. But this wasn't really like her. She always gave a good show, but didn't usually drink that much and he didn't want her to do something she'd regret. He felt like she was somehow inviting danger by getting so wild up there. He felt protective of her. But then, every employee at No Return felt the same way and Fox was right there next to her. Just to be safe, he would make sure Fox accompanied her home or to her car when she left.

“*What the—?*” The singing stopped with a yelp mid-note and there was a series of loud crashes. *Oh shit.* He couldn't see Kate at all, which meant she must have fallen off the front of the stage. How was that possible?

“I'm on it!” Stella yelled, pushing her way toward the stage. He pushed his own way through the crowd, which had naturally tightened into an unnavigable knot as everyone tried to either figure out what happened or gawk. He could see Stella by the stage, cradling Kate in her arms and carrying her toward the stairs. She appeared to be conscious. *Thank God.* Stella met his eyes across the crowd and she nodded, which he took to mean that Kate was okay, relatively speaking. He redirected his efforts toward getting the DJ going and reassuring the crowd before he went upstairs.

In the lounge of his windowless office, he smelled blood—Kate’s. And arousal: Stella’s. Stella held Kate cradled in her lap, licking the blood from her forehead. Her fangs were fully extended and Kate was staring up at them with fascination.

“Uh-uh, Stella. You heard what Fox said—she’s not into it.”

“She looks like she might be persuaded,” Stella said thickly.

He had to laugh—the thought of Stella and Kate getting it on was pretty hot. “No, Stella. Let her go or you’ll get a spanking,” he teased.

The smell of female arousal increased—this time he would swear it was Kate’s. He peered at her as he offered a hand and helped her off Stella’s lap.

“Unless I’m interrupting?” he asked.

She blushed and shook her head quickly. “No.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just a bump,” she said, rubbing her head.

“What happened, exactly?”

She looked embarrassed. “I just lost track of where the end of the stage was. I guess I was a little tipsy.”

“Kate, may I speak with you for a second?” Dom asked, beckoning her into his office. He left the door to the lounge open and leaned against his desk, folding his arms across his chest. “Listen. I think you had too much to drink tonight. I understand that you might need to get your buzz on to enhance

your performance, but you need to be in control when you go on my stage. You should know your own limits.”

Kate looked stricken. “I’m sorry—I didn’t think it would be a big deal. It was just a couple of shots.”

“Well, it was obviously too many and that makes it a big deal. When you’re working for me, I need you to be consistent. Okay?”

Too late, he realized she was going to cry.

“I understand. I’m sorry.” She held her eyes wide so the tears wouldn’t spill.

He hooked his hand around her waist and pulled her a step closer to him. “It’s all right,” he said gently. “The spanking’s over.”

Then he paused. He detected the fresh scent of her arousal. *Interesting*. That was the second time she’d been turned on by the word *spanking*. He tested it out. “Unless you need me to bend you over my desk and *spank* you for real?” He wagged his eyebrows for effect.

Yep, that definitely lit her up.

“Be careful, Kate, he spans hard,” Stella called in from where she was picking up in the lounge. She gave him a wink, obviously smelling it too. Too intrigued to let a moment like this pass, he stood up from where he’d been perched on the desktop and pulled her gently in to bend her over it, moving slowly to give her time to process what was going to happen. Very slowly, he pulled her tiny shorts and panties halfway down her thighs.

He turned to wink back at Stella as she slipped quietly out the door, mouthing the words, “Have fun!”

He ran his hand along Kate's beautiful little butt, which was as firm as a ripe peach and baby soft. He squeezed it a little and murmured approvingly. Kate didn't seem to be breathing at all, but her pussy was glistening with moisture. He drew his hand back and brought it sharply down on one of her cheeks.

She jumped and exclaimed, "Ahh!"

He rubbed the offended cheek a few times before he struck her other cheek. She whimpered. He rubbed again. Then he brought his hand down for several quick hard slaps, holding her in place with his left hand on her low back. "Ow! Uh! Oh!" She was trying to get away from him now and he figured she'd had enough. He dipped his fingers between her legs and was not at all surprised to find she was beyond wet. And he was hard. She moaned as he moved his fingers along her slickness. "Please?" her voice was a tiny squeak.

"How do you want it?" he said, his voice low and gravelly, his fangs long. She tried to turn around and he released her so that she could. She let her shorts and panties drop to the floor and slid back on the desk, spreading her legs and drawing her knees up. The sight of her spread open to him like that was more than he could take. He normally wasn't a fan of the neatly trimmed bush-look that was so popular these days, but on her it was the most erotic thing he had ever seen. He growled and pulled off his pants, grabbing a condom from a box on his desk.

It was better than he could have imagined. Her pussy was so swollen with desire that she felt as tight as a virgin when he slid into her. His body temperature ran low and she was on fire—her heat engulfed him, heating his blood, making him half lose his mind with hunger. Within minutes, they had knocked

everything off of the top of his desk and her torso was laid back fully with her ankles hanging up over his shoulders. He pumped into her, watching her face as it moved through pleasure into fierce desire and finally the flicker of panic that preceded a female orgasm.

“Oh yes, oh yes, *oh yes!*” Kate called out as she came, her head thrown back and her eyes rolling.

Her orgasm spurred his, and he came hard, groaning and gripping her well-toned thighs. Keeping their hips connected, he pulled her up to sit and tilted her head back to expose her vein. “May I?” His voice was hoarse with desire.

“Yessss,” she said breathily. He struck quickly and savored the taste of her—warm, delicious, erotic, with the tang of alcohol. He came again and she squeezed her legs around his waist, drawing him in tighter. She was smiling. When he finished, he sealed the little holes with the blood-clotting and healing properties of his saliva and kissed her nape.

“Thank you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Mmmm.”

Of course Fox picked that moment to barge in, as locks were completely ineffectual at keeping vampires out. His fangs shot out and he hissed. “What the *fuck* are you doing to her?”

He pulled out of Kate and held up his hands as Kate jumped off the desk in search of her panties and shorts. “It was consensual,” he said quickly, pulling his own pants back up. A vampire with his fangs out is nothing to mess with—even if he is your friend. “You can ask her.”

Kate nodded. “Absolutely.”

“You took advantage of her.” The fangs had retracted a little but Fox was still pissed, and Dom couldn’t blame him. He would feel the same way if he knew someone hijacked Kate while she was in an obvious state of intoxication.

Fortunately, Kate spoke up. “Do I look like I didn’t like it? It’s totally cool,” she said firmly.

Fox looked doubtfully from one to another, but his fangs were back where they belonged. “I came up to make sure you were okay,” he mumbled.

Kate rubbed her head where it had been bleeding. “Yeah, just a cut and bruise, I think. No real harm done.”

“You want to go to the after-party at Andrew’s?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you downstairs,” she said.

Fox left, throwing one last doubtful look over his shoulder and Dom reached into his pocket for his cash. He paid almost everyone under the table at No Return. It saved him money and they all appreciated it. “Here’s your pay for tonight. I ought to dock it because you didn’t finish the last set, but...” he stroked and then gently slapped her firm little butt, “I feel like we’re even.”

She flushed, clearly not sure how to take that.

He ran his finger over the bump on her forehead, feeling like it was absolutely tragic that her perfect face would be shadowed with a bruise. Something about her made him feel protective. “Be careful tonight, okay?”

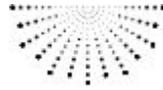
“I will,” she promised.

“All right. Good night, Kate,” he said, giving her soft lips a quick kiss.

“Okay, yeah. Bye.” She seemed a little flustered. Sobering up, maybe.

When she had left, he sat down in his chair and closed his eyes. *Oh hell.* That was a mistake. He had enjoyed every moment of it, but from start to finish—on every level—it had been a colossal mistake.

CHAPTER TWO



He had spanked her. Kate shut the door to the office lounge and stood out on the landing. She felt totally discombobulated. Her body felt relaxed and pleased in every way, yet she still was turned on by what had just happened with Dom. And totally embarrassed.

She couldn't think about it without getting butterflies in her belly and a pulsing between her legs. Her whole life she'd been fascinated by spanking. She used to rub her dolls' bare backsides and spank them in private in her bedroom, and the interest had only increased with puberty. Spanking was her most closely guarded secret—something she'd never told anyone about. She found it completely embarrassing. It made her feel like a deviant.

And now, having just had her number one fantasy fulfilled by the man who often starred in those daydreams, she felt as raw and open as an oyster pulled out of its shell. She felt like bursting into tears, but not sad tears, just... tears. And she definitely didn't feel like going downstairs in her bra and spankies, no matter how comfortable she had been prancing around on stage in them an hour ago. She sat down on the top of the stairs to get herself together.

“Are you okay?”

She jumped and turned around. Dom had left the office and was standing behind her. As she started to stand, he came around and sat down on the stair next to her. He was so attractive to her—the muscles of his chest stood out under his black No Return t-shirt and his long dark hair was tousled and hanging in his face. She leaned against him, grateful for the company. His company.

“Are you feeling... vulnerable?” he asked softly.

Wrong question. How on earth could he know that? Suddenly she lost it completely, tears spilling out of her eyes before she could even take a breath. He stood and gently pulled her to her feet, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and leading her back into the lounge. There, he pulled her down with him on the couch and she somehow ended up straddling him on his lap, her arms twined around his neck, her face buried there, sobbing. He stroked her back and didn't say a word until she'd finished. She sat back and wiped her tears. “I'm sorry—I don't know why I did that.”

“No, I'm sorry,” he helped her wipe a tear. “I just wanted to turn you on—I meant you no disrespect.”

She shook her head. “I didn't feel disrespected.” It was her habit to automatically reassure people when they apologized, but she thought it was mostly true. She did feel ashamed, though. But she probably would have from his lecture, anyway. “Why did you think it would turn me on?” she asked meekly, almost afraid of what his answer would be.

He tapped his nose. “Vampires have a great sense of smell.”

“You can smell—?” She didn't know what to call it.

He smiled and nodded. “Yep. Can’t hide much from us. Especially now that I’ve had your blood, I have a certain bond to you—I can feel your emotions.”

She smiled in relief. It was nothing so scary as him having been in her head or knowing her fantasies. He’d smelled her... arousal, and had wanted to satisfy her little kink. She felt a sudden rush of gratitude and affection for him. She leaned forward and gave him a shy peck on the cheek. “Thanks.”

“It was my pleasure,” he said with a satisfied little purr in his voice.

“So... is that your pleasure?” she asked timidly.

He laughed. “It’s not my regular gig, but it’s an easy role for me to step into. My name *is* Dom, after all.”

Kate looked confused for a moment, and then she chuckled a short nervous laugh. “I’d be your sub any day,” she said in an almost-whisper. His fangs lengthened, like he was turned on and he leaned forward and slowly, lightly ran a sharp tip along her collarbone, then down the vein to her breast as he pushed her bra aside with his hand.

In his home studio the next afternoon, he stared at Kate’s visage in marble. He wished he’d carved fairy wings on her back. He hadn’t seen it when he’d made her in wax, but now with the five-foot sculpture almost completely emerged from the marble, she looked just like a little sprite. And standing back, looking at her, he had a vision of Kate with several tiny fairies flickering around her. It was not a vision precisely, because he didn’t *see*, except that he knew that the fairies were there and what they looked like. He shook his head rapidly. He

hadn't been visited by psychic visions like that in hundreds of years. Not since he'd been turned. The skin on his arms prickled. Was it Kate who somehow inspired them? He picked up his riffler to work on the enormous task of refining her hair.

He'd carved the unsure Kate—she was looking up through her lashes with her automatic smile, and he'd somehow captured her eager to please nature. There had been no question that he was going to carve that Kate. He loved the strong performer side of her as well, but this one seemed more real, more personal, somehow.

Sculpting Kate had been a secret, guilty pleasure. It was an intimate act to hone the shape of someone's face and body with your tools. In this case, it was also a bit of an invasion of privacy, considering she didn't know he was doing it. He'd spent the past nine months absorbed with capturing every curve, every nuance of her and he probably had another three to go before he finished.

“Are you going to show her that?” Fox asked from behind him.

He didn't answer or turn around to acknowledge Fox's question. There was a note of censure in it, which he knew he deserved. He let the silence stretch between them.

“What's going on between you two?” Fox demanded.

Dom sighed and unbent himself from his position and set down his riffler. The last thing he needed was to get riled by Fox and gouge her. Because it had become *her* to him.

“It was just sex. We both wanted it and we acted on the impulse. That's all.”

“She deserves better than that.” Fox's voice was tight.

“I know,” he said, irritation threading through his own voice, more with himself than with Fox. “That’s why I’m not going to do it again.”

“Why don’t I believe that?” Fox folded his arms across his chest.

Dom didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure he believed it, either. He’d already broken his vow to stay away from her when he had sex with her that second time, after he found her crying on the top of the stairs. There was something about her that was so compelling. He couldn’t bring himself to inflict the smaller hurt of keeping his distance, even though in the long run it would save her from a much larger pain. Because the fact was, he was nothing but bad for her. With a capital B. Vampire/mortal relationships were way too difficult to maintain. Kate was in her late twenties—the age these days when women started looking seriously for a long-term mate—and she deserved a real relationship with a man she could settle down and have a few kids with, if she wanted. Getting tangled up with him would only mean an eventual breakup when she realized that her life was stalled out. The last thing he wanted was for her to be hurt.

“I’ll take care of it,” he sighed.

“What does that mean, exactly?” Fox said suspiciously.

He wished he knew. “It means I’ll take care of it!” he snapped and leveled an alpha male stare at Fox until he lowered his eyes, albeit sullenly. Vampires were nothing but animals at their core, and Dom had been around longer than any in the U.S., and most all in the old country, too, which meant he was stronger and more powerful than the rest of them. And although he was hiding out in Tucson with his head in the sand about the rumors of trouble with the vampires in

the old world, he was still the dominant. Fox and Stella had chosen to follow him here, which meant they lived under his authority.

Since his attempt at finding peace through sculpting had been shattered, he gave up on sculpting for the day and went downstairs to shower before he headed to the club.

There was a double set of doors at No Return, just like he had in his home, so that people could enter during the day without letting the sunlight in. The first door opened to a coatroom/foyer and then the second door into the actual club. Because of this feature, Dom could materialize from his home to the club or vice versa during daylight hours. He did it often enough, although he also liked to drive back and forth, too, in case any of the employees started wondering how he got around.

The club was a whole different scene during happy hour. A lot of regulars hung out and the vibe was casual and friendly—the intensity of nighttime was dialed down by half. They served simple bar food like quesadillas, nachos, and pizza slices for people who hung through dinnertime. Dom materialized into his locked office, which was guaranteed to be protected from any light, and then headed downstairs. Alex, his happy hour manager, was leaning on the bar, chatting up the regulars.

“Hey boss,” he said.

Dom walked behind the bar and fished a Dos Equis out of the beer cooler, squeezing a lime into it. Alex would’ve been more than happy to serve him, but Dom liked being hands on in his own club. He had worked every position so he knew the ins and outs of what they did, and what their challenges might

be. Besides, working kept him busy and socializing. Otherwise, he'd never leave his house.

His immortal heart did a double-pump when he saw Kate walk through the door. She wasn't working at No Return tonight—Fox had said the Morphs were playing at Club Congress. Which meant she was probably there to see him. Or not—he shouldn't assume anything. He would just treat her like nothing had happened.

“Hey Kate. Ginger ale?”

“Sure,” she said, beaming at him. She was wearing a thin gray t-shirt that said “Boys Lie” and had horizontal rips all along the back. She had on a denim skirt and cowgirl boots underneath.

He poured the ginger ale and squeezed the lime into it. “Whatcha up to?” he asked casually.

She shrugged, her eyes too eager as they watched his face. This was bad. “We're playing at Congress tonight, so I thought I'd stop in early.”

“Great. Great.” That was brilliant. Now what? He opted for the sneak out method, and casually drifted off down the other side of the bar, checking inventory and wiping down bottles—a job that Alex had probably already done for the day. It might have been a good method, except that an attractive woman like Kate sitting alone at the bar could not fail to be noticed by more than one troller. It wasn't more than five minutes before she had a guy sitting on each side of her trying to pick her up. One had more game than the other and she ended up angled slightly toward him, answering his questions politely.

She obviously had never mastered the art of the blow-off. Most of the female regulars at his club were quite practiced at it. They could ignore, shrug off, or even be downright rude to get a guy off their back, but not Kate. He'd just fed from her the night before, which meant he could feel her discomfort now. She was trying to make eye contact with him for a rescue. *Shit*. Reluctantly, he started to walk out from behind the bar and toward Kate.

"Do you want to get some dinner?" the guy was asking her.

"No, I can't," she stammered. "I have to go over some stuff with Dom," she improvised as he walked up, her eyes begging him to agree.

"I'm ready now, if you are," he said.

Kate bounded off her bar stool. "Yep—totally. Nice to meet you," she said with a genuine smile for the disappointed guy.

"Yeah, you too," he muttered.

Kate followed Dom toward the stairs. He paused and looked at his watch. 7:30 pm. Which meant the sun had just set. It would still be light out, but he could deal with it. "May I buy you dinner?"

Her face lit up and she nodded, which made his heart simultaneously swell and sink. "Wait here, I just need to grab my sunglasses from the office."

When he returned, he put a hand on her lower back and held the door for her. "Does Poca Cosa sound good?" It was a Tucson installation—a hip gourmet Mexican restaurant just around the corner, where the menu changed every day. It might be hard to get in tonight, but he could try slipping the

greeter a twenty to lube the way. Kate deserved a nice dinner if he was going to shut her down.

“Sounds great.”

He stopped and hissed a little, blinking when they stepped outside, temporarily blinded by the remaining daylight. She took his arm the way you hold a blind man’s and just stood there with him until his vision returned. The daylight felt hot on his skin, but hell, the air was hot. It was June and the monsoons hadn’t come yet. They walked the two blocks in relative silence and were fortunate enough to be seated right away.

Dom dipped a tortilla chip into the salsa and crunched. “Ask away.”

“What?”

“You have questions for me.”

She blanched and he felt a ripple of embarrassment from her. “How do you know that?”

“I’ve been around the block a few times.”

“You mean about being a vampire?”

He shrugged. “You tell me.”

She rewarded him with one of her quick smiles. “Okay, so first of all, how do you do that? Can you read minds?”

“A little. I’m better at sensing emotions. Especially if I’ve had your blood recently.”

“How often do you... take blood?”

“We call it feeding. I’m an old vampire, so I don’t need much. I can go a couple of weeks on what I took from you last night. Thank you again, by the way.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, looking pleased. “How do you erase memories? Or do the mind control?”

“Well, both are done with hypnosis. There’s no difference between what we can do and what a licensed hypnotist does, really, except that the induction happens instantly by looking into our eyes while we have the intent. Then we leave the hypnotic suggestion telepathically. Maybe it’s a bit stronger than human hypnosis.”

“Have you done it to me?”

He shook his head. “Never. The fact that you’re sitting here quizzing me is proof of that.”

“You mean I shouldn’t know?”

“Right.”

“Are you going to scrub my memories?”

He shook his head. “You have too many now. And Fox says he’s done it too many times for it to be safe anymore.”

“Are you worried that I’ll tell someone? Because I won’t. Fox already programmed me.” He could smell fear on her suddenly, and although he didn’t want her afraid, he was glad she had good instincts that way.

He nodded. “I believe you,” he said mildly. “But you’re right to be afraid. Vampires do normally kill or change anyone who can’t be scrubbed.”

He let that sink in for a moment and felt her fear increase. “But you’re safe. Fox has claimed full responsibility for you.” He would take responsibility for her too, but he didn’t need to tell her that.

Their food came as she absorbed that. He ordered his usual—a chef’s pick of three things off the menu. Tonight they

brought him a chicken mole, some kind of tomatillo fish and his favorite—tamale pie with a pumpkin cream sauce. Kate had some delectable beef dish.

“Cheers,” she said, raising her margarita to clink his.

“*Buon appetito*,” he said, picking up his fork.

“So, according to some of the vampire novels, vampires don’t eat,” she said accusingly.

He laughed. “Well, if I drank enough blood I wouldn’t have to. But I enjoy food, so where’s the pleasure in that?”

“So, I guess that means you use the toilet like everyone else?”

He nodded with a smile.

“How long have you been a vampire?”

“I was turned in 1522.”

“In Italy?”

“*Si bambina*. I was turned in Venice, but my home was in Parma.”

“Okay...” He picked up a nervous vibe from her. “So you don’t kill people?” she asked in a low voice.

“As a regular practice? No.”

“But you have?”

He nodded. “I’ve killed mortals and I’ve killed vampires, yes.”

He saw a shiver go through her. “How many people have you turned?”

“None.”

She was surprised at that. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Who turned you?”

“A very beautiful female vampire who I stupidly let seduce me when I was away from home.”

“Did you stay with her?”

He shook his head. “No. I killed her, which is supposed to be impossible. And then I went home to my wife and daughter and begged their forgiveness and understanding.”

She looked at him with big eyes. “Does that happen often? A vampire living with his mortal family?”

“Never, as far I know.” He shrugged. “It was where I wanted to be. I stayed on my family property another fifty-some years until my daughter and granddaughter died of fever. Then it was too painful to remain.”

She sat back and wiped her beautiful lips with her napkin. “Okay, here’s the real question I want to ask you. It’s the reason I came down to the club tonight.” She had a confessional tone, and didn’t it just make him lean forward, hungry for her next words.

“Will you do it again for me? What you did last night?”

Oh god. His fangs elongated. Fuck breaking up. He’d never expected her to be so bold when she was sober. Her words ignited a fire in him that would be painful to ignore—he’d gone rock hard. He wanted her—he wanted to be in her, sucking her blood, making her moan and yes, spanking her beautiful bare butt.

She hadn’t asked for a relationship—*yet*. He could make it clear that it was out of the question later. After he gave her what she wanted. He flashed his smile briefly at her to show

her the effect her words had on his fangs and raised a finger to signal their server. He used his napkin around his mouth when he asked for the check to hide his fangs, which to his amusement, made Kate giggle.

He looked at his watch. 8:30 pm. She was probably on at Club Congress at 10 or 10:30 pm. They could go back to his office at No Return. Or... they could get a room in the hotel above Club Congress. Which would make it more just about sex, wouldn't it? Yes, it was safer that way. And hotter.

The room was adorned in retro décor. It had a queen bed with an iron headboard—perfect for a well-spanked girl to white-knuckle later when he was driving into her. He pushed that thought out of his mind. There was a beautiful fifties style clock next to the bed and a claw-foot tub in the bathroom. He pulled off his shoes and shirt and climbed up on the bed, propping the pillows so he could lean back against the headboard.

“I want to take off your panties myself,” he told Kate, who was nervously undressing.

“Oh! Okay,” she said, stripping off everything else.

Meow. Yep, still hot. He crooked his finger at her and she awkwardly came toward him.

“Hurry up.”

She dove over his lap and he laughed. He took his time, stroking the curves of her tight little butt, then he warmed it up over her panties, spanking lightly all over first, then mostly concentrating his smacks at the beautiful juncture where the

butt meets the upper thigh, alternating butt cheeks. She made little “oohs” and gasps and, as he started to increase the intensity of the smacks, she started to struggle and tighten her buns. He gave her another dozen hard spanks and then stopped and rubbed. She moaned softly.

He pulled her panties half way down her thighs and slipped his fingers between her legs. Not that he needed any confirmation—the heady smell of her arousal combined with the pleasure of having her so beautifully presented over his lap had already brought him close to orgasm. Her pussy was slick and swollen. She pushed her hips back at him eagerly. He laughed and pulled his hand out, giving her several spanks that were a little bit harder than the first set. She grunted and jerked, trying to escape his punishing slaps. Her bottom was turning a lovely shade of blush. He rubbed her again, and dipped his fingers between her legs again. “Who’s in charge here, Kate?”

“You are?” she asked timidly.

“That’s right,” he said, gliding his fingers up and down the glossy entrance of her sex. She moaned. “That means you’ll get pleased when I’m ready to pleasure you. And you’ll be patient until I do.”

She made a tiny whimpering sound.

“You’re lucky you have to work soon, or I might take all night to spank you.”

At that, she orgasmed, her butt cheeks tightening and a shudder running through her shapely thighs.

He laughed. “I guess I had it wrong—you’ll be pleased when *you* feel like it! All right, Kate. Let’s get serious. Do you know why you’re in trouble tonight?”

She shook her head, which was buried in the covers of the bed.

“You were a naughty girl. You’re getting a spanking for letting those boys at the bar tonight make you uncomfortable.” He started spanking her again, hard spans. It was divinely inspired, he thought. One of the many reasons he’d been reluctant to get involved with Kate in this way was that she didn’t *need* to be more submissive. It may turn her on, but she’d be better served by standing a little more squarely on her own two feet. She was a brilliant and talented young woman who didn’t seem to know how to stand up for herself. So offering her a discipline incentive to do so seemed like an ingenious twist, if he didn’t say (well, think) so himself.

She was gasping at the burn he was laying down. He paused and rubbed. “You’re a grown woman, Kate, who frequents bars at least two, maybe three nights a week, is that right?”

She nodded.

“You need to learn how to send out appropriate signals.” He adjusted her position slightly so that her butt was optimally presented and started spanking again, using the slap of his hand to punctuate his words. “You do *not* always need to be nice.” Smack. Smack. “And you do *not* need to lie.” Three more smacks. “And you most *certainly* do not need to rely on your friendly vampires to rescue you.” With that he gave her ten hard spans that made her struggle to get away. He easily held her in place with his left hand.

“Kate,” he said lovingly. “When I spank you, I want you to try very hard to stay in place for me. Can you do that?”

She didn’t answer. He could feel her emotions were starting to tangle. He’d pushed her limits a bit with those last

spanks and fear had set in. Time to switch tactics. He slipped his left hand under her hips and found her clit, dripping with the nectar of her arousal. He rubbed her bottom with his right hand while his left made slow circles around her clit. She started pumping her hips and moaning. His right hand started spanking, slowly, and not too hard. She groaned. Gradually, gradually, he increased the tempo with both hands until she was writhing desperately under his hands.

“Please. Oh God. Oh please... *YES!* Oh!” It was a magnificent orgasm. He felt quite pleased with himself as she shuddered and contracted under his hands. After the little earthquake, she lay sprawled across his lap with an absolute glow on her face, at least as far as he could tell from the half he could see. She looked beautiful.

Despite that fact that he hadn't had relief yet himself, he felt quite satisfied. He'd done that to her. After a moment, she rolled off and freed his hard-on from his boxer briefs, taking him into her mouth with a reverence he wasn't sure he deserved. It was amazing, but he wanted to finish inside of her. *Crap*. No condoms.

“Kate?” he said, twining his fingers in her wavy blond hair as her warm, wet mouth moved up and down his length.

“Mmm?”

“Would you believe me if I told you that vampires can't contract diseases or have children?”

She pulled off him and he groaned. “No condom?”

He shook his head. “Sorry.”

She looked at him for a second, then said, “I believe you.”

“Good,” he said, flipping her onto her back so fast she gasped. “Because I really want to be in you right now.”

She drew her knees up as an invitation.

Lying with Dom after having mad, hot sex, she was beyond satisfied. She was blissed out in every way—her body was relaxed and warm, and she rather relished the burn she still felt from her spanking. And the blood sucking was oddly erotic as well. It was not at all what she'd previously feared—he didn't take that much, and it didn't hurt other than the initial puncture moment. And the puncture wounds from the night before were well on their way to healing, looking like nothing more than a cluster of mosquito bites, which is what she'd decided she would tell people if they asked.

She ran her hand over Dom's well-developed pecs. He was everything she'd ever fantasized about. She got up and pulled on her panties, bra and t-shirt. Dom was lying on the bed, watching her with heavy lids. She leaned over on the bed and kissed him.

“Listen, Kate,” he said, his face turning into a blank mask.

She stiffened. She knew from vast experience what that post-coital tone meant. They were going to have a “Talk” with a capital “T.” She pulled on her skirt. Dom climbed out of bed and found his boxer briefs.

“Vampires are great for sex, but not for much of anything else.”

Her chest constricted. “Yeah, sure,” she said, trying for a casual tone. “I have no expectations here,” she reassured him. She sat down on a chair to pull on her cowgirl boots, inwardly cursing the emotions that seemed way too large for this occasion.

He said nothing for a beat. When he spoke, his voice was soft with regret. "It's not a rejection, by any means."

Fuck. He could read her. Her big show of nonchalance was a wasted effort on a vampire who'd just had her blood. And the last thing she needed right now was his sympathy. It made her eyes burn and her throat get tight.

"No, we're cool. Really. I gotta go downstairs and get ready to sing, okay?"

"Kate." Dom was rubbing his chest as if it hurt. Was that her pain he was feeling? Served the fucker right.

"I'll see you later," she said and escaped before he could say another word.

Downstairs Fox offered his cheek to her for a kiss and then narrowed his eyes. He looked at her and then he scanned the room behind her.

"What?"

"Were you just with Dom?"

A surge of anger went through her. Fucking know-it-all vampires. "What makes you say that?" she snapped.

He registered her anger and dropped some of his attitude. "I smell him on you," he said mildly. "What's going on with you two?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing, okay?"

She didn't look at Fox then, because she knew he was regarding her with sympathy. "How about a shot?"

"Yeah, sure," she mumbled.

Fox went to the bar and returned with salt, limes and two shots of Cazadores. "Cheers," he said, clinking her glass and

throwing back the tequila. She did the same, shuddering as she bit into the lime. “Let’s blow it up tonight, ‘kay?”

Fox grinned at her. “Atta girl.”

Thank God she had the Morphs. Performing with them was the best high she ever got. She headed toward the stage and grabbed the microphone. It was summertime, which meant everyone showed up late. They were just starting to arrive and mill about with that awkward, pre-buzzed energy. “Hi there,” she called out.

“Woo hoo!” She was greeted with several scattered cheers. Her band mates took her presence onstage as a call to action and found their way up on stage, as well. “Don’t Speak? By No Doubt?”

Fox rolled his eyes. “Tell me you’re not going to sing breakup songs all night.”

Kate shrugged. “Can you play it or not?” She knew they could—they’d performed it before. Gwen Stefani was a favorite of hers. They bent their heads to their instruments and played for her. A lot of songs she liked to make her own, but this one she sang just like Gwen did—or at least she hoped she did—infusing her performance with mourning and angst.

It was a great song no matter who was singing it, and despite it being early, it drew people out on the dance floor like mosquitoes to blood. Or vampires to blood. *Dammit.*

Okay, so it wasn’t like there was a relationship there to break up in the first place, but it seemed like her feelings at the moment went beyond the sting of a bruised ego. Dom had been more than a drunken hook-up to her. He’d fulfilled her deepest fantasy—and then some. And now she felt horribly exposed. She’d revealed to him a side of herself she’d never

shown anyone. It made her feel vulnerable and he'd just given her the brush-off. And God, what if he told people about her weird kink? She'd be the laughingstock of Tucson. As a well-known player in the club scene, it was the kind of thing that people would gobble up.

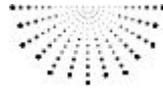
"...with my head in my hands I sit and cry... Don't speak—I know what you're saying, so please stop explaining..." Fuck. There, standing in the back, was Dom. She didn't falter. In fact, she served it right up to him, singing the chorus, looking him in the eye. Which actually meant she had no pride at all. *Ah hell.* She finished the song and faced upstage for the applause, trying to get a grip.

He wore the same sad expression on his face that he'd had when she left him upstairs, and just looked back at her, rubbing his chest.

Fox took charge, calling out the next play—an upbeat song that was one of their originals—and when she turned around, she was back in the zone.

And Dom was gone.

CHAPTER THREE



She was avoiding him like the plague. It was Friday night, which meant she was in his club to sing with the Morphs, but she hadn't come up to the bar for a drink or looked at him all night. It was what he'd wanted, and yet he couldn't stand it. She hadn't come around the club all week.

As an old vampire, his emotions were generally flat. He sensed others' emotions, but he rarely experienced any intensity in his own. But the night at Hotel Congress he'd felt such a pain in his heart at hurting her. It had nearly crippled him, he was so unused to experiencing any feelings of his own. He hadn't felt pain like that since he buried his family, back in the old country.

"I smell pain." Stella wrapped her arms around him from behind. He interlaced the fingers of one of his hands with hers, watching Kate up on the stage.

"Mine or hers?"

"Yours. Hers is obvious, too, but I can't smell it from here."

"I was trying to do the right thing." He rubbed his sternum. "But she's *really* hurt. Do you think that's normal?"

“I think she really dug you. I told you that. I don’t see why you had to break it off.”

“Yes, you do,” he snapped, whirling around in her arms to look at her. The level of irritation he felt with Stella now was unusual for him, as well.

She merely raised her eyebrows and took a step back, releasing him from the embrace. “I understand that *you* think it was necessary. I’m just saying maybe it wasn’t.”

“Well, it was. But I think I did it all wrong.”

Stella shrugged. “You could try to explain. Let her know it’s not about her.”

I did that. But she was right, he had to try again, he needed to fix this. When the Morphs took their set break, he made his way through the crowd to Kate.

Fox narrowed his eyes at him when he saw him coming, so he shrugged to communicate that he didn’t know what he was doing, but it was with good intent. Fox closed his eyes and nodded, then disappeared into the crowd so that Kate was alone at the base of the stage.

“Kate,” he called her name as he squeezed through the guys who were trying to talk to her. She looked momentarily relieved at the rescue, then panicked when she realized it was him. But she took his outstretched hand and he pulled her through the crowd to the base of the stairs, where he leaned his shoulder against the rail.

He opened his mouth and suddenly realized he had no idea what to say. He closed it again. She looked at him expectantly. He could feel tension and pain radiating from her. Sometimes the only option is the dead honest truth.

“Listen, Kate. I want to tell you something. I have sex with a lot of women around here.”

Her face darkened considerably.

“It means nothing to me and I don’t give it much thought.”

Her eyes were narrowed, but she was listening.

“The thing is, with you it already means something.”

Just then a drunk college kid slapped Kate’s ass as he walked by and she jerked her head up and glared. Before Dom had time to think, he had already reached out and yanked the kid back, gripping him by the throat and squeezing until the kid understood that he was at Dom’s mercy. He let go. “Apologize to the lady,” he bit out.

“Sorry! Jeez,” the kid said, rubbing his neck. James had caught sight of the skirmish from his station by the front door, and he was there in moments.

“He’s 86’ed,” he said, and James nodded, taking the kid’s arm.

“No way! Come on, I apologized,” the kid wheedled.

Dom shook his head and turned his attention back to Kate, who was staring at him with wide eyes. The violence of the moment before coupled with being so close to her made his balls tight and he could feel the surge of hormones that made his fangs get long. He willed himself to relax. It was unlike him to handle customers that way, but something about Kate brought out the territorial animal in him. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “What was I saying?”

Kate just stared at him.

Right. “Listen, when I said that vampire/mortal relationships are a really bad idea, it wasn’t a line to get rid of

you. Okay? It's the sorry truth."

She still said nothing. He thought the pain had eased from her, but not the tension. She put her hands on her hips. "Well, why not?" she demanded. "Because I've been friends with Fox for a long time and it's been just fine."

"It's dangerous. For you. For me. For everyone."

"How so?" she asked sharply.

"Kate," he sighed. "Can't you just take my word for it?"

She shrugged. "I have to get back on stage," she said coolly, and turned on her heel and left him.

Well, angry was better than hurt. He'd take that any day.

Why did he have to be so damn appealing? That macho chivalry with the guy who'd slapped her ass had been a huge turn-on. But basically he was your typical commitment-phobic male. He was a rock; he was an island. *Fine*.

At least he'd said she meant something to him. If she could even believe that. She played a few notes on her keyboard, which brought the other four band members back to the stage. "I want to sing 'Don't Speak' again."

Fox snorted. "So your talk with Dom went well?"

"Shut up. I just like that song, and so does everyone else and you know it."

He grinned at her. "That's because you sing it perfectly, love. Just promise me you're not going to ask to sing Adele's 'Someone Like You' next."

She laughed. "I promise."

They had a great second set and she scooted straight out to her car afterward, her keyboard and stand tucked under either arm. Club goers were pouring out into the parking lot and there was talking and drunken shouts.

“There she is,” she heard a voice shout, but thinking it didn’t apply to her, she didn’t even look up. She popped the trunk on her old Toyota Corolla and put the keyboard and stand inside. When she shut the trunk, the guy who’d slapped her ass in the club and three of his buddies were standing all around her.

Her breath froze in her chest. “What the fuck?” she demanded.

“You need to tell your boss, or boyfriend, or whatever he is to let me back in the club,” the guy said.

She rolled her eyes. “You weren’t permanently 86’ed. It was just for the night.”

“That’s not what the bouncer said,” he said sullenly. “All I did was slap your ass. Is that such a crime?” He took a step closer and she could smell that he reeked of beer. He was definitely still drunk. He slapped her ass again, hard. “Huh?” he said, slapping it again. “Is that a crime?”

“Get the fuck away from me,” she yelled loudly, hoping to attract the attention of some of the other customers in the parking lot. She was scared now. She looked around desperately. She didn’t see anyone she knew and there was no one looking their way or close enough to call out to. *Fuck*. “I said, Get. The Fuck. Away from me,” she hissed, mustering all the bad-ass bluff she had in her.

“Well if I’m gonna get banished for it, I at least want to enjoy it,” the guy said and shoved her against the hood of her

car, yanking her skirt up with one hand while the other pushed into her lower back. She rolled to the side and he grabbed her upper arms with both hands and threw her back against the hood. “One of you guys hold her for me.”

“No, man, that ain’t cool,” one of his friends said doubtfully.

“Yeah, man. Chill out.”

“Let go of me!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, struggling hard to get free.

Suddenly his hands were wrenched off of her arms. She whirled around in time to see the guy flying through the air and smashing into another car, cracking the windshield. Dom was standing there, his fangs fully elongated, looking pissed. So vampires did have super strength, just like the books said.

He turned to the other three, who held up their hands and backed away. There was a blur and suddenly he was standing directly in front of one of them, clutching his throat. “Look at me,” he growled. The guy looked at him and froze for moment. Then Dom let him go and the guy turned around and walked away without another word. Dom repeated it with the other two, and they in turn each left silently. He was hypnotizing them. Or scrubbing them. Whatever.

He walked over to her assailant, who was starting to roll around and moan. What if the guy was too knocked out to hypnotize? It did seem to take a bit longer with him, but then Dom left him, apparently satisfied.

She suddenly felt extremely embarrassed. She didn’t know whether the guy had planned on spanking her or raping her, but either way, she just felt like disappearing. Dom moved in a blur again and was standing right in front of her. He wrapped

his arms around her and pulled her in to hug her, but she pushed him away. He had no right. Well, he'd just saved her, so maybe he did, but she knew she'd fall apart in his arms if he held her again. Too dangerous.

"Thanks, Dom," she mumbled, picking up the contents of her bag that had spilled on the ground. Dom crouched down and helped her pick them up. "Did you just happen to be out here or...?"

Dom sat back on his heels and contemplated her. "I felt your fear."

Oh right. Of course.

"Are you hurt, Kate?"

"Nope. Not at all," she said, still not looking at him. She threw all the stuff in her bag as quickly as she could and stood up. He was looking at her with sympathy, which she couldn't stand.

"It was my fault that happened to you. I'm really sorry," he said.

"How was that your fault?" She shook her head. "It was just a drunk asshole."

"I shouldn't have handled him the way I did in the club. I don't usually get rough with customers like that, especially if they're drunk. It just makes them more belligerent."

She shrugged. "Well, it's no big deal."

He was looking at her like he knew that was a lie. *Damn him.*

"I'm going to get home, now."

“Kate, in the future, I want you to ask someone to walk you out, okay?”

For some reason his authoritative tone irritated her, but it really wasn't in her to give him any backtalk. “Fine,” she said dully and climbed into her car, backing up and driving off with Dom still standing there watching her.

“Another vampire has been found drained.” Fox looked at Dom over the top of his laptop. He and Dom were both sitting in Dom's living room at their laptops while Stella made them dinner in the kitchen. “Another old one.”

“Who was it?” Stella called from the pass-through.

“Lucas Aragon. Age 473. He's the third vampire over the age of 400 to be killed in the past six months.”

Stella came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands. “So what are vampires saying?”

“That's the creepy thing. Everyone seems to be scared into silence. At least on the Yahoo group. But I emailed Randolph privately and the word is that everyone suspects Roxanna Vagomir. She's the oldest vampire left.”

“Yeah, but why would she be picking off older fangs? What do they think is the motivation?”

“I don't know, but what they do know is that she's building an empire out of other vampires' businesses. Suddenly everyone is just happily laying their operations at her feet and becoming her loyal followers. It doesn't make sense.”

Fox could tell Dom was listening even though he hadn't offered any comment. “What do you think, Dom?”

Dom shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I’m glad we’re in Tucson rather than Chicago or the old country.”

“Are you not going to give it any more thought than that? I mean, look, if Roxanna—or whoever is doing it—is picking off the oldest vampires, that means you’re on the short list. I mean, how many more are left?”

Dom didn’t answer.

“Dom? Shouldn’t you be worried?”

“Don’t let yourself get wrapped up in all the drama, Fox. It has nothing to do with us.”

“How can you say that?” He heard his voice take on a plaintive tone. “I think giving this a little thought and investigation is totally warranted.” He hated when Dom was dismissive with him. After almost two hundred years together, he still felt like he was the little boy to whom Dom never gave his full attention or respect.

“The label ‘drama queen’ comes to mind,” Dom said mildly.

“Fuck you,” he snapped, knowing full well he’d pay for that little piece of disrespect.

Dom looked up and his eyes narrowed. He raised his hand with the fingers cupped and squeezed, causing Fox’s throat to constrict as if he were being strangled.

“Sorry!” he choked out quickly, knowing from experience it was better to fold immediately. Dom didn’t relent. He waved his hands. “I apologize! I’m sorry!” He could feel his face turning red and his vision was starting to swim before Dom let go.

It was the original Darth Vader move. How George Lucas had ever seen it wasn't clear, but it was certainly an ancient vampire trick. It was a way that older vampires held power, controlling the bodies of younger ones this way.

He coughed a few times, rubbing his neck. "Do you even know what you're doing with that?" he complained bitterly. "One of these days you're going to accidentally kill me."

"You can't choke a vampire to death," Dom said in a bored voice. But then he looked up with a serious face. "I apologize. For the drama queen crack." Then Dom looked back to his laptop as if the subject were closed. From Dom, that was as good as it got.

He sighed. "Look, Dom. I'm really concerned about this." He raised his voice to reach the kitchen. "Stella, don't you think this is something to worry about?"

Stella appeared in the doorway again and leaned against it. She looked as hot as always, her long, shapely legs set off by short shorts. She shrugged. "Well, I'm glad you're monitoring it. But it definitely isn't cause for worry yet. If something happens in the U.S., then we need to take note."

"Yeah, but if something were to happen in the U.S., it would be with Dom. He's the oldest fang in the country. We won't have time to react."

Stella looked from him to Dom for a moment. "Dom, what is your sense about this?"

Jesus, hadn't he just asked that? Sometimes they were so like a nuclear family it was funny. He was the kid who had to petition mommy to talk to daddy for him. But that was how it had always been.

Dom sighed and met Stella's eye. They'd known each other so long they often didn't use words to communicate, which drove Fox absolutely crazy. "Roxanna Vagomir has always been a royal bitch. I would not be surprised to learn that she was behind anything. That said, I don't know why she would want or need to kill and drain older vampires." Dom shut his computer and turned to him, as if he were conceding something. "See if you can find out more about why or how the vampires are giving up their businesses to her. If we know what the game is, we'll have more to go on."

He nodded, happy he'd finally been given marching orders and turned to email Randolph, a former lover he'd met in the sixties when they lived in Chicago. Randolph had returned to his native England, but since rediscovering each other in the nineties through the internet, they'd been tight on a cyber basis.

He was relieved that Dom had finally engaged on the topic of Roxanna. He had a bad feeling about it all. And if his bad feeling played out, Dom and Roxanna would go toe-to-toe—and only one vampire would walk away.

CHAPTER FOUR



“No Return,” Dom answered the phone, feeling a blast of emotion run through his entire body. There was a hesitation, then he heard Kate’s voice and he immediately understood why his emotions had gone haywire. He felt fear and trauma from her and it made every cell in his body come alert.

“Hi Dom. Is Fox there yet? He’s not answering his cell.” Something was very wrong. She was upset in a frizzed-out sort of way. Pure adrenaline was pumping through his body now.

“What happened? Are you alright?” he asked sharply.

“Um,” she squeaked a little, as if she were trying not to cry, “there was a car accident.”

“Where are you?” he barked.

“Is Fox—”

“*Where?*”

“Speedway and Euclid.”

He hung up the phone and walked into the kitchen to dematerialize where no one could see him. He thought of the intersection and couldn’t think of much seclusion. Fuck it—if anyone saw him, they would just have to think they missed him standing there before. He materialized right behind where she stood next to her crumpled car. The car that had rear-ended

her was still jackknifed in the middle of the intersection with a cop car and an emergency rescue vehicle in front of and behind it. She still had her phone pressed to her ear. “Dom? Is Fox around?”

“Kate.”

She whirled around, jumping.

“Are you all right? Come here, *bambina*,” he said, drawing her to him and wrapping her up in his arms, stroking her hair as she pressed her face into his chest. She was trembling and he could feel his shirt dampening with her tears. She seemed unharmed.

He cupped the nape of her neck and held it, thinking about whiplash and its delayed onset. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” came her muffled reply.

“Good,” he said softly, kissing the top of her head. “What happened?”

“The light turned red and I stopped, but the guy behind me didn’t.” She looked at her wrecked car mournfully.

He texted Fox and Stella to get one of them to pick them up. “Have you called for a tow yet?”

When she shook her head, he placed the call.

The EMTs came over to ask her some questions to make sure she was okay and then the cop, who had apparently already taken her statement, informed her that the asshole who hit her was uninsured. At that news, she sagged visibly. He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “It will be all right,” he said when the cop walked away.

“How will it be all right?” she asked, the sound of despair giving her voice a tinny pitch. “My car is totaled and I don’t

have insurance to cover it. I have no way to get to school or to my jobs. And my keyboard was in the trunk!” At that, she started crying again. “I’m fucked.”

He put his arms around her again, soothing her as best he could. “Keyboards are not that expensive to replace and you can use my car during the day. I need someone who can run errands for me in the daytime, anyway. Would you be my gopher girl?”

“I don’t need your charity,” she said with a sniffle.

“It’s not charity. I really do need the help. Alex was doing some of it, but he lost his license, so he can’t drive anymore.”

She tipped her head up and looked at him seriously. “Really?” she said uncertainly.

He nodded. “I really need the help. It’d be a favor to me.”

“Thanks.” She looked like she knew he was blowing smoke up her ass, but was happy to have a solution to her problem.

“You up for performing tonight? Fox has a keyboard you can use, right?”

She nodded. “Yep. I can perform. I’ll text Fox.”

Of course it had to have been Dom who answered the phone at No Return. She’d been doing a decent job of avoiding him, other than the night she had played at No Return—not that she’d stopped thinking about him. But when he showed up like her personal hero at the scene of the accident, she wanted only to stand in the circle of his arms. Forever.

Okay, that was stupid, given that he'd already told her they were a no-go. But having him there, taking care of her, had soothed her freak-out more than anything else could have. And now she'd be driving his car, running his errands, communicating with him on a daily basis. The thought of it was both pleasure and pain at the same time. Kind of like a spanking. *No, don't go there.*

"Scoot over. I'm riding in the back with you," Dom said with great authority after holding open the back door to Stella's BMW for her.

"Oh great, I get to be your chauffeur?" Stella flashed her a smile over her shoulder. "Are you okay, kid?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just shaken up."

Dom slid in next to her and put his hand at the nape of her neck again. It felt good there—like he was lending her his strength. Or stabilizing her, somehow.

She took a little bottle of Rescue Remedy out of her purse and squeezed a dropperful under her tongue.

"What's that?" Dom asked.

"Flower essences. To calm down in a stressful situation."

"May I?" he took them from her and examined the bottle, then squeezed a dropperful under his tongue. After a moment, he said, "That's nice. Very nice."

"You can feel it?"

"Can't you?"

She flushed. "Well, it's pretty subtle... sometimes I feel them, sometimes I don't."

He gave her a strange look, but changed the subject. “What is your schedule tomorrow?”

“I teach preschool music at 9:30 in the morning and then I have individual piano lessons from 1 till 4 pm. Why, what do you need?”

“I’m going to make you an appointment with my Feldenkrais practitioner, just in case your neck freezes up after being rear-ended like that.”

“Your what? What is that?”

“It’s a kind of body work. Humor me, okay? I’m paying.”

She met his eye and his look was full of tender concern. Like a sap, her eyes filled up with tears and she blinked them back and dropped them. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

He wrapped his other hand around her head and pulled it toward him to kiss the top. Then he released her.

“I didn’t know you taught preschool music.”

Why did that seem like a personal question? “Um, yeah.”

“Where? What do you teach them?”

“At the U of A. One of the professors designed the class. I teach 18 months to three-year-olds and a three- to five-year-old class. It’s a lot of creative movement and hands on stuff. They sing, play with instruments, listen to songs and stories. Super cute.”

Dom was staring at her as if it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever heard. “I’d give anything to watch that class.”

Huh? “You would? You could—oh, I guess you can’t, can you?”

He shrugged and what looked like a flicker of pain crossed his face. Stella pulled into the parking lot of No Return and stopped the car in front of the back door. “Door to door service, my lord.”

“Thanks, Stella,” Dom said, climbing out. He unlocked the back door of No Return and held it open for her.

“Thanks for coming to my rescue, Dom,” she said after they entered. “Again,” she said a little wryly.

“No problem. I’m glad you’re all right. I’ll catch up with you after closing to give you my keys, okay?” He said it casually, over his shoulder as he disappeared into the crowd.

“Sure. Thanks.”

She waited for him at the bar after closing. The bouncers were still working on getting everyone out and the staff had turned on the fluorescents, which made most of the crowd scramble like cockroaches heading for cover. Not everyone, though.

“Hey, Kate. Great performance, as usual.”

She couldn’t remember his name. She wasn’t even sure she’d ever known it. He was good-looking in that frat-boy kind of way, and cocky enough to be leaning in a little too close.

“Ah, thanks.” Unbidden, the memory of her last spanking came to mind. *You need to learn how to send out appropriate signals. You do not always need to be nice.*

She lowered the wattage of her automatic smile and looked around to show disinterest.

“Listen, my friends and I are having an after-party at my place. Do you want to come? I can ride you if you don’t feel

up for driving.”

I can ride you. How was that for neuro-linguistic programming? “Thanks, but I have plans, already. I’m waiting for Dom.” Shit. She should have left off that last part, considering Dom was right behind the bar, listening to the whole thing. *You do not need to be rescued by your friendly vampire.*

“Okay, cool. Well, if you change your mind, we’re at 5th and University.”

“Okay, thanks.” She barely gave him any eye contact, looking away immediately, as if dismissing him. He left without a pause.

She could feel Dom’s hazel eyes on her and she started to flush. “What? It’s true,” she snapped defensively. When he didn’t answer, she dragged her eyes up to meet his.

His lips were curving in a smile, “I was just going to say well done. You handled that perfectly.”

She felt her face grow even hotter, this time flushing with pleasure at his compliment. “You think so? Thanks!” she beamed like a little girl.

He chuckled and she knew it was because she was a dork. Oh well.

The employees finished cleaning up, drank their shift drinks, and started to leave one by one. If she didn’t know better, she would think that he was stalling so they could be alone. Finally, when Stella—who was the last person there with them—started gathering her things up, Kate got off the bar stool and walked around behind the bar, which was absolutely forbidden when the club was open for business.

“Are you ready? I’m thinking I’ll ride with you first to make sure you have the feel of it.”

She should have been thrilled at the obvious attempt to spend time with her. Instead, she heard the insult to her driving and rolled her eyes.

Dom frowned. “Did you just roll your eyes at me?” His tone was stern.

She shrugged.

“Do I really deserve so little of your respect?” There was no trace of humor on his face at all.

That threw her off balance. He seemed like he was really upset with her. Unsure, she blinked at him. Or was he just playing authoritarian for her again? That thought sent a rush of heat between her legs and butterflies to her tummy. Dom’s eyes dilated suddenly and she thought she saw his fangs get long. Oh god—he must have smelled her arousal again. Seeing him like that—the look of hunger on his face, his dark hair falling into his face, his eyes burning—she felt almost light-headed with desire for him.

“I can’t decide if you’re serious or just trying to tweak me.”

His lids lowered and he stepped closer to her, pinning her against the wall. “I am serious,” he said in a low, sexy voice. “*And* I like to tweak you.”

Mission accomplished.

His fangs were fully elongated, the sight of which made her even wetter. He leaned forward and dragged the tip of his fang along her neck. She trembled, waiting to see what he would do next. He didn’t strike her vein, instead he pulled back up and looked her in the eye, with the same stern

expression. “If you roll your eyes at me again, I will spank you. And it *won't* be the fun kind of spanking.” He lifted his eyebrows. “Do you understand?”

The temptation to roll her eyes again was so strong. Not because she liked spankings, but because he really was being over the top and it would relieve the shuddering excitement that was building inside her. But she was an obedient girl by nature and directly defying him was too much. She nodded weakly. Then she reached out and boldly pulled his hips toward hers till their bodies were pressed together. He gave a soft groan. She could feel his erection pressing against her. She began to stroke it through his pants and with a growl he cupped her bottom and squeezed, then slid his fingers around to the front of her, slipping under her skirt and into her panties to stroke at the outer lips of her slippery pussy. She gasped.

He picked her up and sat her butt on the counter top, spreading her knees and pulling her panties to the side to suck at her core. She fell back on her elbows and moaned. He flicked his tongue over her clit, then penetrated her with it and she wriggled about as her need grew stronger. “Yes, Dom!” she gasped.

That urged him into action and he used a fang to shred her panties off. Freeing himself from his pants, he pulled her hips closer and entered her, driving upward and in with a satisfying vigor. He continued at that pace until she moaned again and then he picked her up, holding her weight easily in his arms and lifting and lowering her entire body rapidly so that her silky wet sheath traveled up and down his cock with the full gravity of her weight. Up and down he bounced her until she was screaming, “Yes, oh God, yes!” and coming like there was no tomorrow.

He came too, then pivoted and pressed her back to the wall, leaned forward and struck her vein, suckling gently as if it were a caress. And God, did it turn her on. She orgasmed a second time, her muscles spasming around him, drawing his semen deeply within her. Good thing vampires couldn't have children, because a condom hadn't even crossed her mind. Like the past two times, he didn't suck for long—which was a relief, because just the idea of losing blood made her feel weak. When he finished, he licked the wounds, which she had learned from Fox made them heal faster.

“*Oh Jesus!*” he said suddenly, pulling back and inspecting her with concern. “I forgot about your accident. Are you all right? I shouldn't have been so rough.”

She shook her head. “No, it wasn't too rough.” But now that she was calming down, she was starting to feel worse for the wear. There was a pain in her ribs. She pulled up her shirt to inspect. He flicked the overhead florescent back on, blinding them both for a moment. There was a nasty bruise from her seat belt beginning to emerge. Dom ran his finger lightly over it.

Why was it that his concern was so... nourishing to her? She drank up the attention like it was life-giving water or something. She loved him inspecting her, making soft noises of worry. But that was stupid—she didn't need the worrying sort of attention. That was the kind of need that turns women into drama queens or “*thespians,*” as they called them at the club. No, it was just the intimacy between them that felt so satisfying.

“Put some ice on that when you get home, okay?”

She nodded.

“Or do you want me to make you a Ziplock bag right now?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.”

“All right, let’s get you home.”

She smoothed her skirt down and stooped to pick up the shredded panties.

“Sorry about those,” he said with a wicked grin.

“No, you’re not,” she said with mock tartness. He put an arm around her as they walked out the back door, and he led her out to his silver Mercedes, which was parked in his private parking space.

“Listen,” he said with a hesitating tone, spinning the keyring around his finger.

Oh God, what? Her red flags went up with that tone.

“I don’t want you to think this errand running gig is contingent on you screwing me. I just realized that it might seem that way. What just happened... well, I hope you didn’t feel like you owed me.”

She snatched the keys from his hands. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she snapped. She was offended. As if she *would* have sex with someone just to use their car. *Please*.

“Sorry,” he muttered and shook his head, as if realizing he had blundered. He climbed in the passenger seat, making her nervous as he silently watched her familiarize herself with the instruments on the dash. After she adjusted the seat and mirrors, she backed out carefully. She was overly cautious, checking and double-checking her progress in all the mirrors. She felt like she was having her driver’s exam all over again.

“So I’m driving you home?”

“No, drive to your place. I have my own way of getting home,” he said, winking at her when she looked over.

Waiting at a stoplight, he said, “Do you text and drive, Kate?”

“No,” she said immediately. Then shrunk a little in her seat.

He was looking at her as if he knew she was full of shit. She kept her eyes on the road.

“I mean, only if I need to...”

“Yes or no?” His voice was quite stern.

“Sometimes.” Hers was quite squeaky.

“I spank for lying, too,” he said casually.

Her heart did a double beat. God, he had the ability to flip her world on its end with a simple turn of phrase. And stealing a glance at him, she could tell that he totally knew it.

“When you drive my car, your phone will stay in your bag the entire time, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, trying for a casual tone. “If you say so.”

“I say so. And if you disobey me, you’re going to find out how a spanking with my belt feels.”

Her belly jumped into a knot at those words. Dom looked at her for a long moment, then leaned back as if he was satisfied.

She drove in silence, waiting for the inner quaking to fade. Then she ventured, “Dom?”

“Mmm?”

“I was just wondering... I mean, I’m just curious—when Stella said you spank hard, was she just saying that or was she speaking from... personal experience?”

Dom shifted in his seat. He seemed uncomfortable. He took a deep breath. “Stella and I used to be a couple. A very long time ago.”

She already knew that from Fox. She wasn’t trying to pull a jealous act or anything. She just wanted to understand Dom’s past. With spanking. Like, why was he so good at it? And who else had he spanked? And was it a turn-on for him? Or had it been in the past?

“I know. And you guys... you spanked her?”

Dom seemed even more uncomfortable. He tugged at his earlobe. “Well, it was not that kind of spanking. It was more for punishment, not for play. I mean, sometimes it ended up going in a sexual direction, but mostly it was the other kind.” He shifted nervously around in his seat again, twisting to face her. “You have to understand, Kate, that it was hundreds of years ago. At that time, it was common for a man to discipline his woman when he thought she required correction.”

Oh. God. Her internal muscles spasmed at that in a spontaneous mini-orgasm. Dom must have known it because he started chuckling in a low rumble.

“Shut up!” she snapped.

“Don’t be rude,” he said, but there was no sternness to it, and he was still smiling. “Does that turn you on?”

She didn’t answer. She could feel the blush on her face. She was totally and completely embarrassed.

Suddenly he sat forward a little, his smile gone, his brow furrowed. “I wasn’t laughing at *you*, Kate. Did you think I

was?”

“Right, you’re laughing *with* me,” she muttered.

He brought his hand to her nape and ran his thumb along her cheek. “I would never mock your desires. I’m sorry if it seemed that way. To be honest, I feel... *privileged* that I know how to turn you on.”

She ventured a sidelong glance at him. He was looking at her intently.

“You can trust me with your quirk,” he said softly. “And I never, ever kiss and tell,” he added as an afterthought. “In case you were worried about that.”

It was unnerving how well he got her.

“Oh, well okay,” she said, shrugging like it had been no big deal. “Thanks.”

She wanted to ask him why. Why he had effectively broken up with her two weeks ago and now was acting like a long-term boyfriend. She wanted to ask, but she was afraid of opening that can of worms. She was happy enough with the way things were going and she didn’t want to mess it up. She parallel parked the car in front of her house, jockeying it forward and back, nervous about her audience.

He got out and walked her to the door and suddenly was all business. “Okay, so here’s my library card. I reserved some books online and they’re ready for pickup. Himmel branch.”

“Sure, no problem. What else?”

“I’ll text you if I can get you an appointment for the body work. You’ll enjoy it, whether you feel stiff tomorrow or not. It’s great stuff.”

“Thanks. When do you need the car back? For the evening?”

Dom shrugged. “I’m not sure I do. I’ll text you. You playing at Congress?”

She nodded.

“Okay.” Then he leaned forward and kissed her—an undemanding, tender sort of kiss. “Thanks for the sex.”

Her eyes flew up to his. He was looking at her a little wistfully, which she didn’t understand. And then he dematerialized before her eyes.

He materialized right in front of the stone Kate. His Kate. He sucked in his breath. *Damn*. Was he really so undisciplined that he couldn’t stop fucking a mortal when he’d decided it was necessary? He stared at the marble image for a long moment. His chest was filled with such a strong warm feeling that he couldn’t deny—he loved this girl. His instinct to protect and care for her was so strong, there was nothing he wouldn’t do for her. Well, if that were true he would’ve kept his hands off her, wouldn’t he? Because he already knew that a relationship with him would only cause her pain.

He sighed and went into the kitchen and sat down at the breakfast bar, where his laptop was set up. He checked his emails idly for a while, then pulled up the site for Victoria’s Secret. He owed her a pair of panties, didn’t he? Except... jeez. What to pick? He didn’t want to overstep. He wanted to buy what she would want, not what he would want to see her in. Except he wasn’t really sure. He should have grabbed the shredded panties from her.

Maybe it would be better to just get her a gift card and send her out to buy her own panties. Yes, that was a good plan. Except now he wanted to present her with it tomorrow. How could he get a gift card tomorrow, unless he sent her to pick one up? Should he just leave her money in an envelope? He rubbed his forehead. God, he was such a sap. All this thought over a pair of panties.

In the end, he put a hundred-dollar bill in an envelope, sealed it up and wrote on the front of it: “One more errand—to be completed by Friday. Please go to Victoria’s Secret and buy yourself some new panties. You must spend the entire amount on yourself. Bring me the receipt as proof.”

Satisfied, he materialized to the passenger seat of his car and set the envelope down on the driver’s seat. He glanced up at Kate’s place—it was a small guest house or *casita*, as they called them in Tucson, set behind a larger main house. Old adobe architecture from the 1930’s or 40’s. The lights were off. He found himself wondering what position she slept in. Curled up on her side? Sprawled on her back? Or was she a belly sleeper? He shook his head. He was totally losing it over this woman. He flashed back to his place, disgusted with himself.

He woke the following day around noon, arranged for Kate’s body-work session, and then picked up his phone to text her. Fox and Stella had forced him to learn to text, and now that he’d adopted it, it was hard not to appreciate the ease cell phones—and internet for that matter—had brought to their lives. When he texted her with the information, she replied, “Thx 4 panty \$\$. Does it have to be Victoria’s Secret? How bout Target instead?”

He snorted a short laugh and texted back, “Victoria’s Secret. Bring receipt to prove.”

His phone buzzed with her quick reply. “ALL panties? What if I want pjs?”

He texted back. “Pjs?”

“Pajamas.”

“I know what pjs stands for.”

“U want me 2 buy 100 \$\$ in panties???”

He smirked as his thumbs typed, “Changed mind. Williams-Sonoma. 100 \$\$ in wooden spoons.”

Her reply came instantly, “Panties it is!”

He chuckled and texted back, “Get at least 1 pair panties. Then treat yourself—however.”

“But has 2 b @ VS?”

“U want those panties pulled down, don’t u?”

“No.” Then a second text came through, “Yes.” Then a third, “Kind of. :)”

He smiled at that and sent her a smiley face back.

He spent the rest of the week inventing quick, easy errands for her to run for him. He wanted her to feel like she was helping him out, so that it wasn’t just a big, fat favor he’d done for her. But he also knew she was extremely busy with her graduate studies, so he didn’t want to add to her stress level. He was able to limit his contact with her by having her drop off the goods she’d picked up for him at the bar before he got there, and swearing he didn’t need his car during the nights.

She showed up early to perform on Friday and plopped down at the bar. She was wearing a small, fitted t-shirt with a

picture of a dachshund that said “I <heart> wieners.” She had on cut-off jean shorts and her cowgirl boots. Her platinum hair had a blue streak in it this week and was in short, fluffy pigtails. Only Kate could get away looking rockabilly rather than slut in an outfit like that. She was smoking hot.

He brought her a ginger ale with lime and she tossed a slip of paper across the bar at him. He picked it up. It was the Victoria’s Secret receipt. She had a little bit of a naughty-girl smirk on her face and he couldn’t help but grin.

“Do I get a fashion show?”

She nodded, waggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“Mmm... lucky me. Tonight?”

“Yep. It’s all in the car.”

He lifted and lowered his lips quickly to show her what she’d just done to his fangs and she giggled. “It’s a date, then,” she said, sliding off the bar stool.

He left Stella in charge of locking up after closing time because Kate looked absolutely wiped out. She’d put her all into her performance, as usual, and didn’t look up for anything but bed by the time they had turned on the fluorescents to shoo customers out. “Come on,” he said, putting an arm around her waist and leading her out to his car. “I’ll drive you home.”

“Thanks,” she sighed. She stared out the window as they drove in silence for a while. He could feel tension coming from her, but he wasn’t sure what it was about. Then she volunteered, “My master’s thesis proposal is due on Monday. I’m supposed to meet with my committee.”

Ah. That explained everything. “How’s it coming?”

“It’s not.”

“What is your thesis about?”

“Something about how music boosts mathematical abilities in children. Except I haven’t worked out what my angle is, exactly.”

“Well, what are you thinking?”

“I don’t know!” she snapped defensively.

“You must have some ideas,” he pressed.

“I don’t, okay? I don’t have a clue!”

“Just tell me where you want to head with it.”

“Jesus, Dom, would you leave it alone?” she snapped.
“This fucking conversation isn’t helping!”

He swung the wheel and pulled the car over to the side of the road, turning off the engine. She looked at him in astonishment. If he could have worked out how to make it happen in the front seat of his car, he would have spanked her right there. But it seemed impossible.

“I’m going to ask you to try that again,” he said coolly.

Her eyes were wide and he could feel her nervous tension galvanizing into fear. Her face flushed. “I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I’m just stressed out, that’s all. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“Rephrase your previous statement,” he prompted her.

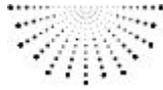
“Okay...” she said slowly. “I’d rather not talk about my thesis right now because I’m wound up about not knowing what to propose.” She blinked a few times, like she was trying to keep from crying.

He started the car. “Better.”

He let her sit in silence for the rest of the ride, fidgeting under the pressure of the tension between them. When they got to her place, he walked her to the door and paused in the doorway after she entered.

“Vampires need an invitation to enter,” he said. “Wait—” He held up his hand to silence her when she opened her mouth. “You should know that if I come in there, I’m going to spank you. So if you invite me in, you’re giving your consent.”

CHAPTER FIVE



She swallowed. “Come in,” she said, her voice a little hoarse. She felt both fear and thrill at the same time. He looked around as he walked in and she found herself embarrassed that it was such a cluttered mess. He sat on the sofa and patted his lap. “Come here.”

Her belly jumped. She was nervous—very nervous. Her palms were sweating and her heart was pounding in her chest. She crossed the room and stood in front of him. He pulled her gently down, so that she was lying across his lap. He adjusted how he was sitting so that her face didn’t hit the armrest of the sofa and then he tucked a pillow under her face.

She lay there in the completely submissive position, waiting. The anticipation was killing her. Her bottom clenched. *Ouch*. His hand came down on her upturned bottom. She gasped. He started spanking her slowly. Then, as it started to get intense and she started wriggling, he increased his speed and force, sending her into a near panic with the inescapable pain. She reached back with her hand to try to protect her offended cheeks, but he caught her arm and bent it gently but firmly behind her back, holding her easily in place. She was gasping for breath.

“Stop! Dom, please! Stop! That’s enough! I’m sorry, okay?”

He stopped spanking and rubbed her sore bottom. “Who is in charge, here?” he asked softly.

“You are, Dom.”

“That’s right. That means it’s not over until I decide it’s over.” With that, he started paddling her again, his hard slaps unrelenting in their intensity and speed.

“Stop, Dom! Dom! Dom, stop! No! Dom!” It was not the pain so much as the helplessness and her inability to get away from the pain that caused her to panic. She started struggling wildly to get off his lap. She couldn’t breathe. She felt like she was having a panic attack. Just when she was at the point of completely freaking out, he stopped spanking, flipped her over and cradled her in his arms.

“Shhh, shh. You’re all right. You’re just scared. You can trust me, Kate.”

She struggled to get off his lap.

“No,” he held her easily. “You see, that’s why I wasn’t finished.”

She didn’t see anything. She couldn’t see what the hell he was doing, or where he got off hurting her like that or not stopping when she asked him to. She *was* scared. And she was pissed. And she wanted to get the hell off his lap.

He pressed a hand firmly over her sternum, his eyes studying her with concern. “You’re okay, Kate. Do you want me to take the pain away?” he asked gently.

She swallowed. That would be with vampire hypnosis. But yes, he needed to take it away right now. She nodded.

“Look into my eyes.”

She obeyed and the pain was instantly gone. The pain was gone but not the swirling emotions. He was still watching her closely. “Please let me go, now,” she said in a small voice.

He blinked at her. Then he shook his head. She felt panic and rage rise up again. “Are you going to do that to me again?”

He shook his head. “Not unless you want me to.”

“I didn’t want you to do it in the first place!”

“I know.”

Then why did you do it?

“Why did I do it?”

She hadn’t asked the question aloud, but somehow he’d heard it. She stared at him sullenly.

“I did it because I know you like to be dominated and there’s a certain release that can result from getting spanked to tears. You seemed pretty wound up, so I thought it might help. Obviously we didn’t get there.” He shrugged. “I don’t know, I probably shouldn’t have tried it—we don’t have that kind of relationship established. There’s not enough trust between us.”

She stared at him open-mouthed as that sunk in. She was shocked. She had expected some sort of lecture about her bad behavior. Somehow hearing that he’d been doing it for her changed things.

“You’re not mad at me?”

He shook his head. “No, *bambina*. When I’m mad, you’ll know it,” he said, dangling his index finger and middle finger down in front of his mouth to indicate fangs.

She smiled reluctantly. She considered what he'd said.
“What kind of release?”

“I don't know—spanking can be a way to let go of stress or guilt or even self-loathing you might be holding.”

“Catharsis.”

He nodded. “I would say it's one part catharsis and one part surrender. You must trust me enough to know I'll take care of you when you let go.”

“Do I get a safe word?”

He shook his head. “No. It's about surrendering your control. You have to believe I know how to read your limits.”

She looked at him, considering that.

“I got it right this time, didn't I?” he challenged.

That was true. He had stopped exactly when she had panicked completely.

“I want to feel it again.” She was nuts. Certifiably crazy.

He pointed to his eyes and she met them, drawing in her breath as the fire returned to her backside.

“Are you ready to finish it?”

She noticed he didn't ask her if she *wanted* to finish it. Because she didn't. But she rolled over on his lap anyway. He pulled her back up to standing, though.

“Pull down your pants, Kate,” he said, the soft command in his voice sending a ripple of fear and delight through her whole body.

She unbuttoned her jean shorts, pulling them slowly down.

“Panties, too.”

She peeled her panties down, feeling completely exposed. For some reason, she covered her lady parts with her hand, though he was already intimately acquainted with that particular part of her body. Her belly was doing flip flops.

“Over my knee,” he said softly.

She bowed her head and awkwardly leaned over his knee, realizing that she’d greatly preferred when he had pulled her into position himself, rather than having her put herself there. There was something completely humiliating about it.

He started up again slowly, striking one cheek and then the other, and as he picked up speed and she felt the intensity of the burn increase she again started to struggle and panic, but he didn’t even pause. If anything, it seemed he was striking her harder. It occurred to her that with his vampire strength, he would never need a whip or a paddle—his hand alone could probably easily bruise her if he wielded it with one ounce of his true strength. So he was using restraint—for him this was probably quite gentle, even though for her, the pain was so intense that tears were running down her face. That thought helped her calm down. But then, that meant it could get much worse if he wanted it to, didn’t it? Oh God, she was an absolute wreck, and there was nothing she could do.

She tried to wriggle away, somehow dodge the punishing hand that kept spanking her over and over, but she was a complete captive—she couldn’t get away from the pain and it wasn’t going to stop until Dom decided it was over. She realized that there was nothing she could do but ride it out until it was over. The tears turned into full-fledged sobs and she wept—for the position in which she found herself, her mismanagement of her time, the stress of the paper looming over her head, the difficulties of navigating this new

relationship with Dom—everything. And as she felt it all flowing out, even as his hand kept striking her blazing bare butt cheeks, she gave up the struggle and went limp, exhausted. At that moment, his hand paused, then he gave a few more cursory smacks before he started gently rubbing her bottom.

“You found it,” he said softly.

She had? She had. Her sobs took on a half-laughing sound. In spite of the tears and the pain, she did feel very different. She felt relieved, released. There was a glowing feeling—much stronger than a post-sex glow—much more vibrant. And now that Dom had pointed it out like an accomplishment, she felt absurdly proud of herself. Like she’d just won a marathon or something.

He started to pull her panties back up, but she reached back and stopped him, kicking her shorts and panties off.

“Aren’t we going to—?” She was still a hiccuping, teary mess, but she wanted sex and she wanted it right then.

“*Abso-lute-ly*,” he said with enthusiasm, as if she’d just offered him a Christmas present. The fact that he hadn’t been expecting to have sex with her made her realize with a jolt that she’d just had a punishment spanking. He lifted her off his lap and stood up partway, placing his shoulder at the crease of her hip so she folded over his shoulder in a fireman’s hold. He carried her easily like that, rubbing and patting her sore bottom as he walked to the bedroom and laid her gently down. “How do you want it?” he asked fangily.

Seeing those fangs made her arch in anticipation—she loved seeing the physical manifestation of his arousal—it was so much more attractive than your average hard-on. She pulled off her shirt and watched him swiftly divest himself of

clothing. He wanted to go slow, caressing and kissing, but after the intensity of the spanking she was interested in nothing less than full penetration. She pulled him off her nipple and shook her head. “Fast and hard. Please?”

A toothy grin. “Your wish is my command.”

Really? He’d just made sure she knew very well that *he* was in charge of *her*. But never mind—she wasn’t going to over-think when she was two strokes from an orgasm. And indeed, Dom delivered. Multiple times.

“Are you still mad at me?” Dom asked, though he knew she wasn’t.

Kate was tucked into his chest, hiding her face, which wasn’t surprising. He’d just fed from her so he could feel all her emotions. There were waves of euphoria and love and peace coming off her. There was also a raw vulnerability. She would probably be feeling vulnerable for a few days after he brought her over the edge like that. And damned if he didn’t feel fiercely protective of her. Logical or not, there was no way in hell anyone could convince him to walk away from this woman right now. She was his. She’d just given herself to him in a complete act of submission and trust. To give her anything less than his complete love and support was unthinkable.

She shook her head. He’d known she wasn’t mad at him, but wanted to offer it up as an acknowledgment of what she’d just been through.

“Do you feel better?”

She nodded but still didn’t show her face.

“I really do want to hear about your thesis. You don’t have to tell me now, but when and if you feel like talking about it, I’d like to hear.” He stroked her back. “When you’re ready, I’m taking you to my place. You’re going to gather up everything you need to work on your thesis proposal and you’re going to stay under my jurisdiction until it’s finished. Kind of like house arrest.”

Kate’s face popped up. “You’re grounding me?” He could feel the mixture of giddy thrill and indignation from her.

His lips twisted into a smile. “Yes. You’re grounded until the paper’s finished. Any activity other than working on your thesis will have to be pre-approved by me.”

He sensed happiness from her. Relief. Joy. Excitement, even. He had lifted her burden by taking charge. He was relieved. It was always a gamble to take a woman in hand like that. She could just as easily have taken it as high-handed or bullying. And even though he was born at the turn of the sixteenth century, he had certainly adapted with the times to support the modern-day woman on her quest for equality. He was not so patronizing as to believe that he knew what was best for her. Well, maybe he did believe it, but that didn’t mean he thought it was his right to impose it on her.

She bit his arm. “You’re so mean,” she pouted.

He grinned and gave her backside a gentle slap. “Don’t you know it?”

He drove her to his place and they entered through the double doors. She gasped, taking in all the marble sculptures. “Whoa. You’re a collector?”

He shook his head and smiled. “No. A sculptor.”

Her eyes went wide. “You sculpted these?” she breathed. He was filled with gratification at her appreciation and wonder for them. She walked around slowly, admiring each one. She touched them, and although he usually forbade it because the oils from people’s hands will discolor the marble, with her he didn’t mind. He liked her touching what he had made.

“How long have you been sculpting?”

“Since right after I was turned. Over 400 years.”

“Italian Renaissance,” she said with awe and he was pleased that she was educated enough to recognize his roots.

“I apprenticed with Michelangelo.”

Her jaw dropped. “*What?* Incredible. This is incredible. I can’t believe it!”

He took her hand. “Come. I’ll show you what I’m working on right now.” His heart was pounding as he led her out into the workspace that separated his quarters from Stella’s and Fox’s. He was afraid to look at her face as she took it in, so he stared at her other face—the marble one—instead. She made a little choking sound and he had to “grow a set,” as Fox would say, and look over. Tears. She was covering her mouth, crying. He was frozen—his normal instinct would be to pull her into his arms and soothe the tears, but in this case, he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. That was his whole heart on display right there and he didn’t know what her reaction meant.

“Oh my God,” she breathed at last.

He swallowed. “What do you think?”

She made a laughing-hiccuping sound. “I think it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my whole life! I... I don’t know what to say. You made me beautiful.” Then she hesitated. “*It is me, isn’t it?*”

He laughed—a relief to the tension that had built in him. “Yes, I *hope* you can tell it’s you!”

“Of course I can,” she said quickly. “I just...” she shook her head, “I just can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it.” She shook her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Does that mean you like it?” he asked softly.

She turned to him, looking serious, her eyes shining. “I love it. I love it so much. I feel so incredibly... *honored* that you sculpted me.”

His arms finally obeyed him and he was able to draw her to him. “Thank you,” she whispered. He squeezed her and kissed her hair.

She drew away and looked at him. “But why? Why me?”

That was a question he couldn’t answer for himself, much less for her. He just shrugged and redirected the conversation. “Come on, let me get you settled in so you can get to bed. It’s already an unreasonable hour and you have a lot of work ahead of you.”

He brought her into the kitchen. “Help yourself to anything you like in the morning. The espresso machine is right there and the grounds are in the canister to the right of it. There’s cream in the fridge. I don’t usually eat breakfast, but I think there’s fruit and you could always make toast with jam or something.”

“Sure, I’m easy.”

“The down side of being here is that there’s no natural light. You can always step outside to the garden, but make sure you close the door tightly behind you, in case one of us comes out.”

“What would happen if the door were open when you came out?”

“Well, if a direct shaft of light hit us, we could die. Indirect light would blister or burn more like a sunburn. And even a little exposure can cause temporary blindness.”

Kate shuddered.

“So just be really careful, okay?”

She nodded in agreement.

“The password for the WiFi is 1522. Can you remember that?”

“Is that the year you were born?”

“No. The year I was turned, actually.”

“Oh, right. You told me that—sorry.”

“Will you remember it, or should I write it down?”

“I’ll remember it this time.”

“Okay, so here are the rules: no more than one hour total to shower, get ready and eat breakfast. Then you’ll sit and work on your thesis. You may take a 10-minute break every hour, but that’s it. Understand?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Did you just roll your eyes?” he asked in a “Oh no you didn’t” kind of tone.

She froze and then started backing away. He could feel her fear—real fear, not mixed with any sexual thrill that he could sense. She was probably so sore that the thought of a spanking was too terrifying at the moment.

“Oh no. No, Dom,” she backed her way into the kitchen table. “Huh uh. I do *not* consent. No.”

He pinned her against the kitchen table and leaned down, looking into her eyes. “You still don’t trust me?” he asked softly.

She faltered then, uncertainty crossing her face. He sensed her fear recede. She dropped her eyes. He turned her slowly around and bent her over the kitchen table, reaching around to unbutton her shorts. He slid his thumbs into the waistband of her panties and slowly slid them both down together. Her fear flared again, this time with a thrill of sexual energy and the wonderful smell that accompanied it.

Her sweet little bottom was still red from the spanking he’d given her earlier, although the color had started to fade from beet to blush. It was amazing how quickly that tender flesh could regenerate. He gave her three slow but hard spanks and then rubbed. Then he pulled up her panties and shorts. Her relief poured out of her in a rush. She turned around and fell against him in an embrace. “I love you,” she breathed. Then she froze, and fear of exposure came out of her like a blast. “I mean—I didn’t mean it like—”

“I’m pretty fond of you, myself,” he interrupted her lightly, running a fang along the outside of her ear.

His bed was tremendously comfortable, with sheets that must be 1000 thread count, and a firm, balanced mattress. He actually tucked her in. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been tucked in, but she felt suddenly so well cared for

that her eyes burned with tears. Of course, there was never any hiding anything from Dom.

“What is it?”

She blinked the tears back. “Nothing. I just really appreciate this,” she said. Then she cursed inwardly, thinking that was two clingy things in a row she’d just let slip out of her foolish mouth. She cringed a little, waiting to see what kind of brush-off that inspired from her commitment-phobic vampire.

But Dom just blinked at her, then leaned down slowly and kissed her softly on the mouth. “Sweet dreams,” he said. “I’ll be in bed by dawn. Reach for me if you like to cuddle.”

With that, he stood and switched off the light, which was a good thing, because she was sure she was gaping at his offer.

She woke up around 10 AM, with Dom’s arm thrown over her waist, and she remembered with a smile that she’d curled into him when he’d come to bed. She got up and tried out the soap and shampoos in Dom’s shower briefly before heading down to the kitchen. He had an espresso machine, which pretty much made her day. She made herself a steaming latte and sat down at her laptop.

And then stared at the thesis proposal. Getting a master’s in music had not been her original goal, but she had enjoyed undergrad so much that she’d been drawn back to study more. She liked the university environment—pushing ideas around with musicians she respected and admired. After a few years of cobbling a living together teaching piano lessons and singing for The Morphs, she had decided she was ready to go back. She’d received a full scholarship, which greatly sweetened the deal.

She sighed and clicked open her email.

And then got on Facebook.

Then she returned to the proposal again. She sighed. She just couldn't *think*. She got up and started wandering through Dom's house, looking at the art on the walls, the sculptures, his books. She was shocked to find a diploma hanging on the wall saying that Dom had received a doctorate in Philosophy of the Mind from an elite university in 2005. She wasn't even sure what that was, but she was sure that she had had no idea that Dom had a Ph.D. in anything.

Whatever she might guess Philosophy of the Mind encompassed, his book selection seemed to reflect it. There were books on meditation, metaphysics, religion, natural healing, energy, quantum physics, and basically any alternative methodology you could name.

Hearing music, she followed the sound of it through the sculpting studio and out another door that led to Fox's section of the compound. Fox was sitting on a couch playing folk music on an acoustic guitar. She'd thought Fox was a genius before, and still did, but now that she knew he was over one hundred years old, she understood how he had mastered such a huge number of musical instruments. The guy could play almost any style of music you could name. Sometimes it made her self-conscious because she knew so little in comparison. Not that he ever acted like he was better than her.

He looked up in surprise to see her there. "Kate!"

She tried not to blush. "Hi."

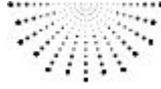
He let her off with just a grin. "Wanna play?" he said, nodding to another guitar.

"Sure." She picked it up out of its case and tuned it.

“Do you know any Grateful Dead?” he asked with a grin, plucking Uncle John’s Band.

She tried it out, listening closely to his notes. He played slowly so she could catch it. She was so engrossed, she didn’t know how long Dom had been standing there when she caught sight of him leaning in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. *Oh shit.* This break had been much longer than ten minutes. *Busted.*

CHAPTER SIX



He caught the smell of her fear when she saw him. Unfortunately, Fox caught it too. He put his guitar down and looked from one to the other of them. “What’s going on?” he asked sharply.

“Relax, Fox,” he said to placate him. “Kate is fine—it’s just a little game we play.” He looked over at Kate and couldn’t help that his fangs elongated a little in anticipation. She saw it, and the sweet smell of her arousal suddenly bloomed.

He tried to hide his smile. Fox, probably catching the same smell, waved his hand, cringing. “Okay, okay, I don’t want to know.”

“Come on, Kate,” he said with gentle authority.

She came at once. In the kitchen, he stopped and rummaged in the drawer, deciding on a rubber spatula. “This should be interesting, shouldn’t it?”

Kate couldn’t seem to answer. She just gave him an anxious, pleading look. He took her hand to reassure her as he led her downstairs to his bedroom.

“Clothes off, on your hands and knees,” he said, indicating the bed.

She was quick, like a scared little bunny, throwing her clothes off and climbing up on her hands and knees. He ran his hand over her baby soft bottom. The spanking from yesterday had faded completely, except for a few red finger marks. He dipped his fingers between her legs and she shivered. She was already wet.

“Tell me why you are being spanked, Kate.”

“For taking too long of a break.”

“That’s right. Did you make any progress on your paper this morning?”

She paused and then sulkily admitted that she hadn’t.

He considered her beautiful little bottom, formulating a plan. “Let’s see... I’ve changed my mind. I actually want you on your belly.”

She looked over her shoulder at him with wide, frightened eyes before she lowered herself down to lie on her belly.

“Put your hand between your legs and pleasure yourself.”

He watched as she timidly complied, moving her hips slightly as she worked her sex with her fingers.

“Now,” he drawled. “The spanking won’t stop until you come. But there’s no faking. If you fake it, you’re going to find out what my belt feels like.”

Kate orgasmed. He laughed. It was so easy to wind her up. “That one doesn’t count. Now, let’s begin.”

He started slowly, using the spatula to swat her sweet little buns. She flinched and jumped and ground her hips into her hand. The sight of her wriggling, her head turned to the side, mouth open, eyes closed, had him rock hard. As her undulations grew in intensity, he picked up the pace of his

spanks, but that seemed to throw her off her game completely, probably because the pain had outbalanced the pleasure. He stopped and rubbed her hot flesh and she moaned, starting to wriggle again. He aimed the spatula low, where the buttocks meet the thighs, and in the center, directly over her pussy. He went slowly and watched as her writhing picked up. He picked up pace with her, but this time lightened the force considerably, trying to guess at a good balance. She bucked and tightened her legs and butt, crying out, and he gave her several hard smacks until the orgasm was over.

When he rolled her over, she was limp with satisfaction. Her face was flushed and her eyes looked a little glazed. She gave him a happy sigh and a slow grin. He lifted her knees to her chest and licked into her hot core, making her groan with pleasure. He coaxed her toward a climax again until she was moaning and pleading with him and then he quickly pulled off his pants and entered her.

He wouldn't last long—he was ready to come before he even started. He drove into her and struck her neck at the moment of orgasm, causing the most intense explosion of sensation he had ever felt. It was like a completed circuit of energy—semen out/blood in—and the effect was mind-blowing. Kate had wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck and she clung to him through it, gasping.

He licked her wounds closed and was struck suddenly by his conscience. “God, I shouldn't have bitten you again. Is your neck getting sore?”

She reached up and felt her neck and then made a cute snorting sound. “Why are you worried about my neck? How about my butt? You've spanked me three times in the past twenty-four hours!”

“No no,” he said gently, rolling her onto her belly and stroking the offended cheeks. “There’s no sulking. Didn’t I tell you that?”

She tried to roll back to the safety of her back, but he held her in place, which made her clench her bottom in fear. He laughed and kissed one of her cheeks and released her.

“Now it’s your fault I’m not working on my paper,” she said, still sulky.

“Listen, I have an idea about that.”

She sat up to listen.

“Do you believe in the power of the mind?”

“Of course.”

“And you know I can give you hypnotic suggestions?”

She looked interested, catching on.

“So I’m thinking we could try some out to see if changing your mindset might help you focus. Are you game?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

“Okay, I’ll say them out loud, so you know what I’m planting, all right? You can repeat them for yourself if you want, but it’s not necessary. Look at me.”

He caught her eyes with his gaze, instantly opening the door to suggestion. Then he just improvised, planting the first things that came to mind.

“I am in the zone. Writing my proposal is easy.”

She repeated it after him.

“All my ideas are flowing in and coming together perfectly. I have all the focus and discipline I need to finish my

proposal this weekend. I am relaxed and confident in my ability to write a perfect thesis.”

Then he released the figurative door to her mind and said, “As soon as I finish my proposal, I’m going to blow Dom.”

She made a sound of outrage and punched him in the arm and he laughed. “I didn’t plant that last one,” he assured her. “I promise I would never mess with you like that.”

She tackled him so that he fell back on the bed and she nipped at his neck with her teeth. “I wish I could bite,” she said.

“No, you don’t,” he said lightly, rolling over to deposit her neatly on her feet at the side of the bed. “Do you feel like working?”

She considered. “Actually, I do!” she said with a look of wonder. “If this works, I will most certainly blow you.”

He laughed and followed her up the stairs. “All right, get busy. And don’t forget the rules.”

She rubbed her bottom. “How could I?” she said with a rueful grin.

The suggestions worked almost too well. Kate did not move from her place in front of her laptop for a solid four hours. She probably would’ve stayed longer, but he insisted she take a break. He ordered Chinese food to be delivered and sent her to open the door and pay for it, since it was still light out.

They sat at the table eating with chopsticks, and Kate bubbled over with enthusiasm, sharing her ideas for her thesis. She had starting planning research methods to test the children’s aptitudes in math before and after music lessons. She’d contacted several elementary school principals to find

out if they'd be willing to have her as a guest teacher in exchange for gathering research from their students. She 'd written most of her introduction and background for the proposal and was halfway through the methodology.

As she spoke, Dom just watched, entranced. He loved seeing her so unselfconscious. This was the real Kate. Not shy Kate, not the brilliant performer Kate, but the real woman underneath all those exteriors. He loved it.

After a while she rerouted the conversation. "What is Philosophy of the Mind?"

"Ah. You saw my diploma? It's sort of a shared branch of psychology and philosophy. A study of consciousness."

"And you really have a Ph.D. in it?"

He nodded. "The advent of online studies changed my life."

"I'll bet," she said softly.

"So is that why you're so good at hypnosis?"

"No. Any vampire can do it. It's a defense mechanism you learn pretty quickly after being turned. But it might be why I'm interested in how it can be applied to improve lives."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the mind is capable of controlling more than we fathom. The power of belief is incredible. And I know firsthand how malleable belief can be."

Stella and Fox would usually roll their eyes at him at this point, but Kate was sitting forward in her chair, drinking it up. He decided to show her his cheap parlor trick. "Okay, here's a super simple example of how much your mind controls." He rummaged through the drawer in the kitchen that held the

miscellaneous things until he found a safety pin and a lighter. He held the pointed tip of the pin under the flame of the lighter for a few seconds to sterilize it.

“Look at me.”

She complied.

“I’m going to prick you with this pin, but you will feel no pain.” He pricked the back of her hand in two places and she didn’t flinch at all. “Now Kate, please close this hole off so no blood comes out. Now send one and only one drop of blood out of this other hole.” They both watched as a single drop came out of one hole, while nothing happened with the other.

“You see? I didn’t make you bleed that way—you did. Your brain somehow knew how to control your blood to follow my directions. There are thousands of applications for this. Many of them people are already using—like hypnosis for pain-free childbirth, or to have surgery without anesthesia. There’s no limit to what could happen when you start playing with your brain.” He shrugged. “Anyway, that’s what I’m interested in.”

“It’s fascinating,” Kate said, and he felt gratified.

“Well, *piccolina mia*, I think this has been enough of a break,” he said, standing up and starting to clean up the dishes. She jumped to join him.

“What does *piccolina* mean?”

“Pretty little one. You’re playing at Congress tonight?”

She nodded.

He checked his watch. “So that gives you two more hours to work, if you have it in you.” He wasn’t sure at this point how much to enforce, but she nodded.

“Sounds good. Thanks for helping me with this, Dom.” She beamed a smile at him that melted him in his place. He kissed the top of her head and left her to her studies. Two hours later, she was still typing away intently when he interrupted her so she could get ready for her gig at Club Congress.

“The trouble is, I’m not really in the zone for performing now,” she said after they’d both changed for the evening. “Can you give me a new suggestion?”

He looked at her beautiful face. It was hard to refuse her anything. But depending on him was not in her best interest. “Why don’t you try it for yourself? Just set your intent to be in the perfect zone for performing, and it will happen for you.”

She looked at him doubtfully.

“Well, you have to believe for it work. You trust in what I’ve shown you so far, right?”

She nodded.

“Then trust me when I say that your intent is enough. You don’t need me to do it for you.”

“Okay.” She looked flustered and he could feel a mild impression of hurt and disappointment coming from her.

“I’ll go catch a ride with Fox. Should I come to the club after closing? Or meet you here? Or... should I just take my stuff now?” She had faltered completely now.

He couldn’t seem to turn on the disciplinarian voice to tell her sternly that she was still under house arrest until her paper was finished. He should have, because it would’ve relieved the tension and made her laugh.

Instead, he just kissed her cheek. “Meet me at No Return.”

She avoided his eye as she picked up her bag. “Okay, I’ll see you there.”

When she left, he sighed. As if he’d needed one more example of why he was bad news for Kate Strand.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why was it so easy for her to feel rejected? She tried to shake off the feeling she’d had leaving Dom and get into the right head space to perform. She took his advice and set her intent to be in the right zone for it.

She was using Fox’s keyboard since hers had been destroyed in the crash. He’d said she could use it indefinitely, which took the pressure off her to buy a new one. As she started to play, she found that Dom had been right. She was able to summon the right energy to perform, just by setting her intent to do so. It was a smooth and easy night and rather than wait for Fox, since he was getting his game on with some boys, she took off to walk the four blocks to No Return as soon as they were finished. Fox could put the keyboard back in his car.

Customers were still being herded out of No Return when she got there, and there was a new bouncer standing at the front gate who crossed his arms and blocked her way when she tried to pass him to go in. “Club’s closed,” he grunted.

“I know, I work here. Remember? I played in the band last night?”

“Well you’re not working here tonight, are you?” he demanded.

She stood on her tiptoes to try to look past him to see Stella or Dom or anyone else who would vouch for her. Not seeing anyone, she pulled out her cell phone and tried Dom's number. He didn't answer. Of course, he probably couldn't hear it with the end of night bustle. "Just let me go grab Dom and he'll vouch for me, okay? He's my ride," she wheedled.

The bouncer looked unsure at that, like he didn't know whether to believe her. She didn't blame him. Every customer at No Return claimed to be a personal friend of Dom's to try to get out of paying cover, or get a free drink, or be able to stay past closing. She probably just seemed like another one of them.

"Dom!" she called out, spotting him as the doors opened and more customers filed out. She saw his head jerk up before the doors closed, and a moment later he plowed through them with a purpose.

"Matt!" he snapped. Matt—the bouncer—turned around and stood at attention. Dom held out his hand toward Kate and Matt stood back so she could walk past him and take it. "This is Kate. She's my girl. I should have introduced you last night. I want you to take very good care of her. If she says 'jump', you say 'how high?' Got it?"

Matt nodded. "Sorry, Kate," he said to her.

Still reeling from the fact that Dom had just called her his girl, she beamed at him. "It's okay, you didn't know. Thanks."

Dom wrapped an arm around her and led her into the club. "How did it go?"

The happiness he'd just given her completely washed away the remains of the hurt she'd felt earlier. "It went well. You were right," she admitted.

He stopped and took her into his arms. “I don’t care about being right,” he said, looking at her with that wistful sadness she’d seen before. “I just want you to know your own power.”

She stared up at him, arrested. Whatever she’d thought he might say, it wasn’t that. “I don’t have any power,” she mumbled. “You’re the you-know-what.” She was reluctant to say the word *vampire* out loud in case anyone happened to hear.

“It is your mind that knows what to do with a suggestion. And knowing you can control your own mind is more power than you’ll ever need.” He looked around the club. “Do you want a drink, or are you ready to head out?”

“I’m ready.”

“Okay, let me just tell Stella. Give me one sec.”

She leaned against the stairwell wall and waited for him.

“Hey Kate. What’s happening?” A drunken customer wasted no time in moving in on her. Standing alone after closing was an invitation to every boy who hadn’t found a girl to leave with yet.

“Just waiting for my man,” she said with a little smile.

The guy scowled at her as if she’d just insulted him and moved off out the door.

Dom reappeared. “You’re getting good at that,” he observed.

“Well... I don’t know if it counts when I give you as my excuse?” She scuffed her toes a little and then peeked up at him and he laughed.

“Maybe not, but it’s your attitude toward it that’s changed. You didn’t look the least bit uncomfortable.”

She was surprised. She considered his words and realized that he was right. And it wasn't because she knew Dom would return any moment and could rescue her if she needed him to. It was because she had confidence that her words would send the fellow away. And she was surprised to realize that she hadn't cared if they hurt his feelings—even after he'd looked like she had.

Dom took her home and made love to her without any spanking, which may not have been as hot as usual, but actually was just what she needed. He held her until she fell asleep, and then must have left the bed, because she remembered waking to him crawling in again around 5 AM.

When she woke the next morning around 10 AM, she found that her motivation and focus for her proposal was still sharp, and she sat down without even showering or eating and worked for two hours straight. It was only the thought of Dom waking and finding her with stinky breath and bedhead that made her tear herself away and get herself cleaned up and fed.

She heard the bathroom door open while she was in the shower, and then Dom came in, naked and erect, his fangs extended. She smiled her welcome and he reached for her, stroking his hands all over her, running a sharp fang along her ear, down her neck.

“Buon giorno,” he murmured in her ear.

“Buon giorno.” The accent sounded flat in her voice and she giggled. He kissed her deeply with his hands still roaming, then crouched down to apply his experienced tongue between her legs. She gasped, taking hold of his head with her hands. It felt amazing, but she was slow to orgasm in the mornings—her body was just too relaxed from sleeping or something.

Dom didn't seem impatient, though. He used his fingers and his tongue until she was backed up against the shower wall, gasping. When she finally came, he struck her femoral artery with his fangs and drank, still working his fingers deep inside her, on her g-spot. The bite shocked her, sending a jolt of adrenaline through her body as she watched him with wide eyes. He licked the wounds closed and came up, a little of her blood still on his lips. She swallowed, closing her eyes for a moment. She really wasn't that good with seeing blood.

"I'm sorry that frightened you, *cara mia*," Dom said, stroking her cheek.

She opened her eyes. The blood had washed off his lips. She started to deny that it had scared her, but remembered that he could sense her feelings. She shrugged instead. "I didn't know you could bite there," she said lamely.

"I won't if you don't like it. I just thought your neck might be getting tired of my fangs."

"Um, yeah." She rubbed her neck. "I think I prefer the neck, but I could get used to it. It just startled me, that's all." She willed her legs to stop shaking.

"Are you finished in here?" Dom asked gently. She nodded and he turned the water off and stepped out, pulling a towel off the hook and holding it open for her. "How's your proposal today? Are you just now getting up?"

"No, I've already worked for a couple of hours. It's going well. You're going to get that blow job tonight for sure." She beamed at him and he laughed and pulled her in for a kiss.

Keeping his hands off Kate was an impossibility, it seemed. Not that she seemed to mind. It felt amazing to just give in to his desire and be with her fully, turning a deaf ear to the warning bells going off in the back of his head. She was like an addiction—the more he was with her, the more he needed her. And it wasn't just sexually, although that was the best expression of his feelings. He just liked her energy—being near her, watching her laugh or smile or bite her lip when she was worried. He loved taking care of her. Her emotions were all so big—he'd felt it so strongly when he'd made her happy the night before by telling the bouncer Matt that she was his girl. It had been such an easy thing to do. Yet he knew each step he took down that path would make it harder to end this thing. This thing he didn't really want to end.

He left her to her work and she again did not stir from her laptop for several hours, until at last, she slapped the cover of her laptop down and exclaimed triumphantly, “Done!”

“Congratulations,” he said. “I guess that means I can't keep you trapped here as my sex slave anymore?”

She beamed at him. He looked at his watch. Six o'clock—still too early to go out. “What else did you have going on this weekend?”

“Nothing,” she shrugged. “Just getting this paper finished.”

“Okay, how does this sound... as you've probably noticed, we need groceries. Would you take my car and run to the grocery? And then when you get back I'll take you out to dinner to celebrate.”

Kate jumped up. “Sounds great! I need to stop in and feed my kitty anyway. What do you need?”

He, Stella, and Fox kept a running list on the side of the fridge so that whoever had a chance to run errands (usually Fox) could easily grab it, so he handed it to her now along with the keys and cash. “See you in a bit.”

When she had returned, she was wearing a sassy babydoll dress and kitten heeled sandals. “You look great,” he said, taking the groceries from her as soon as she came through the second set of double doors.

She flushed a little. “I wasn’t sure where we were going and I didn’t want to look like a slob.”

“I was thinking Italian.”

“Yum.”

He set the groceries down on the counter. “Are there more bags?” He checked his watch to see if the sun had set yet.

“It’s still a little light out. Don’t worry, I’ll grab them. Besides, I don’t know where things go here yet.”

He could feel a little shiver of daring emanate from her at her use of the word *yet* and it made him smile.

She was a little nervous at the restaurant, so he ordered a bottle of expensive wine and enjoyed the feel of her relaxing more and more into the moment as she sipped. As if reminded of their last dinner date, she started quizzing him.

“So, when did you come to the U.S.?”

“In 1858. Fox and I came together from England and settled in Chicago. Stella joined us five years later.”

She looked confused. “But I thought you and Stella were together a long time before that.”

“We were. And then we split up and went our separate ways for a hundred years or so. She found me in the States by accident, and it was easy to band together again. Just as friends,” he added hastily.

“How did you actually get over here from Europe?”

“In the bottom of a ship. Fox wasn’t a vampire back then, so he took care of me—made sure I was safe from the light and that I had everything I needed.”

She frowned. “You knew Fox before he was a vampire?”

He nodded. “I’ve known Fox since he was nine years old. I found him on the streets of London. He tried to steal my coin purse so I took him home and fed him. You might say I raised him, except that he was already mostly grown up at that point. He’d been on the streets more or less his whole life.”

Kate looked at him with big eyes. “He never told me any of that. But it explains a lot.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” she smirked. “You’re still his daddy in some ways.”

He raised his eyebrows, but knew she was right. As much as he’d tried to foster Fox’s emotional independence, there was a neediness there that still showed up at times.

“But wait... you said you’ve never turned anyone. Who turned Fox?”

“Stella.” He couldn’t keep the hard note out of his voice. It had been a source of contention between them since the day she had turned Fox.

Kate had raised her eyebrows, waiting for more. He shrugged. “Fox wanted it. I didn’t want it for him. Stella gave

him what he wanted.”

“Why didn’t you want it for him?”

He pressed his lips together. “It’s a curse, *bambina*.”

She stared at him for a long moment and he willed her not to ask more. She took the hint. “So, what did you do in Chicago?”

“I owned a few taverns, and then during prohibition I owned a piece of every speakeasy in town.”

“I thought the Chicago speakeasies were run by Italian mafia. Oh!” she said, clapping her hand over her mouth.

His lips curled into a smile. Once again, he was impressed with her knowledge of history. “How do you think the mafia got so powerful? Vampires can make a lot happen on the seedy side of business.”

“Is that where you killed people?”

He shook his head at her. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want to hear the answers to, *cara mia*.”

“I didn’t.”

He felt hurt from her and cursed inwardly at how sensitive she was. He tried to explain. “The answer is yes. Among other places. But I’ve tried to leave that way of living behind me. And it may be what you want to know, but I don’t especially want you thinking of me that way,” he admitted.

She softened at that. “Okay. I can understand that. But it doesn’t make me think less of you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You think it makes me exciting.”

She took offense. “No, I don’t.” Her face had flushed.

“The truth, Kate.”

She took some bread from the bread basket and dipped it in the olive oil and balsamic vinegar he had poured onto a plate for them both.

“Yeah, maybe.” She shrugged. “So what?”

He shrugged himself. “I don’t know. I don’t like it. I guess because I don’t want to be that person.”

“Well, okay, you’re not that person anymore. But it’s what’s made you who you are today. Right? So if it turns me on, well... you could just go with it, couldn’t you?”

He couldn’t help but smile at that. He helped himself to the bread. It was warm and melted in his mouth—a delicious sour dough. “Mmm, this is good, isn’t it?”

“I know,” Kate said, reaching for another piece. “I shouldn’t have it, but I just can’t help myself.”

“Why shouldn’t you have it?”

“I have a wheat allergy. I break out in a rash on my neck and chest if I eat it too many days in a row.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “So why do you eat it?”

She shrugged. “It tastes good.”

He took a sip of wine and considered. He had taken on a dominant role with her, which she obviously liked. And though he questioned its ultimate benefit to her, there were ways to use it to help her.

“Is this something you’d like help with?”

She looked up in surprise, and he felt a little thrill of fear come off her. She knew what he meant, then. “I guess so,” she said, sounding a little nervous.

“Okay,” he said, pulling her bread plate away from her. “Here are the rules: no more wheat. If you decide something’s really worth eating, which I’m sure will happen, you have to text or call me first and explain to me why it’s worth it. You don’t have to wait for my permission if I’m not around, but you do have to provide the explanation in advance. Does that make sense?”

She smiled and nodded at him and strangely, he could feel a rush of love pouring out of her. Just then their waiter appeared to take their order and Kate suddenly scrambled to open her menu again, mumbling, “Well, I was going to get the penne pasta, but I don’t think it’s worth it...”

“Do you want another few minutes?” the waiter asked.

“Please,” he said. “And will you take the bread away?”

“Of course, sir,” the waiter said smoothly and glided off with the bread basket in hand.

Kate chose something else and closed her menu again.

“Would it bother you if I ordered the penne?” he asked.

“Of course not!” she assured him.

“Great. So back to the rules. If you eat something with wheat in it without prior explanation, you must come to me and let me know. And then I’ll put you over my knee and spank you soundly.”

She turned a little pink at that and he saw her eyes dart around the room, as if to make sure no one overheard.

“If you eat wheat and you *don’t* tell me...then you’ll get spanked with my belt.” He sat back in his chair then and watched as she flushed a deep red. *Adorable.*

She caught him trying to hide his smirk and laughed at herself. He felt another rush of love pour from her. “Dom, why do you think I’m like this?” she asked, sobering.

He shook his head. “Don’t go there, *cara*. It’s a quirk, that’s all. There’s nothing wrong with you. I would guess that a pretty large percentage of women have the same quirk.”

“Really?” she said doubtfully. “I’ve always wondered, you know, *why*.” She leaned forward to say in a low voice, “I sometimes can’t get turned on or orgasm during sex without thinking about it.”

“So? Be happy you know that about yourself. Some women have never orgasmed at all and can’t figure out why not.”

“True,” she said doubtfully. “So what is your experience with it, really?”

He smiled slowly. “Vampires have a lot of sex—more than mortals. I guess originally it was because we were so separated from religion that we were the only ones who were uninhibited. Now our sex lives probably aren’t so shockingly different from those of many mortals.”

“And...?”

“Well, when you’ve had that much sex, you’ve pretty much tried it every way. I got my personal experience caning women in Victorian England. You wouldn’t believe the kinds of things they were into.”

She leaned forward eagerly. “Like what?”

He grinned. “Have you ever heard of using a piece of ginger as a butt plug?”

“Shut. Up.”

“It’s true. Add a little caning to that and you’ve got the true Victorian S & M experience.”

“Whoa.”

The waiter returned and Kate ordered a steak, cooked to medium. He ordered the penne pasta himself.

“They make excellent authentic Italian food here,” he said.

“Do they? You would know, wouldn’t you? I suppose you know how to make it all.”

He laughed at that. “No, *cara mia*. Men didn’t cook when I lived in Italy.”

“Oh. Right.” She blushed. “What does *cara mia* mean — ‘my dear’?”

“That’s right.”

Their food arrived, then and they began eating with enthusiasm.

“Dom,” she started shyly.

“Yes?”

“Where did you get your blood from, before me?”

He hesitated. It was another question he’d prefer not to answer. “I hypnotized women at the club,” he said at last, pulling on his earlobe.

“So they didn’t know you’d bitten them?”

He nodded. He didn’t feel any strong emotion coming from her. Neither revulsion, nor anger.

“Always women?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

He blinked slowly and sighed. “Well, I prefer women,” he said and winced, waiting for her to react.

“Because there’s something sexual about it?”

“Yeah, I guess. Yeah.”

“Did you do...other things with them?”

“No. I mean... wait. Let me start over. Yes, sometimes. But if so, it was consensual. I would never hypnotize for that. If I ended up picking a girl up—which isn’t that hard to do when you’re the owner of the club—then afterward I would just erase the feeding part.”

He was surprised and slightly amused to sense jealousy from her. He looked at her plate and noticed she hadn’t eaten much.

“Why aren’t you eating?” he asked.

“Oh... well, it’s a little too raw for my taste,” she said, turning the cut part of the steak around to show him how pink it was.”

“Send it back.”

“No, it’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. You’re not eating.”

“I know, but I have enough with potatoes and vegetables.”

He raised his eyebrows and put on his most stern voice. “You will send that steak back and ask that it be cooked to your specification or I will take you home and spank your sweet little butt.”

He felt a flare of irritation from her as she stared at him, contemplating that threat.

He softened. “Look, I’m not trying to be heavy-handed. If I were truly a gentleman, I would send it back for you. But you lying down and taking it instead of demanding what you deserve is a pattern I’ve seen in you before and frankly, I don’t like it.”

He felt hurt coming off her then, and it saddened him. He reached for her hand across the table. “I just want you to practice standing up for yourself. Here and now. I’ll back you up if you need it.”

She rolled her eyes. “But I don’t *need* to stand up for myself. The steak is fine!” To prove it, she stabbed a piece with her fork and put it in her mouth, chewing it viciously.

He watched her in silence until she faltered and stopped chewing, staring at him uncertainly. He caught the waiter’s eye and waved him over. Kate was pleading at him with her big eyes, but he ignored it and gave her an encouraging smile.

“Um, I was wondering if I could have my steak cooked a little more?”

“Of course,” the waiter said, smoothly whisking her plate away. “I’m so sorry. You asked for medium, didn’t you? I will bring it right back for you.”

“You see?” he said, when the waiter had gone. “That wasn’t so painful, was it?”

She was still looking a little resentful.

“Be sweet and I’ll forget that you rolled your eyes at me,” he said, casually turning back to his own food. He was satisfied when he smelled the familiar mixture of fear and arousal coming off her.

Okay, so sending her food back hadn't been that bad. But she hated that Dom had pushed her into it. Now her belly was filled with butterflies wondering if he was going to spank her over rolling her eyes. Peeking at his handsome face as she ate her dinner (the steak was now cooked to perfection), she found him devastatingly sexy. His dominance made her knees go weak and her belly do flip flops. He knew just exactly what to say and how to say it.

For whatever reason, the vulnerability of the moment made her willing to take a risk. "Dom?"

"Yes, *cara*?"

The waiter came then and asked if they wanted dessert or coffee. She looked at Dom to see if he felt like staying, but he looked the question back to her. Since dessert was her favorite thing, she nodded happily and ordered a decaf. Dom ordered a cappuccino and smiled indulgently at her.

"What were you going to ask me?"

"Oh. Um, well... I'm wondering what changed for you between getting a room at Hotel Congress and my car accident?"

"Oh." He looked like she'd asked yet another question he didn't like answering. He did his ear-pulling thing, which she was beginning to recognize as what he did when she put him on the spot. "Well, the truth is that I still think I'm bad news for you." He was looking at her seriously.

"Why?"

“A whole myriad of reasons, *dulcezza*. The main one being that I’m a vampire.”

She rolled her eyes and then froze halfway through the gesture. Of course, he hadn’t missed it. He very slightly raised one eyebrow but he didn’t say anything about it. Instead, he just shrugged. “I guess I think you deserve more than just great sex.”

She felt angry at that. “I guess I’m tired of you deciding what I do and don’t deserve,” she snapped. He raised his eyebrows. She leaned forward to take him further to task, but the waiter showed up with dessert menus. She sat quietly and looked at the menu. There was one dessert that sounded like pure heaven. It was called molten chocolate lava cake, and it served two. But it also said it took 30 minutes to prepare.

“I’m thinking the molten chocolate lava cake is a worth it, despite the wheat,” she said with a note of challenge in her voice, testing his new rule.

He nodded. “All right,” he said mildly.

She dropped back into her normal submissive state then. “But it says it takes thirty minutes.” She looked at him pleadingly.

He smiled. “I’m in no hurry, *cara*.”

“Great!” she said, as giddy as a little girl and he chuckled.

The waiter came and he gave him the order. Then he said. “You were saying?”

She looked at her fingernails. “Well, I’ve never had great sex before. So why is it for you to decide that that’s not enough for me?”

He blinked at her for a moment and then his face broke into a slow grin. “Far be it for me to prevent you from having great sex.” She smiled back.

After a moment, he said, “It’s just that at some point it won’t be enough. And it might hurt both of us more to end things then than it would now. That’s all I was thinking at Congress.” He shrugged. “And then even after making that decision, I couldn’t keep my hands off you. The sex is pretty good for me, too,” he said in a conspiratorial tone that made her giggle.

“Well, let’s just enjoy what we’ve got, okay?” she said.

He nodded, but she caught that wistful look on his face again.

She pressed on just a little further. “Do you consider this... whatever it is, to be exclusive?”

He raised one eyebrow at her and answered sternly. “It had better be. You don’t want to screw around on a vampire. Believe me.”

She laughed, fairly certain that he knew darn well that she would never screw around and had just answered her that way to flatter her. She peeked another look at him and he gave her a knowing smile. The rush of love she felt for him at that moment was overpowering. She wondered if he could feel it.

Back in the car after dinner, Dom said, “Your place or mine?”

“Mine, I guess,” she said reluctantly. Even though she’d stopped in and fed her cat when she changed clothes earlier, she felt bad that she’d been gone all weekend.

She wriggled in her seat a bit, wondering what would happen next. Would he come in? Would he spend the night at

her place? No, the sunlight wasn't safe for him there. Would he spank her for rolling her eyes?

“Dom, can we revisit the eye rolling rule?”

“No.”

She wheedled, “It’s just that it’s sort of an automatic thing. Like a reflex. I can’t really help it.”

Dom looked over at her. “I really have you scared of spankings now, haven’t I?”

It was true. Now that she’d experienced such a painful one, she wasn’t in a hurry to repeat it, despite the fact that thinking about the way he’d handled her was the hugest turn on. She shrugged. “Kind of,” she said in a small voice.

He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips for a kiss. “How about this? I promise you that if I spank you for rolling your eyes at me, it will only be the fun kind of spanking. Can you live with that?”

She smiled in relief and a bit of excitement. “Yes,” she breathed.

At her place, he got out and walked up to the door with her. When she started to go in, he pulled her back onto the porch for a kiss. “You look tired, *cara*. I’m going to let you get your sleep.”

“Oh.” she was disappointed.

Dom’s phone buzzed and he pulled it out, saying, “Excuse me.”

She probably shouldn’t have, but she looked over his shoulder to see him open a text from Fox.

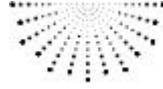
Roxanna is looking for you.

Dom turned his phone off immediately as if to hide the message. "I've gotta go," he said with a grim look on his face. He pressed the car key into her hand, gave her a quick peck on the lips and dematerialized without another word.

She stood there like an idiot on her porch staring at the place he'd just been. Her kitty Zapper twined around her ankles, happily purring, oblivious to her pain.

Who the fuck was Roxanna?

CHAPTER SEVEN



Dom materialized in the living room right after Fox texted him.

“What do you know?”

“I heard from Randolph. He said people have been asking around about whether you’re still alive, and where you might be now. I’m telling you, you’re the next target.”

“Fuck.” Dom breathed.

“Yeah.” He was relieved that Dom was taking him seriously this time.

“Who knows where we are? Besides Randolph?”

He shook his head. “Randolph only knows I’m in the Southwest. He doesn’t even know which state. Honestly, I can’t think who else. Some of Stella’s people might know.”

“Is she here?”

He nodded.

Dom bellowed her name and she emerged from her wing of the complex.

“Fox hears people are asking where I am. Who do you know who knows where we are?”

Stella considered. Then she shook her head. “No one. I’ve been careful.”

“What have you found out about the vampires who have given up their property to Roxanna?” Dom asked, turning back to him.

“It seems they are changed. They’re not the same vampires—it’s like they’re brainwashed by her to do her bidding. They all are acting like her minions.”

Dom steepled his fingers and looked thoughtful. “Maybe not brainwashed. Maybe it’s bloodwashed. The question is, what does she need with the blood of old vampires?” he mused. “We know that older blood controls younger blood, particularly if the older vampire is the maker of the younger. Could she believe that by somehow drinking the blood of the older vampires, she will get a line on controlling all younger vamps? I’ve never made anyone, but she may not know that...”

“But still, the way an older vampire compels a younger doesn’t affect their mind or personality,” Stella said doubtfully.

“No,” Dom said heavily.

“So how is she doing it?” Stella asked.

They both looked to Dom. He had always been the brains of their operation. They’d stuck by his side all these years mainly out of love and devotion, but also because they were attracted to his power. Despite the fact that he rarely demonstrated it, Dom was an extremely brilliant man who had gifts that went beyond ordinary vampire power.

Dom stood up now and paced around. “I don’t know. Keep trying to get any details you can on the people who have been changed. I’ll keep thinking on it, too.”

Dom stopped in front of Fox and looked down. Fox looked up. "Come here," Dom said.

Fox furrowed his brow but stood up obediently. He felt like a child again when Dom would call to him to impart some piece of wisdom or remonstrance or praise.

Dom reached out and cupped the base of his skull with his two hands in the old Italian custom. He was all mafia don now. He looked him square in the eye. "You were right, Fox. I should have given you heed when you first spoke of it and I'm sorry." Dom leaned forward and touched his forehead to his, pausing there for a moment. Then he pulled back and looked him in the eye again. "I am blessed to call you my friend. Thank you for looking out for me, even when I don't listen."

Fox felt himself flush deeply and he couldn't speak. He wanted to shrug and say "it's cool," except that it meant so much more to him than that, and he didn't want to belittle Dom's rather grand gesture of apology. Dom saved him by releasing him and turning to Stella. "So...how should we prepare?"

Stella gave a wicked grin. "Start sharpening stakes."

Friday night, he could see Kate messing with equipment on the stage. Something was off. There was a tension radiating out from her. He hadn't seen or talked to her since he dropped her off the previous Sunday, although he'd left a few texts and messages for her, and had set up another body work appointment for her as a treat for finishing her paper.

He walked down the stairs and up onto the stage. She didn't look up from where she was crouched, fiddling with

cords, although the tension increased so he knew she felt his presence. He put his hand on her back and she stiffened.

“What’s going on, Kate?” he asked quietly, trying to catch her eye.

“Nothing,” she said breezily. “Just trying to set up here.” He looked around. It appeared already set up to him. From what he could tell, she was just fiddling with cords that were already plugged in.

“Kate.”

She stood up from her crouched position and looked at him. “Yeah?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” she exclaimed defensively.

He took her arm. “Come here,” he said, leading her across the floor and up the stairs to his office. He picked her up and sat her on his desk, caging her between his two arms as he leaned his hands on either side of her. “You’re mad at me.”

She shook her head stonily.

He slammed his hand down on the desk, causing her to jump. “Dammit, Kate! Talk to me!”

“Who’s Roxanna?” she demanded with narrowed eyes.

A wave of pure exasperation ran over him and he shoved himself away from the desk. “Oh *Jesus Christ!* You have got to me kidding me!” His voice was raised and he was waving his hands in the distinctly Italian way that he thought he had left behind him long ago. “You’ve been stewing all week over Fox’s text to me?” he demanded.

She looked at him with wide eyes, obviously surprised at seeing him so animated.

“You couldn’t just pick up your phone and ask me?”

He heard Fox clearing his throat from the door way. “Everything okay, Dom?” he said in a careful voice. It was fairly unusual for Dom to raise his voice unless he was really pissed off, so Fox was clearly there to run interference.

“Go away, Fox.” He threw out a hand and sent a wave of energy that slammed the door in Fox’s face and locked it.

Fox materialized inside the office, next to him. “Dom,” he said in his very cautious tone. “Why don’t you take a walk and come back to this conversation when you’ve calmed down a bit?”

He rubbed his face impatiently. Kate was looking from him to Fox with wide eyes. “Fox, I’m fine. Look,” he said and bared his teeth to show that his fangs were not extended.

Fox was standing very still but his eyes darted around, as if assessing what kind of risk factors were involved.

“I just need to talk to Kate. *In private.*”

“Okay,” Fox said slowly. “Why don’t you take it down a notch and sit in the lounge where you can get comfortable?”

“Don’t make me hurt you in front of Kate,” he said through gritted teeth.

Unfortunately, that threat just seemed to confirm Fox’s fears. “Kate, why don’t you wait for Dom downstairs?” he said quickly, puffing his chest up and trying to look around Dom to see Kate’s face.

Now he *was* feeling his fangs start to extend in anger. He backed away from Kate and turned around, closing his eyes

and covering his face with his hands. Deep breaths. Calm mind. He put his hands down and paced around, slowing his breathing. Finally he said in what he hoped was a calm and patient tone, “Fox. I am *not* going to hurt Kate. But the same is not true for you. I’m asking you nicely. Please. Leave.”

Despite all their fronting, Kate did not seem frightened by the confrontation. She looked extremely surprised, but not afraid. “I’m fine, Fox. I need to talk to Dom,” she said, finally throwing in her opinion. He sighed. Fox vanished.

He rubbed his face with his hands again. “To answer your question, Roxanna is a bitch of a vampire who is supposedly after me. It’s dangerous business that I don’t want you involved in, so please don’t ask me about it again.”

Kate stared at him. He could feel a tangle of emotions from her. Relief and anger, mostly.

He stared back. “I *told* you we were exclusive, didn’t I?” he asked in a quieter voice.

Tears shone in her eyes and he stepped in to embrace her. He held her for a long moment, stroking her hair and back until it felt like her emotions had settled down. He pulled back and tipped her face up to his. “It pisses me off that you were upset but didn’t even ask me. You just tried and convicted me in your mind.”

She blanched at his rebuke and then her face took on a sullen look. “You didn’t call or try to see me all week! Over the weekend I thought...I thought...I thought we maybe had something special,” her voice cracked and her eyes filled with tears again. He stroked her cheek with his thumb. “But then you totally blew me off. And I’d seen that text, so I just... got confused, I guess.”

He gave an exaggerated sigh, totally exasperated. “How can you think I blew you off? I left messages for you all week.”

“Yeah, but that was just work.”

He gave her an “are you sure?” look. She dropped her eyes.

“And what about you?” he demanded. “Did you call or visit me this week? Did you let me know that you were worried about who the hell Roxanna was?”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I guess I really overreacted.”

“Look at me,” he commanded and she lifted her eyes to his. “It is absolutely unacceptable for you to get upset with me over expectations you haven’t communicated. Do you understand? If you want to get together, then you damned better well pick up your phone and use it. Okay?”

He felt a flash of anger from her. “Does that mean you didn’t want to see me?”

Before he could help it, he growled, causing her to draw back sharply. He closed his eyes and stepped back from her, taking a deep breath. He let out an exhale and looked at her. “No. It means nothing of the sort. I was busy this week trying to figure out what exactly Roxanna’s game is. But you would have been a welcome diversion.”

Kate still looked pouty.

“Listen, you’re coming to my place after closing tonight. If you’re going to throw fits like this every time we’re apart, then I may just not let you leave.”

That won him the reluctant smile he was looking for.

“And don’t think you’re not getting a spanking for this.” He picked her up off the desk and turned her around, bending her over in the way he had that first night they were together. He lifted up her miniskirt and very slowly pulled down her panties. She was frozen completely, not even breathing, as far as he could tell. Her little bottom tightened and released in anticipation of feeling his hand. He gave her twenty hard swats that left her gasping, then rubbed before he pulled her panties back up and flipped the skirt back down. “You be good tonight, or there will be more where that came from,” he said when he’d turned her back around. He gave her a pat on the bottom. Her face was flushed pink and she looked like she couldn’t speak. He wasn’t sure if it was good to send her off so discombobulated.

He kissed her deeply, and she threw her arms around his neck and responded with enthusiasm. “That’s my girl,” he murmured when they came apart. “Are you okay?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

He put his arms around her and held her close for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “You must think I’m the stupidest girl alive.”

“No. I don’t. I think you’re *my* girl. And I don’t want you to forget it.”

He felt the love from her then, and knew they were okay.

She was wearing her new Victoria's Secret panties. They were pink and silver striped with the word "naughty" stenciled across the butt. Of course, Dom had already previewed them when he spanked her in his office earlier. Like always, it had made her knees go weak to have him bend her over and pull down her panties like that. The spanking itself had been pretty gentle—more of a warning or reset, than anything. But then he left her with the question of whether he'd be giving her another one later.

Sitting in the passenger seat of the Mercedes, she stole a sidelong look at him. The corner of his mouth curled just a little bit to let her know that he was aware of her spying, and probably that he knew what was on her mind, too. An involuntary shiver ran through her.

"Dom, I really am sorry about earlier."

"It's forgotten, *amore*."

"You were really mad?" she asked, remembering how worried Fox had been for her.

"I was *not* mad," he said a bit defensively, as if Fox were still there with them.

Fox had shaken his head when he saw her come down happily snuggled under Dom's arm. "All I can say," he had said to her when they went on stage together, "is that I've never seen Dom so emotional in the entire time I've known him. You do something to him." She'd been pleased to hear that and she filed that information away with a note to herself to quiz Fox later on the full history of Dom's past love life.

"Fox made me mad. Not you," he clarified. "I was exasperated with you, that's all."

She stared at his profile for a while without comment. Then she said, "Fox seemed worried about my safety."

"Were you worried?" he asked, taking his eyes off the road to look at her.

She shook her head. "No," she said softly.

"Good."

She waited to see if he'd offer any more.

He sighed. "Fox isn't used to seeing me worked up about much, I suppose. I must have sounded similar to the way I do when I'm angry. And an enraged vampire should always be feared, even by his closest friends. Remember that, okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

When they reached Dom's residence, he led her through the marble-stated magnificence and opened the back door. "Come here, I want to show you something," he said, leading her out to a beautiful courtyard and garden. It was all subtly lit with lights under trees and bushes, and there was a water feature, with a mini waterfall splashing down into a pond.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"I have every type of night blooming flower I can grow here."

She looked around. "Evening primrose," she identified.

"Yep."

"And night-blooming cereus. That grows well here." There was something blooming in the pond. "What is that?" she asked pointing to it.

"A night blooming water lily."

"That's not native."

“No.”

“Incredible.” She pointed to a large, dark-green leafed plant that spilled out of several pots. “Sacred datura.”

“Very good,” he said. “It probably won’t bloom till August.”

“I don’t know the names of any of the cacti. Are they all night-bloomers?”

He nodded. “Every one of them. This one is called flying saucer. It only blooms for one night. Over there are some other non-natives—moon flower and night gladiolus.”

“Did you plant all these yourself?”

He shook his head. “No, I hired a landscape designer. But I spend a lot of time out here communing with them.”

“Dom, I have a question for you.”

“Hmm?”

“Why do you work at No Return? It seems to me like you have plenty of money and you have great staff over there—they could handle everything.”

“I work to force myself to get out and interact with people. If I didn’t make it a point to work, I’d probably just hole up in my sculpture studio and turn into a hermit.”

She nodded. “That makes sense.”

She looked up at him and he caught her in his arms and kissed her. She felt the tips of his fangs on her lips as they elongated and she pressed her hips against his to feel his erection. She pushed him back into a comfortable outdoor lounge chair. “If you recall, I owe you a blow job.”

“Mmm. I had not forgotten.”

She unbuttoned his pants and freed his erection, kneeling between his legs and licked his cock from base to tip, keeping her eyes on his in what she hoped was a seductive look. He was uncircumcised and it was the first uncircumcised cock she had ever sucked. She realized suddenly that he had probably had a million blow jobs in his very long lifetime, and she wasn't sure how her skills would compare. She licked a few more long strokes before taking him into her mouth. She loved the feel of his thick length stiffening even more as she slid her warm mouth up and down it. She loved the sense of servitude that kneeling before him gave her and at the same time, the power of giving him pleasure. She worked it for a long time, her jaw aching to accommodate his width, her fingers massaging his ball sac, pressing and squeezing at the base of his penis as her lips moved up and down his cock. She could take most of its full length into her mouth without hitting that gag reflex when it hit the uvula. His endowments were more in the way of girth and her jaw was truly starting to lock up from the strain of sucking with it open so wide. She started to feel a bit anxious. How long would he take before he came? Was he used to hour-long blow jobs? Would he tell her what he liked so she could get there faster?

Dom must've felt her anxiety, because he laughed. "Come here, *bambina*," he said, releasing her from duty. "I want to be in you." He pulled her up to stand, turned her facing away from him and pulled her panties down, then lowered her to sit on his cock.

She sighed in pleasure as he began to move her hips toward and away from him with a bit of a grinding motion thrown in for extra friction on her clit. She started to moan. Even though she was on top, he was driving, his vampire strength making it easy to manipulate her in any direction and

speed that he wanted. In the end he bounced her into orgasmic bliss, then stood with her bent at the waist and drove into her until he came, too.

It was amazing. She settled on his lap and breathed in the sweet scent of the desert flowers and sighed with pleasure. The sound of the water in the fountain was soothing. She looked at his windows and noticed that he had blinds on the outside. “Why are your blinds on the outside instead of the inside?”

“Actually, I have it set up so that you have to open the shutters on both the inside and outside of the window if you want to let light in. It’s a safety measure—like the double doors at the entrance. If you ever want to open them, that’s how you do it, but make sure you close both sides by noon at the latest—before Stella, Fox or I wake up. It’s really important that you never leave them undone. *Capiche?*”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Are you ready for bed?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Is it okay if I don’t tuck you in? I want to work on your sculpture.”

“Of course!” she said, although her heart had sunk just a little bit. But that was part of being with a vampire, wasn’t it? He wasn’t going to go to sleep when she did. Ever. Well, she could certainly live with that.

When she woke in the morning, she was tucked up with her head on Dom’s shoulder and one leg thrown over his body. He

was sleeping heavily, he didn't even move when she climbed out and got in the shower.

Upstairs, he had left his laptop on the kitchen table with a note: *Check out these blogs*. Curious, she opened the lid to the laptop and looked at the blog that was open. It featured a large wooden paddle at the top and the blog post had the tags of domestic discipline, spanko, submission, marriage, taken in hand and this thing we do. Forgetting her plan to make herself a latte, she sat down and started reading, fascinated.

It was funny that Dom had researched this for her. She could be an obsessive researcher herself, but it had never occurred to her to Google about her kink. She guessed she thought she would just get pornography.

She read for two hours straight. Dom had been right—the blogs were full of women just like her. Women who liked to be spanked in every kind of flavor. She read blogs with details of erotic spankings which really turned her on. There were also blogs about couples who engaged in domestic discipline, where one partner (usually the husband) was deemed to be the “Head of Household” and the other partner submitted to his will or was punished by spanking. There were blogs by people who practiced a mix of erotic spanking and domestic discipline. There were blogs that were more about master and slave, and blogs with a religious bent.

She read with fascination. Regardless of the flavor, many of them had mentions of how bringing the spanking dynamic into their relationship had improved their sex life, intimacy, communication and closeness. And the bloggers seemed very supportive with their comments to each other.

She found some sites that were “how to’s” on spanking. One site riled her up with biblical references for why a man

must be the head of the household and the woman should submit. Even as it riled her up, the idea of having a husband who believed he was responsible for disciplining her turned her on. She remembered how hearing that Dom used to discipline Stella had made her wet.

When the rumbling in her belly finally convinced her to pause for breakfast and coffee, she found she was trembling all over—excited, titillated, angry, encouraged. It was so much to process all this new information. She shut the laptop with a snap and busied herself with breakfast.

She dug around the kitchen and decided to make a big breakfast, in case anyone else in the house woke up and felt like eating. She cooked up a package of bacon in the fridge and made apple walnut pancakes with cinnamon and nutmeg. The smell of it lured all three vampires out of bed, looking groggy and curious as they convened in the kitchen to see what she was up to.

“Hungry?” she asked with a bright smile.

“Mmm,” Fox said, sitting down at the table, obviously not hatched enough to speak. She set a plate down in front of him, stacked with pancakes and a few slices of bacon and handed him the butter dish.

Stella pulled the maple syrup out of the fridge and popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, pouring it into flutes with orange juice for mimosas. Kate served Dom and Stella and then sat down with her own plate of food, happy to have cooked for the three vampires who were quickly becoming her closest friends.

“This is delicious,” Dom said with a wink. “Thank you, *amore*.”

“*Si, grazie, amore,*” Stella said with her beautiful fangy smile.

Fox grinned at her. “They’ll have you speaking Italian in no time. The trouble is, the Italian they speak is so antiquated that it would get you laughed out of the canals of Venice.”

Dom threw back his head and laughed. “That may be true, Fox.”

After breakfast Fox volunteered to clean up, and Dom tossed her over his shoulder and carried her back downstairs.

“Tell me something, *piccolina,*” he said, tossing her onto the bed.

“What?”

“Did you make those pancakes from scratch?”

“Yep. Why?”

“Well...I don’t think we have any wheat flour alternatives in the house, do we?”

She gasped and clapped her hand over her mouth, her belly doing a flip. “I didn’t even think of it! Dom, I wasn’t testing you, I swear!”

“I believe you, *bambina.* But I still have to spank you.”

She gave him her best puppy dog eyes. “You don’t *have* to spank me.”

He smirked. “Yes, I do. It will help you remember next time. Now, be a good girl and take off your clothes.”

She sat on the bed feeling defeated. “I don’t *want* to be spanked, Dom!”

“That’s the bitch of it, isn’t it?” he said lightly. “Come on, if I have to strip you and put you in position, I am going to

make your butt even sorrier than it's going to be.”

Her belly flipped again. She scrambled off the bed and pulled off the t-shirt and boxer briefs she had borrowed from Dom since she didn't have a change of clothes there. Dom patted his knee. She went reluctantly to him and he guided her gently over his lap.

“Did you read any of those blogs?” he asked.

Odd time to start a conversation. “Ye-es.” she said from her muffled position.

“I learned all kinds of ways to spank you better. You gotta love the internet, right?” With that, he started spanking, still conversing with her as if they were sitting down over a cup of coffee for a chat. The sting of his hand was quickly turning into that slow burning feeling. “So I'm supposed to give your butt a warm up with my hand or a wooden spoon first,” he said, spanking first one cheek and then the other, over and over again. She flinched and wriggled, but he held her firmly. It seemed like it went on forever, until her entire bottom felt like it was on fire. Then he stopped and rubbed her hot cheeks. “And then I rub for a few minutes.”

“Please, Dom. Please let me up?”

He pulled Kate to sitting on his knee, then swung one leg to the other side of his waist so she sat straddling him. He cupped her hot cheeks in his hands and leaned forward and nibbled at the stiff peak of her nipple.

“Tell me why I should let you up, *piccolina*?”

“Um. Because...I’m very, very sorry and I promise it won’t happen again?”

He laughed. She was absolutely adorable. “I wonder if I can have sex with you and spank you at the same time?” he mused. Her little body shivered at that and he laughed again. “Come here, let’s try.”

He stood up and tossed her on the bed, crawling up on it, himself. He knelt, sitting back on his heels and pulled Kate up so she sat down on his erection facing away from him, then he pushed her torso down until her head rested on the bed. She looked uncomfortable, so he grabbed a pillow and stuffed it under her chest. He manipulated her hips, enjoying the incredibly beautiful view of her reddened cheeks spread wide over his lap, the long slender arch of her back. He loved the sprawl of her blond waves on the bed where she lay, face turned to the side, mouth open, eyes squeezed shut. He brought his hand down and smacked her ass.

“Mmm,” she said, moving her hips up and down over his cock.

Smack. He brought it down again.

“A-ahh?” She was panting and pumping her adorable hips, making the most beautiful sight, her slender back arched, her beautiful, reddened bottom undulating in his lap, her face with the look of a woman in the throes of ecstasy.

He started to spank her continuously but lightly, which made her go wild, grinding her hips into him and moaning. It took no time at all to bring her to orgasm with the gentle spanking and sex and afterward he nudged her up to all fours so he could finish.

When he was spent, he fell back on the bed and pulled her little body down on top of his, running his hands lightly up and down her back. She was blissed out for a while, but then she finally stirred. She rested her chin on her hands on top of his chest and gazed at him.

“So, Dom, I’m not sure what to think about those blogs. I mean, it seemed like some of those people really think the man knows best.” She sat up, suddenly and straddled him. “Do you think that?” she said with an accusatory tone.

He laughed. “Of course not. Look, those people exist whether they’re practicing domestic discipline or not. From what I read, there are as many different flavors of it as there are people.”

She was still eyeing him suspiciously. “I mean, I don’t know what to think. Admitting it turns me on is one thing, allowing my husband or boyfriend to make all the decisions and vowing to obey him is another. I mean, I consider myself a feminist. I wasn’t planning on taking my husband’s last name.”

He shook his head. “Don’t get wrapped up in some philosophical discussion with people you don’t even know. Bottom line is that they’re all a bunch of spankos and they’re making it real with domestic discipline.”

She chewed her lip, then smiled. “You’re right. They also all claim that the submission has improved their marriages.”

He nodded. “Well, I can believe that. It certainly will end every argument, right? And it’s extraordinarily intimate—more intimate than sex sometimes, don’t you think?”

She flushed and nodded.

“So I can see how that could pull couples closer or straighten them out if they were having problems, can’t you?”

“You’ve had real domestic discipline relationships,” she said.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “I’m not sure they were the same flavor as what’s out there today.”

“So do you think that the man is meant to be in charge?” she demanded.

He hesitated. “Listen. Men and women were different then. The whole dynamic was different. The men were real men. Because they were either working their asses off to put food on their family’s table, or if they came from privilege, they were responsible for being master to all the servants and serfs in addition to their wives and children. Either way, men *had* to be in charge.”

“Which were you?”

“Which...? Oh. The latter. I was an aristocrat—the Count of Parma.”

Kate raised her eyebrows at that. “Hence your last name?”

“Yep. I had vineyards and a winery—more than a hundred servants and peasants I was responsible for.” He shrugged. “So I was accustomed to giving orders and making sure I was obeyed. “It wasn’t that we thought of women as lesser creatures. It wasn’t that way at all. We revered them as different. As special.

“But there was an imbalance of power, and it was necessary for things to evolve the way they have. I don’t think we’ve achieved the right balance yet. Now, women are acting like men and men are acting like women and although the laws and society are far more favorable for women, it seems to me

like things are still off. I don't know what the answer is precisely, but I think it goes back to celebrating the differences between women and men instead of trying to blur the lines."

Kate took his hand in hers and brought his fingers to her mouth, nibbling gently on one of them. He smiled at her, fondly.

"Kate, I have to tell you that some of my reservations about our relationship are around these issues."

She stiffened, as he knew she would. He stroked her thigh to reassure her.

"Obviously it was clear from the start that we were heading into a dominant/submissive relationship. And it seemed to me like you didn't really need any more practice being submissive. And the power balance between us is completely skewed. I'm your boss, for God's sake! Not to mention I'm older, wealthier and of course, physically stronger."

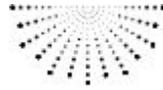
"So?" she said warily.

"So, I just don't know if I'm good for you. At all."

He saw an angry look appearing on her face and she moved as if to dismount. He grabbed her hip and pulled her back. "That's why I've been using my dominance to insist on you developing your own assertiveness."

He felt a flicker of hurt from her, then she stared at him thoughtfully. "You have, haven't you?" she said with a note of wonder. He felt a warm blast of love from her. She lowered her body onto his and nestled her face against his neck, whispering, "Thank you, I think."

CHAPTER EIGHT



It was Dom who had taught Fox about intuition. It was not a vampire skill, per se. Dom had been psychic before he was turned, but using his psychic abilities as a vampire made him physically ill. Even so, he had given Fox the basics of how to tune into his own intuition, before Fox had been turned. After he'd been turned, he'd cautioned him about using those skills, which had never made sense to Fox. From what he could understand, Dom experienced a blackness and a kind of pain when he tapped into his inner knowing. He personally had never experienced any such thing. But he would guess Dom's trouble with it was part of what pushed him to study all the consciousness expansion that he did.

One of the first things Dom had taught him was that intuition is not fear. When it comes, it is a calm sense of knowing. Which unfortunately, doesn't mean it won't be about something fearful.

In this case, it was. What was going down in Europe with the vampire community made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. And he was quite certain that very soon it would involve them, too.

He'd been trying to keep Dom engaged and focused on the problem. Which was tricky because it seemed like his budding

romance with Kate was something serious. And he didn't want to thwart that—he honestly had never seen Dom so animated, so interested in anything besides his sculpting before. He loved Kate and Dom both dearly. Seeing Dom so changed, so engaged with life for the first time, was pure joy.

But Dom's safety was at stake. All of them were at risk, but especially Dom. He checked his watch: 2 am. Dom should be upstairs soon. That was usually the time Kate went to bed and he reemerged from his bedroom. Sure enough, fifteen minutes later, he heard the door at the top of the stairs open and Dom came out.

"I heard from Randolph again," he said.

"What did you learn?"

"It sounds like more and more vampires are falling to Roxanna. Vampires who know them report they have lost all of their former personalities and preferences, even memories. They're becoming almost zombie-like. And Dom, she's converting them *by the hundreds*."

Dom looked at him seriously.

"Randolph's scared. He didn't say so, but I can tell. It sounds like anyone who hadn't been converted is going into hiding."

Dom sat down and closed his eyes, touching the tips of his fingers together. It was a good sign—Dom did this when he was tapping into his intuition. He was careful not to make any distracting noises as he sat watching Dom's still figure, waiting.

After about fifteen minutes, Dom's eyes snapped open. "She's turning them a second time. Same process as an

original turning—taking blood and giving it, just that she’s doing it to a vampire instead of a human.”

Dom rubbed his temples, wincing with the pain that using his psychic abilities brought on. “I don’t know what she needs the older vamp blood for, though.” He stood up and crossed the room to the bathroom, and Fox heard him throwing up in the toilet.

Fox shut his laptop and stood up as well. “What would help?” he asked quietly, standing in the open bathroom door. “Some water? Tea?”

“Tea. Thanks, Fox,” Dom grunted, rinsing his mouth out with water from the tap. That was one thing to be said about Dom. He might be gruff and overbearing at times, but he was also appreciative and kind. Dom had been part of the Italian aristocracy before he was turned. He’d been waited on hand and foot by an army of servants. There were many—well, there *had* been many more before Roxanna—older vampires who turned and kept scores of younger vampires for the sole purpose of serving them.

Not Dom. He didn’t expect to be served, though something about him made everyone—vampire and mortal alike—want to please him. And he always showed his gratitude, which just made them want to give him more.

“No problem.” Fox went to the kitchen and put the kettle on, looking through his extensive tea collection. He may be British born, but living in Tucson, he’d developed a knowledge of the uses of many herbal teas and had even developed a fondness for the taste. He picked out two herbals that were good for calming the belly and called out, “Chamomile or mint?”

Dom threw up again and groaned. “You pick.”

He picked mint and tossed a tea bag into a mug and dripped a glob of honey on top of it. When the kettle whistled, he poured the steaming water on top of the tea bag and honey glob and stirred.

Dom came into the kitchen and threw himself into a chair. Fox placed the steaming mug in front of him. “Thank you,” Dom said, giving him a faint smile.

He sat down across from Dom. “So. She’s coming for you, right?”

“Is that what you see, Fox?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see things like you. But I just feel certain that it’s true.”

Dom’s shoulders sagged and he stared into his tea.

He took a deep breath. He already knew this wasn’t going to go over easily. “Dom, I think we need to find a way to help them.”

Dom shook his head. “What can we do? We’re in Tucson. Until things take form here, we do nothing.”

“But, Dom. Vampires are scared. They don’t understand what’s going on or how to protect themselves. Couldn’t you come up with some kind of strategy that they could employ? Either to protect themselves or to turn the changed ones back?”

“Your faith in my abilities is way too high, Fox. I don’t have a clue how to protect against this, nor how to reverse it.” He shook his head. “And it’s not our problem.”

“Jesus, Dom! We have to take care of our own or there will be no good vampires left! Don’t you remember that Niemoller poem that used to run in Dear Abby about no one speaking up

when the Nazis came for each different group so at the end there was no one to speak up for them?”

Dom looked at him like he was crazy.

“Well, anyway, we need to band together now! To stop that bitch Roxanna—to save the vampires who have been twice turned! We have to do something,” he implored.

Dom buried his head in his hands. “Fox...” he said heavily.

He dreamed about Roxanna. He was having sex with her standing up, her long slender legs wrapped around his waist, her back pressed against the wall of the kitchen at No Return—obviously it was the redux of the sex he’d had with Kate there.

He was ready to climax and he struck her vein. She struck his at the same time, drawing deeply. When he realized she wasn’t going to stop, he drew her blood with renewed vigor, not about to stop until she did. Her fingernails were digging deeply into his arms and he could feel her writhing like a snake against him. There came the realization that she was not ever going to stop drinking and that made him wonder if she’d be his creature, then or if he would be hers? Did the oldest blood win? She had the combined blood of at least ten vamps older than him. He felt a burning all over, a feeling he’d entirely forgotten from his first turning. He forced himself awake then with a grunt, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

He got up and peed and splashed his face with cold water, then headed upstairs for a cup of coffee. Kate would be gone already, she was giving piano lessons all day. He opened the

door at the top of the stairs and was instantly scorched with a blinding light. It seared his eyes and smote his flesh, causing him to yell out loud. He slammed the door closed again, feeling the heat of burnt skin, unable to see anything. His eyes were burning, his heart was pounding.

Roxanna.

He stumbled blindly downstairs and into the bathroom to splash cold water on his eyes. It soothed them a bit. He closed the toilet lid and sat on it, calming his breath. It could be an accident. He didn't think Kate would make that mistake, but it was possible. He still could only see a blinding light with his visual field, so he felt his way into the bedroom to locate his phone. The trouble was, he couldn't see the display. In this day and age of cell phones and stored numbers, the only number he knew by heart was Stella's. He ran his fingers over the phone. Unfortunately, it was a touch screen, which meant there were no buttons he could sense with his fingertips. He'd have to try to go by memory. He turned it on and started touching around the bottom of the screen. It took a long time, but eventually he stumbled on the voice dial feature.

“Please speak the name or number you wish to call.”

Thank god. “Kate,” he said urgently.

She didn't answer. He left a terse message. “Kate. There's sunlight in the living room. I need to know if you left something open. Call me right away. We're trapped in our rooms until it's fixed. But listen carefully—DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT come here if you didn't leave something open yourself. Call me.”

He hung up and suddenly felt a stab of fear. *Stella and Fox.* They could be in imminent danger. He needed to warn them before they woke up and walked out of their rooms. He

tried again to locate the voice dialer. *Damn*. He should have called Stella first to warn her. She could have called Kate for him. Now he was wasting precious time while she or Fox might wake up and get burnt to a crisp anytime. He finally stumbled on the voice dialer function again and practically shouted Stella's name, his hands trembling.

"Dom?" She said groggily.

"Don't leave your room. There's sunlight in the living room. I just got burnt."

"How bad?"

"Indirect light. First and second degree. Biggest problem is that I can't see. Call Fox to warn him then call me back."

Thirty seconds later he heard Stella gasp and Fox curse. They had materialized into his room. Why hadn't he thought of that?

"You okay?" Fox's voice was deepened with sleep, but clearly worried.

"Yeah. Blinded. Temporarily, I hope." He heard Stella walk to the bathroom and run the faucet. When she returned, she pressed a cold washcloth gently over his eyes.

"What's going on?" Fox asked.

"I don't know yet. I left a message with Kate but she's teaching all day so her phone's off."

Stella blew out her breath. "We could call Marta. Then erase it from her after she shuts the blinds or door or whatever it is."

Marta was their house cleaner who came in twice a week to clean and do laundry for the three of them. They paid her well to come in the evenings, rather than the daytime, and he'd

planted the hypnotic suggestion that she never touch the blinds. “No,” he said sharply. “First of all, I don’t think she can fix the blinds when I’ve got her programmed not to touch them. Second of all, I don’t want her in danger if it was not Kate who opened them.”

“Okay, let’s be rational here,” Fox said. “Roxanna wants your blood. You’re of no use to her burnt to a crisp.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Stella said.

“Fox, you keep trying Kate. I’m having a helluva time using my phone when I can’t see. Keep me posted. I’m going to take a cool shower.”

“Okay, I’ll keep you posted,” Fox said. “If you need anything, just materialize to my room. Are you able to transport that way?”

“I don’t know. I was so shaken up I didn’t even think to try.”

His two friends dematerialized and he stood up. His body was still trembling from the shock of the burns. It was mostly his face and arms that had been affected, but his eyes were causing him real pain. He could feel tears running out of the outer and inner edges and since vampires cry blood, that was going to be messy.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed that Fox must be right. It had been Kate. He’d jumped to the conclusion it was Roxanna because of his conversation the night before with Fox and the dream he had woken to.

But *Jesus*. How could she? He’d thought he’d made it perfectly clear how dangerous it was to let light in the house. Well, if Kate had wondered what a real punishment spanking was like, she was going to find out. He felt his way to the

closet and picked out a wide, flexible leather belt. He tossed it on the bed. Then he went to the bathroom and stood under a cool shower, trying to calm the burns on his skin. He air dried, because the thought of rubbing a towel over his blistered skin was too painful. He wet the washcloth again with cool water and lay down on the bed naked with the washcloth over his eyes. Nothing to do now but wait. His belly rumbled.

It was three hours before Fox called him. “It was Kate. She’s on her way.”

He grunted in response and hung up. By the time he got dressed, he heard Kate calling his name with a note of panic in her voice. “Dom? Dom, I’m here!” He heard the back door bang open and then shut. He was waiting at the top of the stairs when she knocked there. “Dom? It’s safe!”

He opened the door and he felt her jump back in surprise.

“Oh Dom,” she gasped. He was sure that the sight of him was not pretty. He was too irritated to speak to her yet. He walked past her to the kitchen and started feeling his way to the refrigerator. “You can’t see,” she spoke in an anguished whisper. “Please, Dom—let me. You’re hungry?”

He took a step back from the fridge to allow her in.

“What sounds good? A sandwich?”

“Yeah. Make three. Fox and Stella will be hungry too.”

“Your—your eyes,” she whispered.

“It’s temporary. Like snow blindness,” he said tersely. He sure hoped it was temporary, anyway. “I need to go let Stella and Fox know that it’s safe.”

He left her to it and felt his way down the corridor to the stair door to Stella’s wing. He knocked on the door and she

opened it right away. Like him, she'd been waiting and ready for the word that it was safe to come out.

“All clear. Will you tell Fox? And maybe run interference for me with him while Kate and I *discuss* this?”

“You bet.”

He didn't have to explain anything to Stella. She was a no-questions-asked type anyway, but he also knew that she understood the dynamic he had going with Kate.

Back in the kitchen Kate said in a tiny voice, “Here you go, Dom.” She put a hand very lightly on his arm to guide him to a chair where the sandwich was waiting for him. “What else can I do?”

“Are you finished with your lessons for the day?”

“Yes. I canceled the last one when I finally got the message. I'm so sorry, my phone was—

“Go wait for me in the bedroom,” he interrupted.

“Okay,” she whispered.

Kate's knees were jelly. She tripped down the stairs and into Dom's bedroom with her heart pounding in her throat. *Oh God*. There was a belt on the bed. She was sure it was purposeful. This was it.

Her first real punishment spanking. She didn't count the time he spanked her to tears over snapping at him, because he hadn't really been angry then and he had done it to relieve her stress. This time he was angry—she could tell. She paced

around the room, tears choking her. Her face burned with the pressure of them. She sat on the bed and started to cry.

The door opened and Dom filled the doorway, holding a wooden spoon. She stood up and ran to him, clutching his arm so he could find her in space. “Dom, I’m so sorry. I was in a hurry and I just totally forgot that I’d opened the shutters.” Her tears started up fresh again.

To her surprise, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She sobbed into his chest. When she had calmed down a bit, he drew her away and looked in her direction, although his blind eyes missed focusing on her eyes. They were a horrible sight—bloody mucous was oozing out of the inner and outer corners of his eyes and the whites were completely bloodshot. His skin was as red as a lobster, like a redhead who’d spent all day at the beach without sunscreen. Some places had weeping blisters.

“Kate, there’s no excuse for your irresponsibility. I thought I made it clear how serious it was to leave the shutters closed.”

“You did,” she choked. “You absolutely did. I know and I feel so bad,” her voice broke again and she drew in several hiccupping breaths.

Dom just waited.

“Are you going to spank me?” she asked in a whisper.

“What do you think I should do?” he asked quietly.

Ah. This was the consent piece, again. He wasn’t going to hurt her without her permission. Of course she didn’t want to be spanked. Especially not with his belt. But she’d caused him to be badly hurt and she felt absolutely horrible about it. And spanking was the solution on the table. She leaned her forehead against his chest and nodded. She couldn’t bring

herself to say the words—to actually ask him to spank her. He understood.

“Take off your clothes,” he commanded.

He went to the bed, reaching his legs in front of him tentatively, until one of them hit the edge of it. He sat down, turning his face in her direction.

Knowing he was blind somehow made stripping off her clothes a little easier, but not that much. There was something about baring herself to be punished that made her feel so very small and vulnerable.

“Can I just pee first?” she asked in voice that sounded too squeaky.

He nodded without comment. He still looked so stern and remote. Her thighs trembled as she peed and her breath was coming in quick little gasps. She returned and stood in front of him, her belly doing flip flops. He still held the wooden spoon in one hand. He felt for her hips and then pushed her across his knee, with her head resting on the bed.

There was no waiting in anticipation this time. It wasn't a game. He started immediately spanking hard with the spoon, taking her breath away with the thud of it. She gasped and squirmed. He threw his free leg over to scissor hers so that she was firmly pinned across his knee. It was worse than any spanking he'd given her, and this was just the warm up. As the burn increased, she struggled harder to escape the punishing smacks of the wooden spoon. It seemed he was applying it all over her already burning bottom—smarting every inch until she imagined it was as red as his burnt skin.

“Please, Dom!” she was starting to panic. “Stop! Please!” Fear had welled up in her. She couldn't possibly take any

more, she was sure of it. And he was so angry, he was sure to overdo it. And that wasn't even considering his vampire strength. *Oh God*, were his fangs out? He'd warned her to be careful of him when he was angry. She was flipping out completely. She reached a hand back to block the spoon and felt Dom's body jerk in response. He snatched her wrist and pinned it behind her back.

"Do *not* reach, Kate! I could break your fingers that way." Then he gave her five of the hardest spanks she had ever felt. She screamed bloody murder the whole time, trying in vain to get free of his merciless hold.

He lifted her abruptly onto her feet, then and rubbed her bottom. She was completely agitated and confused. "Go stand in the corner. I think you need a break," he said in the most ordinary tone, as if he hadn't just spanked the living daylights out of her. *Please say that was enough*, she prayed.

He'd learned these things from the damn blogs. Warm ups and corner times and giving a break. She started to rub her bottom and then stopped abruptly and peeked back at him. That was something that wasn't allowed, according to many "heads of households" on the blogs. But then she realized he couldn't see her anyway. She leaned her head into the corner, sobbing and rubbing her blazing bottom.

"Where is your bag?" he asked her.

She was too confused to even know what he meant. She peeked to see him feeling around on the dresser for her purse. She kicked at the wall. She felt so bad about herself at that moment. She banged her head on the wall a few times.

"*Stop that.*" Dom barked. She jumped and turned around. He walked over to her and took her shoulders. "Calm down, Kate," he said sternly.

Her bag was on his shoulder and he turned to it now, and reached into it. She stared at him dumbly, shifting from foot to foot as if she might somehow alleviate the burn she was feeling. After a moment, his hand emerged with her flower essences. He unscrewed the top and held the dropper out to her, blinking rapidly, his eyes trying to focus. She took his wrist and guided it over her open mouth and then made an “o.k.” sound. He squirted a dropperful into her mouth and then another into his own. She couldn’t have been more surprised that he would remember the flower essences and think to administer them now.

She looked at the bed and saw he had stacked the pillows in a pile while she was in the corner, and the belt was lying next to them. She felt the anxiety welling up in her again. “Dom,” she pleaded through her tears. “Dom, *please*. Please don’t be angry with me. I’m *so* sorry.”

The banging of her head against the wall had really thrown him. He realized with a bit of a shock that the reason Kate couldn’t calm her emotions was because of his own. He’d been prickly and irritated with her and she was absolutely freaking out. He could feel guilt and fear and agitation radiating from her. He took a deep breath and exhaled, listening into how his body reacted to the flower essences. It really was powerful stuff.

“Kate,” he said in a much gentler voice. “*Bambina*. It’s okay. I’m sorry I seemed angry. I’m not.”

He could feel her resistance to that and he said it again. “I’m *not* angry. I promise you. I admit that I was irritated, but I’ve already let it go. I got it out with the wooden spoon.” He

reached back and rubbed her backside. He scooped her into his arms and walked to the bed, banging his shin against it despite his efforts to feel with his legs. He sat down and cradled her in his arms.

“You made a mistake. It happens. I’m going to punish you for it and all will be forgiven. And then I will never mention it again.”

She nodded tearfully into his neck. He rubbed her back. They sat that way for a few minutes and her breath started to calm.

“I’m scared,” she admitted in a small voice.

His heart lurched. He kissed her head. “I know you are, *bambina*. But you can trust me. Yours isn’t the first bottom I’ve whipped in my life,” he said, patting her backside softly.

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she squeaked.

He stood her up and got to his own feet. “Lie over those pillows there,” he said, waving his hand in the general direction of the stack. He was starting to be able to make out shadows now, which was a great improvement to the searing white light that had been floating in his visual field.

He heard her obey and he picked up the belt. He blinked at her form, trying to take in the shape. Actually, whipping someone blind was *not* in his repertoire. What had he been thinking? Spanking with her over his lap had been easy because her body was so close to his that he knew where everything lay. But this position?

He reached out his hand to verify that she was lying exactly as he thought she was. He found the two dimples at the back of her pelvis. He traced lower to find the top of her butt crack. “If I strike you here or higher I want you to say the words ‘too high’. *Capiche?*”

“*Capiche,*” she agreed.

He brought his hand down past where the butt meets thigh. “If I strike you here or lower you will say ‘too low’. Got it?”

“Yes.”

He took a deep breath and held the intent that he would deliver each stroke exactly where he meant to and began. The slap of leather on flesh was loud, and her cries were even louder. It pained him to hurt her. There was nothing sexy about this spanking.

He gave her fifty strokes—enough to make it memorable for the next day or two. He couldn’t tell how they colored her skin. She didn’t scream this time—the cuddle they’d had had settled her into her punishment. She lay submissively, crying hard, but not moving. She did croak “too low” once but he’d been aiming for the juncture between her bottom and thighs, so he didn’t worry. When he finished, he scooped her up and climbed to the head of the bed, leaned back against the headboard and cuddled her in his arms.

“I’m sorry I scared you,” he murmured, stroking her hair. “I didn’t mean to.”

She buried her face into his neck, her salty tears stinging his sensitive skin. Her arms were tangled around his neck tightly. She kissed his neck and then laid her head on his shoulder. He stroked her back and kissed her hair. “I love you, *piccolina,*” he murmured. He felt a jolt of a reaction from her

that felt almost like fear—a shock—followed immediately by an enormous wave of gratitude and love. Her arms tightened even more around his neck until he had to say, “Easy, *bambina*. My skin is sore.”

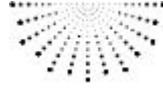
“Oh God!” she exclaimed, releasing her hold on his neck completely. She sat back from him and brushed her fingers on the hot skin of his face. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s forgiven. Completely.”

“Say it again?” she whispered. At first he thought she meant to repeat that she was forgiven, but then he realized.

“I love you, Kate,” he said, cradling her head in his hands as if to look into her eyes, if only he could. “I love you.”

CHAPTER NINE



Fox heard Kate screaming and he flashed to the doorway to Dom's stairs. Stella arrived a second before him, blocking the way. He was in full defense mode, his fangs starting to elongate. He didn't know where Dom got off, but hurting Kate was not something he would ever allow.

"This is between the two of them, Fox," Stella coaxed, taking his arm.

He pulled away. "The hell it is," he snarled.

"Listen to me," she said, her face very close to his. "Kate likes to be spanked."

She let that sink in as he shook his head in denial. "She's not liking it now," he said grimly.

"I know, but it's what they do. It's how it's gone down with them from the very start. Trust me—I was there. I saw them the first time he spanked her—remember? Up in the office that night?"

He didn't answer.

"So that's the way Kate likes it. And Dom likes giving it to her. And that means it's how they're going to resolve their conflicts, too."

He hesitated. He remembered that morning Kate had been playing guitar with him and he'd smelled both fear and arousal on her when Dom came to find her. Could Stella be right? Maybe. But if not—if Dom was hurting Kate against her will and he did nothing to stop it...

“Look at me. I'm telling you the truth.” Stella was inches away from his face, right up in his grill. Technically, as his maker, she had the power to keep him from interfering. But she never exercised that over him. “Fox. It's between the two of them. Do you really think Dom would hurt her?”

“He's hurting her right now!” he snapped, but he'd already lost his drive and she knew it.

“Believe me, a sore butt never hurt anyone,” Stella said drily and he suddenly had an image of Dom spanking Stella. *Yeck*. He shook his head to get the image out. Stella was smirking at him as if she knew what he'd been thinking. “Come on, Kate made us sandwiches. They're in the kitchen.”

He followed Stella reluctantly back to the kitchen and sat down to eat the sandwich. He tried not to think about what exactly Dom might be doing. But the more he thought about it, the more Stella's words seemed to make sense. Dom was crazy about Kate. He definitely wouldn't do anything she wouldn't consent to.

It seemed strange to think of Dom spanking anyone. In the entire time he'd spent with Dom as a boy, Dom had never laid a hand on him. Maybe he knew that Fox had already been knocked around enough. He certainly had demanded Fox's complete respect and his very best, but it was always through love.

He remembered once he'd come back to Dom's house beaten by one of the men Dom did business with. The man

was a whoremaster. He never knew what business they had together, but he'd been delivering a message for Dom and had accidentally spilled the man's ale because he'd been so startled to see topless women milling about. The whoremaster had beaten him for ogling the women and spilling the drink.

He'd been ashamed. He wasn't going to tell Dom, but of course, Dom could smell his pain the moment he walked in the door and demanded to know what had happened. As soon as it was dark out, Dom had stormed in and kicked the shit out of the guy, disarming and taking down at least five men who were supposed to be providing security. Before he was done, he forced the whoremaster to apologize to *him*, a mere street urchin message boy.

Dom had then spoken to all the whores and customers who had gathered to take in the scene. "You tell everyone that this boy belongs to Dominic DeParma. Anyone who touches him, answers to me." With that, he put his hand on Fox's shoulder and they left.

There were a few more challenges after that, because not everyone heard about the whoremaster's fate, and every time he was harmed or disrespected, Dom intervened with an animal-like ferocity. By the end of that year, it was hard to remember that he had once skulked about the streets. He was clean, well-fed and well-dressed. Though he was only a boy of ten, the working women and the whoremasters of Covent Garden tipped their hats or nodded politely at him when he walked by. The tavern owners poured him a pint of ale or, those who knew him better, a glass of milk, when he came in. When he made visits to conduct Dom's business, he was received with hospitality.

It was not until he was turned that Dom ever used any force with him. Once he was a vampire it was a little different. Vampires are more like animals. They show dominance to establish pecking order. Dom could freeze him in his skin, or knock the wind out of his chest with a flick of his hand. And he did it anytime Fox showed disrespect. It was custom, it seemed.

He heard the door to Dom's stairs open and Kate emerged, tucked tightly under Dom's arm. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she looked relaxed and almost blissful, as if she'd just had great sex. He shuddered a bit, not wanting to know what their sex life looked like.

Kate drew in a breath and then said, "Stella, Fox, I'm really sorry. I know I put you both in great danger today by leaving the shutters open and I just want you to know that it will never happen again."

He and Stella both stood up from the kitchen table. "You could have killed Dom, you know," Stella said, clearly not letting Kate off the hook. He shouldn't have been surprised that Stella would feel as protective of Dom as he did of Kate.

"Enough." Dom said immediately.

"I just want to know what you're going to do to ensure it doesn't happen again," Stella demanded, folding her arms across her chest.

"I'm not going to touch the shutters again," Kate said firmly. "If I need sunlight, I will go outside and shut the door behind me. And knock before I open it to come in," she added.

Stella nodded. He pulled Kate away from Dom and wrapped his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. "It's okay, kid," he said softly into her hair.

“Thanks, Fox,” she whispered.

“Are you hungry?” Dom asked Kate, solicitously.

“No, not really,” she said.

“Well, I’m certainly not up for leaving the house tonight. How about if we hole up and watch movies?” he suggested to Kate.

“But you can’t even see!” she exclaimed.

“That’s okay. You can watch and I’ll cuddle you.”

Cuddle you? Fox was in complete shock to hear Dominic “I am an island” DeParma, speak with such tender intimacy. And in front of him and Stella, even. He could admit Stella had been right to stop him from barging in on whatever it was that had been going on between them. Obviously it worked quite well for them.

It was true what she’d read about punishment spankings on the blogs. She did feel cleansed of guilt. And Dom had said he’d released his irritation completely. The closeness she felt with him now was amazing.

They were curled up on his bed, watching her favorite movie, *Shakespeare in Love*. Well, she was watching and Dom was holding her. She reached down and ran her hand lightly over her welted skin. She was wearing nothing but one of Dom’s t-shirts, because even the idea of panties over her sore buns sounded painful. The thought of him punishing her made her shiver a little. He’d been the perfect dominant, as far as she was concerned. Holding and comforting her when she was scared but still firmly insisting on her punishment.

Despite the fact that she had no care to ever repeat such an episode, she knew already it was going to be fodder for her fantasies for a long time. Dom really did it for her.

“What are you thinking about?” he murmured in her ear, his voice a low purr. She flushed, realizing he was most certainly picking up the scent of her arousal.

“The spanking you just gave me,” she admitted.

His hand trailed to her bottom, lightly stroking her sore cheek. “You know, I read that fifteen or twenty spansks with a wooden paddle after the belt might prevent these welts.”

She couldn’t find her voice to answer that.

“If you’ll bring me the wooden spoon, we can test it out?”

“No thank you,” she said in a tiny voice.

Dom laughed. “It’s probably too late, anyway.”

She rubbed her backside. “So what’s your opinion on rubbing?”

He laughed. “You mean should it be allowed? I have no problem with it. I think that’s a dumb rule. Personally, I would find the sight of you rubbing your sweet little butt to be visual confirmation that I’ve done my job well.” He gave her a squeeze with that and she smiled up at him, and was thrown again that he couldn’t see her face.

“That’s good,” she confessed. “Because when I was standing in the corner, I was rubbing, and I wondered if you’d care and then I realized you couldn’t see me anyway!”

Dom laughed with her at that. “I’m sure it was a lovely sight. I would’ve melted like butter to see you like that. It’s something to look forward to next time.”

“There’s not going to be a next time,” Kate said firmly, scrambling closer into his arms.

Dom just laughed again. “Oh no? You think you’ll never get in trouble with me again?”

“That’s my hope,” she said in a little voice.

“Then how will I ever turn you on?” Dom said in a low voice and drew her slowly across his lap.

She listened with every cell of her body, waiting, her breath held, to see where exactly this was going. He stroked the curves of her bottom.

“You were a bad girl, today, weren’t you?” he asked, his voice husky.

She felt a surge of arousal. “Yes,” she breathed. He gave her a few gentle slaps, which only hurt because she was still so sore. He followed them with rubbing, which normally helped, but this time even that hurt.

“Bad girls get spanked on their bare bottoms, don’t they?”
A couple more light slaps.

“Yes,” she gasped.

“Bad girls get spanked hard.”

She was breathing hard now, starting to grind her hips into Dom’s lap. He dipped his fingers between her legs, gliding the silky moisture up and down the outside of her pussy. She moaned.

“Did you get spanked hard, Kate?”

“Yessss.”

“Yes. You got spanked with my belt, didn’t you?”

Her belly flipped at the mention of the belt and she moaned again.

“Didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“But you’ll be a good girl now, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes. You’ll get good girl spankings.”

His fingers entered her and she felt a zing of sexual energy run down the insides of her legs to the arches of her feet. Her toes spontaneously curled.

“Good girl spankings are better than bad girl spankings, aren’t they, Kate?”

She gasped as his fingers had started to enter and withdraw deeper and deeper. “Oh God...” she moaned.

“I like to give good girl spankings,” he said and his fingers found that elusive g-spot deep within her as his thumb applied light pressure to her butt hole. She bucked under the magic of his touch, shuddering her release and begging for more before it even ended. He didn’t release her, bringing her over the edge again, this time penetrating her anus with his thumb as his two fingers continued to explore her g-spot. She was begging, moaning, almost crying at the ecstasy as wave after wave of orgasm rolled through her.

When Dom finally released her, he wasted no time in flipping her on her back and freeing his erection. He gave a fangy smile as he covered her body with his own, entering her and holding her shoulders so he could drive deeply. She rolled her head back, lost to the sensation of it, calling out and climaxing when he came, tipping her head back and pulling

his head down to help his fangs find her vein. He struck and suckled, still grinding gently inside her, his heart beating firmly against her own. She sighed. All was right in the world.

Being unable to see did not hinder making love to Kate in the slightest. But as he suckled her vein post-coitally, he “saw” a dancing of lights around her head. *Fairies*. He’d had that feeling before about her, when he’d been sculpting. Somehow, being blind had enhanced his seldom used inner vision. And he didn’t have any of the headache or nausea that he normally did when he tried to call upon it.

“Do you believe in fairies, Kate?” he asked.

“Fairies?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess if I believe in vampires, I have to believe in fairies, too, right?” she said flippantly. But then she added, “Actually, I’ve always loved fairies. When I was a child, I had a picture book about fairies that I used to read over and over again. I pretended that they were watching over me.”

“They are.”

“What do you mean?”

“I see fairies around you now. Being blind has some perks, it seems.”

Kate’s fingers were twined in his hair and she was still undulating slightly. He kissed her fully, then rolled onto his side, facing her. “Can I tell you, something?” He felt like he wanted to offer her something of himself. She’d given him the gift of her complete submission. He was so tired of holding

himself apart from everybody all the time. It felt amazing to be so intimate with someone for the first time in so many hundreds of years.

“Before I was turned I had a gift. God spoke to me. Or so it felt. I saw things—I knew things before they were going to happen. Nowadays you call them psychic abilities. I had it from childhood. It took me a while to learn that not everyone saw the things I did, and so at first I hid it. I thought something was wrong with me. But when I became a man, I saw it differently. I felt blessed. Like I had guidance, angels that watched over me.

“Then I was turned.” His voice broke a little and he was surprised that after all these years there was still emotion there. “I was turned and...God cast me out,” he croaked.

He felt Kate moving closer to comfort him. He stroked her hair. “I think that vampires...vampires don’t... I don’t know,” he sighed.

“Don’t what?” Kate prompted softly.

“Don’t answer to the same God? I don’t know. Do vampires serve a different master? I don’t really believe that, but ever since I was turned, when I cast my mind out to listen to divine guidance, all I see is a blackness instead of light and my head feels like it’s going to split in two. And afterward I throw up.”

“But do you receive guidance?”

“Yes. Usually. But I don’t go there often and I don’t stay for long.”

Kate was silent for a moment. “Maybe it has nothing to do with God, but it’s about your new biology. Maybe your brain works a little differently as a vampire than it did as a mortal.

And it changes the way you experience receiving guidance. Because it seems to me like if God cast you out, you wouldn't still be receiving information.”

Dom's eyes burned with tears. He'd been in an existential crisis for almost five hundred years. Hearing a new opinion on the matter—hell, just being able to discuss it, was clearing a film from the lens through which he'd been viewing life.

“Are you all right?” Kate asked sharply.

“Shh, yes. Don't worry—vampires cry blood. It looks frightening but it's normal.”

Her fingers wended through his hair again and he felt a blast of her love surrounding him.

Kate woke still snuggled against Dom. His skin did not look as red as it had the day before and when he opened his eyes and blinked at her, she could tell he was focusing.

“Can you see me?” she asked, stroking his hair back from his face.

“Mmm.” He sat up on his elbows and blinked, looking around the room. “Yes, it's better. It's like trying to see in a room with no lights. If I wait a moment, the shapes come into focus.”

“Dom, I'm so sorry...”

“Enough. No more apologizing. You're forgiven, remember?”

“That doesn't mean I'm not still sorry,” she said, kissing his temple to show her gratitude.

“Let’s see how your bottom fared,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her down into what was becoming their favorite position. He stroked her bottom, inciting a delicious shiver through her. “I can’t see that well, but I think I left marks this time,” he said matter-of-factly. For some reason that matter-of-fact tone gave her another shiver. It was because she’d deserved those marks—a reminder that she’d had a real punishment at his hands. He let her up and gave her a kiss.

“Kate, do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

“Run and see if the mail has come yet. It gets dropped through the slot in the front door.”

“I know!” she said brightly, happy to do his bidding.

She returned with the letters and dropped them on the bed. He picked them up and fingered them, not able to read the writing.

“Let me help. Do you want me to read who they’re from?”

“No, I’ve got it,” he said, holding up an envelope from Citibank. He ripped it open, peeled a credit card off the paper and handed it to her. It had her name on it.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for all the errands I have you run. It’s also for you to use for anything you need or want, so long as you text or call me to report what you spent it on when you use it for yourself.”

She blushed at that. She was not going to use his credit card for herself. Although the idea of his willingness to be her sugar daddy made her feel a little giddy.

And she found him ingenious with the way he put limits on it. It was the same as his rule about the wheat. By handing her self-governance with the only qualifier that she must be prepared to justify her actions, he effectively ensured she would never be frivolous about any purchase she made, or pastry she ate. But she would never use his credit card for her own purchases.

He seemed to know that, because he tried again, “I don’t care what you buy—I won’t question it, so long as you’ve told me it was important, *capiche?*”

When she just shrugged, he said, “You can simply text me that you need gas in your car. Or that you want to buy your friend lunch. Okay?”

She smiled fondly at him. “I won’t need it. But thank you.”

He frowned, but didn’t look surprised. “I know, but if you do, it would make me happy if you used it.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Dom teased her all week with spanking-related errands, first sending her to Office Max for a “sturdy ruler” and the next day to several drugstores in search of a large wooden hairbrush. At the end of the week, he sent her to Fascinations, the upscale adult boutique where she was required to pick out her very own paddle.

She’d been there before with friends in search of bachelorette party goodies like penis-shaped lollipops and other silly trinkets, but she’d never gone in alone before. It felt a little scarier. The good thing was that Fascinations produced an atmosphere that was as benign as any store at the mall. They had friendly, knowledgeable staff who didn’t act

awkward or size her up as if they were wondering why she was in a sex shop.

The woman working the floor happily led her to their selection of paddles. “The whips and crops are mostly on the wall there, and the paddles are hanging from that display. There are wood and lexan. The lexan isn’t as pretty, but the manufacturer claims it imparts the best sting without bruising.”

“Oh?” Kate choked out, feeling like she must be blushing to her toes.

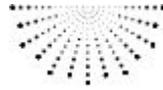
“Do you have any questions about anything?”

“No, thanks,” she managed and didn’t breathe until the salesperson had departed.

It was ridiculous that her fingers were shaking and her heart was running a little too fast as she touched the paddles. She kept thinking about her real punishment spanking. Would Dom use one of these the next time he thought she deserved to be punished? Her belly was developing a little knot. Of course, this is what he wanted. He knew that this errand would make her all a-twitter.

In the end she purchased two paddles—one wood and one lexan. They put it in a black bag and slipped a couple of condoms in as a treat. She managed a weak smile and escaped as fast as she could, not even daring to think of what Dom might have in mind for using them.

CHAPTER TEN



Randolph's last email sounded like it was written in a near panic. Fox read it again and again.

There's no one I can trust here in London. All the vampires are acting strangely—I can't tell who's working for Roxanna and who isn't. I need to get out of here. Here's my cell number. Call me?

It was just past sundown and Dom and Stella were already out for the evening. He picked up his phone and hesitated. There was a chance Randolph had been turned to Roxanna's side and this was a setup to get to Dom. But no, he trusted Randolph. They had loved each other once, as best they could.

He dialed the number. Randolph picked up on the second ring. “ello?” he said suspiciously.

“It's Fox.”

“Fox,” Randolph exhaled. “Thanks for calling.”

“What's happening there?”

“Well, the nest I live in is still secure, but I don’t know for how long. It seems like other nests in England have been corrupted, as far as we can tell—vampires we knew aren’t themselves anymore. Word is that another nest in London was infiltrated in the past few days, and I feel certain we’re next. Like tonight. Roxanna has power and sheer numbers in her favor—there’s no way we could fight her.”

Fox’s heart was beating fast. “Okay,” he said slowly. “I’m at home and I’m sending out an energetic marker to where I am in space. Can you find it?”

The phone was silent for a long moment. Then he heard Randolph exhale. “Bloody hell,” he hissed. “I remember you taught me this trick of yours before, I just can’t recall how to find you.”

It was Dom who had created this method of locating each other in space. He and Stella taught him how to use it to safely materialize where the other vampire was. If someone put up his or her energy marker, it meant they were in a place to which it was safe to materialize.

He channeled Dom’s patient teaching now. “Try again,” he said in a soothing voice. “It’s there, and you will find it.”

Twenty seconds went by in silence, and then suddenly Randolph appeared in the living room, looking worried. His brow cleared he saw Fox and he rushed at him, picking him up in a bear hug. The strange familiarity of Randolph was overwhelming. The smell, the handsome face, the manly strength that had been long forgotten came back to him as if they’d been together merely a week ago instead of 34 years.

“Come on,” he said, putting his hand on Randolph’s shoulder. “I’ll pour you a drink and you can catch me up.”

Dom stopped on the step outside his front door as if listening, putting his arm out to stop Kate from going further. He had just taken her out for Spanish tapas at a downtown restaurant that featured flamenco dancing as entertainment and was bringing her to his place to spend the night.

His brows snapped together and he frowned. She heard the door unlock without him touching it, and he took her hand as they stepped into the vestibule where Dom unlocked the second door with his mind. Again he stood listening, with a frown.

“What is it?” she whispered.

He shook his head and opened the door slowly, holding her firmly behind his body with a hand on her arm. He stopped there in the doorway, but allowed Kate to come out from behind him.

The house was absolutely packed with people. No, not people, actually—vampires, unless she was mistaken. They were lounging on every sofa and chair, they were gathered talking in the kitchen and in the hallway. They lined the walls of the living room.

“What. The. Fuck.”

Fox caught sight of them from the kitchen and hurried forward, looking extremely anxious. Dom stepped back out on the porch and Fox followed, shutting the door.

“Dom. I’m sorry. I’ll take care of it,” he said and she thought she saw real fear there. Then she looked at Dom and she saw why. His fangs were fully extended and he looked like

he was ready to kill someone. He picked up Fox by the collar and threw him up against the door.

“What is going on?” Dom hissed.

“I gave my marker to Randolph. And then he brought in a few friends. And then they gave themselves as a marker and...” Fox looked sick. “They just keep showing up. But don’t worry. I’ll get rid of them. I’ll find a place for them to stay tomorrow. Kate can help me rent a place for them in the morning.”

Dom’s arm shot out and he pushed Kate firmly behind him again. “No, she can’t. You keep her out of it.”

Stella’s car pulled into the driveway and she flashed to the scene, standing next to Kate, protectively.

“I can help Fox, Dom,” Kate said.

“Shut up, Kate,” Stella said in a low voice. “Don’t call attention to yourself.”

Dom held up his hand in the shape of a “C” and Fox started choking, dropping to his knees, his hands holding his throat.

“I’m sorry—” Fox choked out.

“Dom, stop!” she cried out, alarmed.

“Shh.” Stella covered her mouth and pulled her backward slowly. “Don’t make eye contact,” she said softly. “He can’t kill Fox that way, he’s just punishing him.”

“What—what’s he doing?” she said with alarm. “Is that the Darth Vader move?”

Dom released Fox, who stumbled back to his feet and faced Dom with his hands outstretched. “I’m sorry,” he said

imploringly. “I know this is bad. I fucked up. But I will fix it. I will have every one of them out of here by tomorrow night.”

Dom ran his hands through his hair and then let out a snarling roar that was like no sound Kate had ever heard before.

“It’s too late, dammit!”

“I know,” Fox said wretchedly. “I know. I’m so sorry.”

“Come on, I’ll take you home.” Stella said in her ear.

“No, I’m not leaving,” she exclaimed, trying to pull her arm away from Stella’s impossibly firm grip.

“You can’t help either of them and Dom’s dangerous right now.”

Dom had turned when he heard Kate speak and was looking at her with a look that could burn right through her. Like she was prey. There was a tense moment of silence as Stella tried to pull Kate backward and Kate struggled to free herself.

“Let her go,” he growled at Stella. “*Now.*”

Stella stood in front of her to block his view.

“She’s mine,” he bit out, shoving Stella aside and looking at her with the same devouring stare. He put two hands around her waist and lifted her in the air as if she weighed nothing, then shifted her to just one arm wrapped around her legs, just below her butt, as he opened the front door. Looking back she saw Stella exchange worried glances with Fox. She balanced herself with her hands on his shoulders as he strode past all the vampires, opened the door to the stairs where she ducked to avoid getting her head whacked, and walked briskly down them with her.

“No blood, Dom!” Stella was following along behind, trying to get his attention. “Don’t bite her. Look at me.”

He didn’t look back, but he spoke through gritted teeth, “I won’t bite.”

Stella stopped on the stairs meeting Kate’s eye over the top of Dom’s with a worried look. “Scream if he bites,” she said to her, sending a wave of panic through her. Dom whipped around and bared his fangs, hissing, which caused Stella to flinch and take a step backward.

So she officially had a death wish. If Stella and Fox’s fear of their closest friend was any indicator, she should be very, very afraid right now. And she was. But he wouldn’t really hurt her if he could help it. Would he? They had a trust between them that he knew when to stop. She prayed he would—or rather, could honor that this time.

When he reached his bedroom, he dropped her on the bed and ripped her shirt straight down the middle. Her bra received similar treatment. Her jeans were torn half way down one leg and then tossed. Underpants, snapped. He removed his own clothes as quickly (though not by ripping, she noticed), licked two fingers and tested her readiness. And she was. Something about being manhandled that way had her turned way on, despite the obvious danger she was still in. He growled when he felt her slickness, which she took as his approval.

He entered her then, his cock so hard and long that she cried out from the intensity of it. He couldn’t seem to go slow, pounding into her so hard that she gave up trying to meet him in any way, but rather just gave herself over to his direction, his ride. Any mismatch could easily result in pain, so she let him drive. And drive he did—with an animal-like snarl, his face still enraged, his fangs long, he pumped in and out of her,

over and over until she thought she would split in two. It was the most terrifying and simultaneously arousing experience she had ever had. When he finally came, he hovered over her neck, those ferocious fangs gleaming as he stared at her jugular.

She wrapped both her hands around her neck. “No biting,” she whispered. He closed his eyes, pulled out and flipped off her so quickly she groaned. She sat up and watched him pace around the room like a caged lion. Clearly he had not burned off any steam at all.

He passed by the mirror over his dresser and held his palm out to it, pumping it once, as if to high five it. The glass burst and shattered into a million pieces. Without looking, he swung his arm backward, waving his palm toward the master bathroom and she heard the same splintering crash from that room. He looked around as if to see what else he might destroy.

And he was still rock hard—his cock popping straight out from him and waving as he walked. She got up and went to him, kneeling before him and taking him fully into her mouth. He held her head with both hands and groaned. She worked him hard and fast at first to get his attention and then slowed it down, hoping he would follow her rhythm. It worked for a few moments but then he pulled out and pulled her up, bending her over the dresser after brushing the glass on the floor aside with his foot. He put his mouth on her core, sucking and licking into her with an intensity that blew her apart. She shook with orgasm after orgasm until her trembling legs were only being held up by the firm grip of his hands on her upper thighs.

She was so far gone that she could not have told him what her name was if he asked it, when he rose up and entered her

from behind. She tensed up, afraid he would crush her against the hard dresser, but he held her hips firmly away from it as he pounded into her, the sound of their meeting flesh making a firm slapping sound. He came again, but again he pulled out immediately afterward and paced around. But something in him was softening. She wasn't sure how she could tell, but she could.

She slowly unbent herself from the dresser and he flashed to her. "Be careful of the glass," he muttered, scooping her into his arms and carrying her to the bed. She nearly wept at that. Surely if he was worried about her feet being cut, he was coming back to himself. And she was perfectly safe. She touched his face and he met her eye for a brief moment before he gently lowered her to the bed. She curled up her well-used body on the bed and watched him. His pacing had slowed and his breath had deepened a bit. He stopped and looked at her for a long time.

"Can you stand it one more time?" He sounded more like himself now. His tone was grim, but he was her Dom again.

No. She nodded. His eyes still burned through her as he slowly came to the bed and laid down behind her in the spooning position. He pushed into her, going slowly this time. At least at first. They ended up in some sort of twisted position, her legs tangled over his torso as he used her body to finally find his way home. He didn't pull out or roll away this time. He stroked lightly up and down her body, stopping to caress her breasts and bottom.

"Give me your neck now." It was phrased as a command, but he was examining her face and it seemed to her that if she were still afraid, he wouldn't bite her. She tilted her chin to the side and offered it up. He rolled on top of her and stroked at

her vein a few times with his fang, as if savoring it before he struck. He suckled gently and then licked the holes closed.

“Thank you,” he said softly, kissing her along her hairline before meeting her lips.

She was still trembling all over, but mixed with the adrenaline were the pleasure hormones—the dopamine and nitric oxide from the orgasms, giving her a distinct, drugged-like affect.

“Dom?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to. But if you can...well, what’s going on? Who are all those vampires and what does it mean?”

Dom sighed and let his head fall down onto his arm. “It’s bad. It’s so bad. Remember I told you about that bitch of a vampire, Roxanna?”

She nodded.

“Well, they’re all here hiding from her. Which will lead her here as sure as the sun sets. And she’s been looking for me. She wants me dead.”

“Why?” she asked, shocked.

“She wants my blood. As far as we can tell, she’s draining old vampires for their blood. I’m not sure how, but she uses it to make younger vampires her minions.”

Kate took a deep breath and threaded her fingers through his. “Well, you could stay at my place. I could board up all the windows so no light gets in.”

“No, Kate.” He sounded very tired. “I’m going to have to face her now, there’s no hiding from this. And I don’t want you involved at all. I don’t want any of those vampires seeing your face, or knowing you exist, although that will be hard since I just showed up with you here. I can’t see you at all until this is all through.”

She shook her head. “I know I’m not a vampire, but I want to be with you in this.”

“Are you nuts?” he snapped.

Then, seeing her hurt, he said more gently, “Thank you, *tesoro mio*. You are so sweet. But if Roxanna knows I care about you, she will not hesitate to use you against me—she has no problem with collateral damage. Until this is over, I want you to pretend like I’m nothing more than the owner of the club where you play once a week. No phone calls, no texts, and we can’t see each other at all. You can drive Fox’s car instead of mine.” Dom stood up and started getting dressed. He tossed her one of his t-shirts and a pair of his boxer briefs. “I’m really sorry about your clothes. I’m sure you could borrow something from Stella if you don’t want to wear that out of here.”

Her vision was blurring with tears. She shook her head.

“Don’t argue with me, Kate. If I have any hope of besting Roxanna at her game, I need to know you’re safe. *Please.*”

She nodded blindly and pulled the t-shirt and boxer briefs on. “Yeah, okay.” She felt like her heart was being squeezed tightly.

He wrapped his arms around her. “Thank you,” he whispered and the note of genuine relief she heard in his voice confirmed how serious this situation was to him.

“How long—?” her voice cracked.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “Probably not long at all. I’m going to ask Fox to be your shadow at night, okay? You can’t be with me, but I don’t want you unguarded.”

“Okay,” she agreed, tears filling her eyes again. Her fear for him was overwhelming. What if he couldn’t fight Roxanna? What if she lost him forever? She shook her head. These were thoughts she couldn’t stand.

Dom pulled open a drawer in his closet and came out with a huge wad of cash. “Here’s some money.”

She started to shake her head but he thrust it at her aggressively. “*Take it.* You might need it. We don’t know where the fuck this is going. And you can use that credit card, too. I don’t think they’re going to be detailed enough to trace my financial records. She’ll find me soon, just through word of mouth.”

She took the money reluctantly.

“Okay, I want you to go home now.”

“No! Dom—” she pleaded.

“Do *not* argue with me.”

“I’m scared,” she croaked.

He took her roughly into his arms and squeezed her so tightly he took her breath away. He murmured something softly in Italian, kissing her hair several times. Then he put her down and held her face in his two hands, looking at her with a fierce intensity. “I’m going to make sure that nothing happens to you. *Capiche?* But I need you to do everything I tell you to. And right now that means getting the hell out of here. Now come on.”

Stella took her home and stood on the porch clearing her throat until Kate remembered to invite her in. She put the tea kettle on and started picking up the clutter, embarrassed. Stella joined her, clearly as incapable of relaxing as Kate. “You don’t have to do that,” she protested, but Stella just ignored her, moving through the little adobe casita with a relentless efficiency. She scrubbed the toilet and bathtub, swept and mopped, vacuumed and dusted while Kate took care of putting all her things where they belonged, washing, folding and putting away her clothes and cleaning out the fridge.

By the time dawn rolled around, her place looked better than it ever had before and she was dead tired. Stella grabbed her, gave her a quick kiss and dematerialized.

She crawled into bed and slept till two in the afternoon. All she wanted to do was call or text Dom, but he had forbidden it. She wondered if she was allowed to contact Fox. That question was answered for her after sundown, when she saw Fox’s car pull up in front of her house. She swung the door open and walked toward the kitchen to get a beer for him, but he called out to her from the porch.

“Kate? Come here for a sec.”

She walked back to the door. “Come on in,” she said with a note of impatience, then she saw why he’d called to her. Fox wasn’t alone. With him was a beautiful male vampire. He looked like he’d been about 35 when he’d been turned. He had shoulder-length brown hair pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and large square jaw. Her eyes went from Fox’s to the vampire’s. Dom had said he didn’t want any of the vampires to see her. But Fox wouldn’t have brought him if he wasn’t safe.

“Kate, this is Randolph,” he introduced her.

She stuck out her hand. “Pleased to meet you. Won’t you come in?”

“Thank you,” he said with a British accent, shaking her hand and following Fox into the house.

“Would either of you like a beer?”

They both accepted her offer and she cracked one for herself, too, sitting down with them in the living area. Randolph was staring at her neck—her carotid artery, to be precise—in a way that made her uncomfortable. It was oddly like having someone ogle her breasts.

“Is Dom okay?”

Fox nodded.

“Did you get everyone out of the house?”

“Yes,” he sighed.

She continued peppering them with questions until they’d told her all they knew, which wasn’t that much. She still hadn’t figured out who Randolph was, either.

She offered them a second beer, but Fox stood up. “Actually, I’m supposed to take you to buy a car tonight,” he said.

“What? No way,” she insisted.

Fox shook his head at her. “Don’t argue,” he said rather grimly. “I’m answering to Dom on this one. Come on, I called some dealerships to make sure they’d stay open for us.”

“Fox, *no*. What are you talking about?”

“Let’s go,” he said, ignoring her protests. She followed dumbly to Fox’s car. She didn’t want a car. She didn’t want Dom to buy her a car. She quite liked sharing Dom’s car, thank

you very much. And the part that frightened her most was that this felt like Dom was putting his ducks in a row in case something happened to him. She blinked back tears as she got in the back of Fox's car and saw Randolph eyeing her throat again.

“So do you two know each other from England, then?”

“Chicago, actually. But like attracts like, I suppose.”

“Right. Probably not that many English vampires around, are there?”

Fox gave a short laugh. “*Gay* English vampires. I guess not in the U.S., anyway.”

“So, were you a couple?”

“Yes,” Fox said without explanation, and Randolph seemed to grow a little stiff.

A thought suddenly occurred to her. “Is your name really Fawkes, as in Guy Fawkes?”

“You just now figured that out?” Fox said drily.

“So did you make up the last name McQueen?”

“What do you think?”

“What was your original first name?”

“That, my love, I'm not going to tell you.”

“Why not?” she asked indignantly.

“Because that boy is dead.”

“Oh. Right.” She could understand that.

Fox pulled into the car dealership. “I'm thinking a Mini Cooper,” he said, turning around and looking at her. “You

would look hot in a little red one.” He had summoned a faint grin. She managed one back at him.

“Yeah, okay. That sounds great,” she said dully.

She ended up with a cream-colored convertible Mini Cooper. She ought to feel like she’d just won the lottery, but instead, driving the beautiful new car Fox picked out and paid in cash for her felt like a defeat of sorts. A step away from Dom.

The next few days continued the same way—either Fox or Stella stayed with her through the night, with no word or contact from Dom, who they said was still okay. She was relieved when Thursday rolled around and they had a gig at a loungey kind of bar near the university.

She sang sad songs that night and Fox didn’t razz her about it. It worked with the atmosphere of the bar and she was able to lose herself for a little while in the music. They took a break between sets and she sipped on a ginger ale with lime. All five of the band members were squeezed into a booth together when an impossibly beautiful woman in short skirt and high heels stopped at their table.

“Well, hello there, Fox,” she purred. Fox froze.

There were five vampires flanking her, all looking deadly.

Fox just stared back at her with hatred in his eyes. This must be Roxanna.

“What, no hello? Where are your manners?” Then she turned to Joe, the band member on the end of the booth. “Get out,” she said.

One of her minions reached down to forcibly help him out of the booth and onto his feet. She saw him stare into Joe’s eyes, no doubt erasing his memory of this event. There was a

scramble of activity as the minions pulled them out of the booth one by one. When it was her turn, she avoided his eyes, but he caught her head and tilted it back. “This one’s got bite marks,” he announced.

“I use her for blood,” Fox said quickly. “She doesn’t know.”

Kate played along. “What? What are you talking about, Fox? What’s going on?”

“Bring her along. She may prove useful,” Roxanna said.

She shoved them into the back of a van, duct taping their wrists behind their backs. Fox didn’t fight, but his eyes were alert, darting everywhere, as if he were taking in all the information he possible could, making a plan to get them out this.

They took them to a hotel nearby, hauling them roughly out of the van and marching them into the building, flanking them to hide their taped wrists. Kate’s heart was beating double time, but she followed Fox’s example and kept her mouth shut.

They took them to a suite on the top floor. The windows had cardboard duct taped to them. They shoved Fox into a seat. “Bring the girl to me,” Roxanna said, taking a seat herself.

Kate was hauled over in front of her, and to her shock, Roxanna pulled her down firmly onto her lap and held her jaw with iron fingers, turning her face in her direction. “So...” she said slowly. “You’re the girl that Fox gets his blood from.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kate said, allowing her real fear to come through.

“No?”

Roxanna was staring into her eyes and Kate found herself strangely lost for a moment, when Fox hissed, “Don’t—” at the same time she realized her mistake and squeezed her eyes shut.

Pain exploded in her cheekbone and she found herself flat on her back, blinded with agony. The bitch had cold-cocked her.

“You two lied to me,” Roxanna hissed. She was confused for a moment, trying to understand what lie she was being accused of—what Roxanna had seen in her mind. Was it that she was Dom’s girl? But then she realized it was simpler than that. By closing her eyes, she revealed that she *did* know they were vampires.

After a moment, she said in an oily voice, “Pick her up. Give her to me again.”

Kate’s limp body was collected and placed back on Roxanna’s knees. She felt sick to her stomach and more than a little bit dizzy. The pain in her face was unbelievable. She tried to twist around to look at Fox, but Roxanna grabbed her hair and wrenched her head back to look at her again. Her face swam into focus. For a horrifying moment she watched as if in slow motion as Roxanna bared her fangs and leaned toward her. Then she felt a stab as she struck her neck.

She heard Fox yelling, then.

“Sorry, Fox,” Roxanna purred, licking the blood from her fangs. “I couldn’t help myself. She just looked so tasty.

But you answered my question. You *do* care about this little mortal, don’t you?”

Fox didn’t answer.

Roxanna slipped her hand into Kate's shirt, fondling her breast. "She *is* a sweet little thing, isn't she? I think I will save her for dessert. I'll need the blood after I turn you," she said, looking past Kate at Fox.

Kate still couldn't see Fox, but she heard his voice, deep with regret. "I would keep her alive if I were you," he said.

"I'm sure you would, Fox," Roxanna said absently as she pulled Kate's blouse off her completely.

"No, I mean she's not mine. I was just guarding her."

Roxanna went still at that. She leaned back to look past Kate at Fox. Then she grabbed Kate's hair and pulled her face in close again. "Who do you belong to, little girl?" she hissed.

Kate's eyes filled with tears. There was no way she was going to be the cause of Dom's demise. Fox should not have told the bitch what he had.

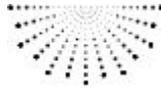
"Who?" Her voice was deadly quiet. "Dominic DeParma?"

Something in her face must have given way because Roxanna suddenly smiled widely. "Excellent. Excellent, my dear," she said, shoving Kate off her lap and onto the floor again. "Throw her on the bed and tape her ankles up, too," she barked and two of her minions hauled her off the floor to comply.

She watched in horror as Roxanna approached Fox. He tried to get away, but two men held him firmly and Roxanna sunk her teeth into his neck and drank deeply. She drank for a long time and then she used a fang to slit her own wrist and held it to his mouth. He squirmed and tried to get away and they tussled around, ending up with Fox flat on his back on the floor, three of the minions pinning him down as Roxanna held her wrist to his mouth. He coughed and spluttered, but one of

the vampires punched him in the face and knocked him out cold. Kate wept as she saw Fox's body convulse with the new blood entering his mouth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



The bad feeling he'd had all week had sharpened to a point when his cell phone rang. He was at No Return driving all the staff crazy with his irritable demands. It was Fox.

“What's up?”

“Dominic,” a silky female voice came through. His heart stopped completely—*Roxanna*. “I have not one, but *two* of your dear friends with me. Scream for me, sweetheart,” she said and he heard a scuffling sound, and a whimper that sounded like Kate. “I said *scream!*” Roxanna snarled and then there was the sound of flesh hitting flesh and Kate shrieked. Dom's fangs fully extended and he snarled into the phone.

Roxanna laughed. “Let's meet, shall we? Top of the parking garage at Park and University in 30 minutes. Come alone.” The phone went dead in his hand.

He whirled around and caught Stella's eye. She saw the fangs and came across the club to him at a run, smacking Randolph's shoulder on the way. Dom walked out the back door to the parking lot and sent out his sensors. There it was—a clear marker in space. “Way to go, Fox,” he murmured. Stella and Randolph met him at his car. He opened his trunk and pulled out the wooden stakes that they'd sharpened to a point.

“They have Fox and Kate,” he briefed them grimly, handing out the stakes. “Fox set a marker, though. We follow it now. Surprise is the only thing we have going for us. Kill as many as you can as quickly as you can. Try for Roxanna. When and if I say the word ‘go’ that means I have to surrender. I want you two to flash out of there. Maybe somewhere nearby to watch and see if you can get another chance at her. But you will go when I say go. It may be the only thing that can save us. *Capiche?*”

Stella and Randolph both nodded. “Promise me?”

They nodded again.

“Okay. Ready?”

The other two nodded and he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and dematerialized. He arrived with his stake poised to strike and took down the first live body he saw. Stella and Randolph were right behind him. They were in some kind of hotel suite. Eight bodies. Kate on the bed, bound. Fox, on his feet, not bound, looking ready to fight.

“Fox has been turned,” Kate screamed.

He killed another one but the stake stuck in the fucker. Fox materialized in front of him and lunged for his throat with his fangs bared. He tried to knock him back with a blast of energy, but it had no effect. *Dammit.* He wrestled Fox away from his throat and punched him as hard as he could in the face. Fox flew back and hit the wall, breaking a hole in the plaster. The entire scene was a blur of bodies dematerializing and materializing around the room, making quick strikes when they could.

“Say goodbye to Girlfriend!” Roxanna screamed, a knife poised over Kate’s heart.

“NO!” he yelled. In a lower tone, he said “Go,” and true to their word, Stella and Randolph vanished.

“Dammit!” Roxanna cursed.

Dom stood perfectly still, his hands held up in surrender. Four vampires lay dead on the floor. Fox was recovering, getting up and shaking himself off. One more vampire was standing up, rubbing his face.

“Take my place,” Roxanna hissed at Fox, who obediently took the dagger from her hand and held it to Kate’s throat, as if he’d never known her. “You,” she said to the other vampire, “hold him down. Fox, if he makes one move, any move at all, you kill the girl. Got it?”

“Got it,” Fox agreed.

“Fox,” Kate pleaded. “Foxy, it’s me.”

The other vampire kicked the backs of Dom’s knees so he knelt in front of Roxanna. She smiled a slow, dreadful smile. “Dominic DeParma,” she purred. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“I’m right here,” he drawled, looking at Roxanna, but keeping his attention on Fox and Kate in his periphery.

Roxanna put her high heeled boot on the middle of his chest and pressed him down on his back. “Hold him,” she ordered. She straddled Dom’s chest and bit into his neck. Kate made some kind of involuntary noise and he looked over at her. They locked eyes. Hers were wide but completely lucid. This plan of his wasn’t going that well. Sacrificing himself hadn’t saved Kate or Fox. His only hope was that Stella would make a reappearance in time.

A knock sounded on the hotel door. “Security,” a male voice called.

Roxanna released her hold on his throat. “Take care of it,” she hissed at her minion, his blood dripping from her fangs. She bit into him again.

“Dom,” Kate whispered.

He blinked his acknowledgment.

“Remember what you showed me? With the drops of blood on my hand? It’s your mind that controls what your body does, right? Your belief?”

He was getting lightheaded—Roxanna was drinking deeply. He didn’t think she could drain him all at once, but there was a chance this was it for him. He blinked several times to keep Kate in focus. What had she been saying?

“Use your mind,” she was pleading with him. “Use it. Or talk to God the way you do. Anything,” Kate’s voice broke and her eyes filled with tears.

The taste of blood was in his mouth. He closed his lips to create the suction and began to drink deeply, desperate for the nourishment after being drained.

“Dom!” Kate’s voice was desperate, calling him back. Right. He was drinking Roxanna’s blood. She was turning him, too. And Kate was telling him he had a choice, here. He closed his eyes and sent a spire of energy up to God. Up to the spiritual sun that he never saw anymore. And he held his intent firmly, asking for assistance from that higher realm: *I will remain the same*. This blood will remain inert.

There was a great convulsing. His body jerking and hopping on the floor. Roxanna was off of him now, standing over, watching with a look of satisfaction. He took it in without releasing his clear intention: *only my essence will remain*. He could almost feel the blood cells surging within

him—there was a sense of chaos in them as matter and energy warred.

His body continued convulsing. He heard Kate softly sobbing. He sensed Stella was somewhere nearby. His vision had gone black, his head felt like it would split. He held his intent: *my true essence will remain*. The blood cells stilled. They held his intent. His vision slowly cleared. He sat up and vomited on the carpet next to him.

Roxanna laughed and waved her hand at Fox. “You can let her go. He’s mine now,” she said with a wide smile. “You all are.”

He made a big deal about crawling up onto his hand and knees and hurling again, this time on the body of the vampire with a stake still in his chest. Then in one fluid movement, he grasped the stake, pulled it out and whirled, plunging it straight through Roxanna’s back and into her heart. She never saw it coming.

Fox was on him again, fighting with an intensity and speed that made it difficult to defend himself. Stella materialized, fighting the other vampire. She finished him with a war-cry then captured Fox in a choke-hold.

“What do we do with him?” Stella’s eyes were wide and pleading. She never, ever showed fear, but he could see it in her now. She didn’t want to kill Fox. Neither of them did. And she was begging him to save him.

“Hold him tight,” he said grimly. He caught sight of the duct tape they’d used to bind Kate and he snatched it up. “I’ll hold him, you wrap his wrists and ankles,” he instructed, taking over trying to contain the struggling vampire. Stella made quick work of it. They shoved Fox down in a chair.

“Unbind her,” he barked at Stella, indicating Kate.

He put his hands on Fox’s shoulders. Then adjusted himself so he could put one hand on his chest and one hand behind, on his back. He felt a current of energy flow between the two hands. He sent up a spire again. The blackness parted this time and he felt a stream of light flowing down into the top of his head. Tears ran down his face at the grace of it. He made his request. His intention that Fox’s essence be restored to him. He felt nothing change. *Oh God*. Why not? Was it too late? He tried again. He changed his intent—to clear Roxanna’s blood and essence from Fox. This time he felt movement. That same sense of chaos he’d felt in his own body. A sickness in his belly. Fox convulsed under his hands. He held them steady, held his intent steady. After what felt like a long time but was probably more like ten minutes, he felt the energy smooth out again.

Fox was weeping. Sobbing actually. He didn’t know how to verify that Fox was truly himself again, but there was no question in his mind that he was. He grasped Fox’s head and pulled it against his chest, holding him tightly as he wept, stroking his head.

Stella and Kate were crying too. Kate knelt at Fox’s feet and held his hands in her own while Stella cut the tape that bound him. They huddled together like that—the four of them all hugging and weeping. Then he scooped Kate up into his arms and carried her to the bed where he cradled her in his lap and rocked her like a baby. Not that she needed it—it was for his own comfort.

“*Mi dispiace, amore mio*. I brought this on you. I’m so sorry.”

Stella had dropped into Fox's lap, and they curled in together, giving and receiving the same comfort.

"You saved me," Dom murmured. Then he couldn't help but smile. "You were brilliant. You saved us all."

She slept the entire night in Dom's arms, with him alternately applying and removing ice packs to her face, staring at her bruises with grim concern. He had tried to take her to the hospital in case she needed x-rays or stitches, but she refused. They had argued back and forth about it.

In the end, he used his intuition to analyze her. He had just held her head in his two hands and closed his eyes. Then he had opened them and said there was no fracture to her orbital bone. Fox had murmured "are you okay?" to Dom afterward, but he had just shrugged with a little smile. "I guess so," he'd said with a surprised tone.

Her face really did hurt, so after showering and eating breakfast, she took three ibuprofen and crawled back in bed next to her sleeping vampire to watch movies until he woke. When he did, he scooped her back into the circle of his arms and inspected her face with the same concern he'd shown all night. "How do you feel, *bambina*?"

She tried to smile, but winced at the pain. "Happy to be back in your bed."

For some reason that put a wistful look on his face and he got up abruptly to use the restroom and take a shower. Upstairs, they found Stella, Fox and Randolph in the kitchen, eating a delicious stir-fry of chicken and vegetables over

brown rice. Stella urged her and Dom to join them so they filled their plates and sat down.

“So how did you do it?” Randolph asked Dom with a broad smile.

“Kate told me how,” Dom said softly, looking at her with a loving look. Then he shrugged. “I just refused to allow the change to happen. It was sheer will.”

Randolph looked at him like he didn’t believe it. “And how’d you change Fox back?”

Dom considered for a moment. “These are things, Randolph, that there aren’t good words to describe. It seemed to me that I felt into his body and then asked his cells to change back. Whether that’s the reality of how it happened, I couldn’t say. Perhaps it was just that I said a prayer and God answered.”

Randolph raised his eyebrows at that. “God, eh?” He shook his head like he didn’t believe in any such thing.

“What I felt was that I was two people trapped in the same body,” Fox said. “My real self was still in there, thinking, seeing, but unable to act or speak for myself. And then there was the self that belonged to Roxanna. I couldn’t break past that self.” He turned to Kate, “When I was holding the knife to your throat, the real me was still there, but I just couldn’t stop myself from doing Roxanna’s bidding. I couldn’t stop myself from attacking Dom, and the whole time the real me was praying you two wouldn’t drive a stake through my heart,” he said, looking ruefully from Stella to Dom.

Stella shook her head. “There’s no way we would do that.”

He raised his eyebrows, challenging that statement. “You would have if you had to.”

“It would have killed us and you know it,” Stella said, dead serious.

“Of course I know it,” Fox said gently.

After dinner, Dom continued to treat her like a princess, running to the store to buy Godiva ice cream, which she ate in bed. She felt much better the next morning, but still didn't stray from Dom's house, still feeling like she needed to be close to him after the trauma of the recent events. When he woke, he began making love to her reverentially, kissing along her neck down to her breast, which he teased with his lips and tongue until her nipple stood at attention. He continued to worship her body, leaving no part of her unkissed, caressing her until she felt as warm and fluid as melted butter. Only then did he enter her, still holding the same reverence, looking her straight in the eye with an intensity that burned into her soul. She almost didn't climax—it was too delicious and slow, but then his climax was so beautiful that she shuddered around him, feeling the spasm of her muscles drawing his seed deep within her. Afterward she felt as relaxed and warm and loved as she possibly could imagine feeling.

He got out of bed, showered and dressed and then sat in an armchair in his room and pulled her onto his lap. “Kate,” he said, sounding very serious. “You almost got killed because of me.”

She shook her head quickly. This wasn't the kind of thinking that was going to be helpful.

“No, listen. I told you before that vampires and mortal relationships don't mix. That's only become clearer to me. I'm bad for you, and you deserve so much better.”

What? Panic filled her chest. What was he saying? “*No.*”

“Listen to me. You’re young. Your whole life is ahead of you. You’re going to want children someday, and a husband that will grow old and die with you. I can’t give you any of that. All I have to offer you is danger and heartache.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “That’s not true. I know we haven’t been together that long, but—my time with you has been everything to me. You’re my real-life fantasy.”

He shook his head. “Sex is sex. You’ll find another spanko now that you know what to ask for. You don’t need me for that.”

Fury rushed in her ears. “I see,” she said cuttingly. “So sex is just sex. And that’s all I was to you?” Her raised voice sounded shrill to her. She struggled to get off his lap.

He pulled her easily back. “That’s not what I meant and you know it. I love you, Kate Strand. I meant it when I said it. And that’s why I can’t do this to you.” She could feel his agitation growing and it only fueled her own.

“Do *what*? You can’t do what? You can’t make me happy by staying with me? You can’t just let us enjoy what we have? You think you have the right to make decisions about *my* future without consulting me?” She was yelling now.

Dom just looked at her sadly, his jaw muscle twitching.

“Let me up,” she said in a deadly quiet tone. “*Now*.”

He complied.

She finished getting dressed and gathered up her things, making a big show of leaving the key to the Mini Cooper on the bureau.

Dom stood up as well. “No. That car is yours,” he said immediately. “You keep it.”

“I don’t need your guilt presents,” she said bitterly.

“Keep. The Fucking. Car.” he said, picking up the key and pushing it into her hand.

“You can’t make me!” she screamed, throwing the key across the room.

Dom turned away from her and she heard a half-snarl, a distinctly animal-like sound. He picked up the key and when he turned back she saw his fangs were partially elongated. She should be afraid, but she was too torn up to even care if she was in danger. In fact, she’d be perfectly happy if he just tore her to shreds, because that was what he’d just done to her heart.

He took her wrist and pressed the key into her hand, wrapping her fingers around it.

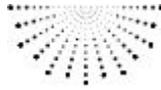
“Keep the fucking car,” he said again, fiercely. And then a bloody tear rolled down his cheek. “Please,” he added, vulnerability bleeding into his voice. He picked her up by the waist and sat her on the bureau. She tried to push him away, but of course, it was like moving stone.

“Fine!” she said, grinding her teeth.

“Thank you.”

He let her up and she slid off the bureau, swung the door open and walked out, slamming it behind her as hard as she could.

CHAPTER TWELVE



He had to remove the statue of Kate. He used a dolly and carted it off to a corner of his studio, then covered it with a tarp so he didn't have to look at it. Somehow it still had a huge presence, even as a shapeless lump covered with a piece of canvas. He still felt her presence through the covering, as he did everywhere in his house.

The pain was so intense it was unbearable. Not only could he feel every last vibration of her pain, but his own blended with hers, creating a symphony of grief that was so overwhelming he could hardly function. He spent all his time at the club, revamping the accounting system, installing a new inventory method, reorganizing the staff schedule and changing up the entertainment.

He couldn't sleep during the days, and he couldn't sculpt, which left him doing desk and computer work until his eyes turned bloodshot with strain.

He pulled the tarp back off her and stared. She was so beautiful. Someday, when it didn't hurt so badly, he'd be grateful he had this statue to remember her. Then he'd be able to sit and contemplate the short but explosive romance they'd shared. But now was way too raw.

"It's a poor substitute, isn't it?" Fox said.

Go to hell, Fox. He sighed and turned around. “Whatever it is you have to say, I don’t want to hear it.”

Fox had his arms folded across his chest and he just nodded, as if he’d expected such a response. “I can keep it in my wing, if you wa—”

“*No.*” He was being stupid. He didn’t want to look at her and be reminded. But he didn’t want Fox to have her, either. Even if having her just meant looking at her image in marble.

“When is the last time you felt this way about someone?” Fox asked with a casual tone that he wasn’t buying.

Never. “I don’t know. Look, it’s because I feel something for her that I had to end it. Not that I owe you any explanation.”

“In your 536 years, how often has something like this come up?”

“Fuck you, Fox.”

“No, really. I honestly want to know. Because I’m not sure it ever has for me. I cared about Randolph when we were together, but I don’t think I loved him enough. If I did, I would’ve been faithful.”

“I’m protecting her,” he said savagely.

“No,” Fox said. “That’s not true. You’re protecting yourself.”

He stared at Fox, anger surging through him.

“You know what I think?” Fox challenged. “I think you’re a coward. Neither you nor Kate deserves this pain you’ve created out of your own cowardice.” With that, Fox turned and strode out of the room.

Dom stared after him, the anger draining till he felt nothing but emptiness.

She refused to play at No Return anymore. Fox didn't pressure her, he could sing lead for the Morphs for a lot of their songs, and was so good at playing any cover song he felt like, that they could play without her.

For two weeks her heart had felt like she was wearing a corset around her chest. She now understood that the word heartache was aptly named. Her heart literally pained her—so much so that she wondered briefly if she ought to see a cardiologist. She moved through her days doing the bare minimum she needed to get by. Taught her piano lessons, rehearsed with the Morphs, played at Club Congress on Saturday nights.

She spent the evenings going for hikes in the desert. It was still unbearably hot, but the monsoons had arrived, and the hour before sundown became her time to get out and commune with nature, trying in vain to ease her agitated state. She'd planned a hike that evening up Tumamoc Hill with her friend Kelly.

“Hey,” Kate said heavily, when she picked Kelly up.

“Hi.” Kelly was good about just honoring her depressed state without expressing the sympathy that would cause her to burst into tears. Kate felt like she could just “be” with her—talk about her feelings if she wanted, or not, as the mood struck her.

Tumamoc Hill was a steep hike that was very close to where she lived. They kept a brisk pace, which left her fairly

winded. After a while, her senses felt nourished by the smell of creosote and the bloom of little green shoots, nurtured into life by the recent monsoons. Finally she spoke. “The thing that’s stupid about all this, is that we were only together for two months. I don’t understand why I’m so broken up about it.”

“It doesn’t matter. You feel what you feel, you don’t need to start judging yourself for your feelings.”

The clouds were starting to build for a monsoon. The air had an electric feeling and they could see lightening on the far east side of town. They picked up their pace.

“I’m late,” she confessed, keeping her eyes fixed on the wall of black clouds that was getting closer by the minute.

Kelly stopped walking. “Have you taken a test?”

“No. He said he wasn’t able to have kids, so it seems like a fluke.”

“He’s had a vasectomy?”

“Um, yeah.” She didn’t like lying to Kelly, but explaining that her ex-boyfriend was a vampire would be too difficult, even if Fox hadn’t made it impossible for her to do.

“Well, even vasectomies are only 99 percent effective. You should take a test, just to be sure. Then it’s one less thing you have to dwell on right now.”

“Okay,” she sighed.

“Let’s pick one up on the way home and you can do it while I’m there. Unless you want to be alone.”

“No, I’d like you to be there. Thanks.”

They finished the rest of the hike in relative silence, making it back to the Mini Cooper as the first huge drops started to pelt down. She drove in a torrential downpour, the wipers moving at their highest speed without making a dent in the sheets of warm water on the windshield. She stopped at Walgreens and got soaked running in to pick up an EPT test kit.

They sat in the car to wait for the rain to let up before they drove to her house. She cracked open the box and read the directions as they fogged up the windows with their breath and heat inside the car. The directions said it was best to use the first pee of the morning, but now that she'd bought a test and Kelly was there, she wasn't about to wait.

“Any thoughts or feelings on what you might do if you are?” Kelly asked.

She sighed and tears burned her eyes. “I'd keep it. I've wanted to be a mother my whole life. Even this way. And it's not like he wouldn't pay child support, or whatever. He's loaded,” she said bitterly.

The monsoon passed as quickly as it had come, and she started the car and drove home. Kelly came in and she peed on the stick. And waited the long two minutes. A plus sign appeared. Pregnant. She handed it wordlessly to Kelly, who simply opened her arms to give her a hug.

“I'm sorry, sugar,” Kelly said. “Or congratulations. Whichever feels more appropriate.”

Dom woke to the sound of his own voice crying out. He looked at the clock. He had slept late—it was 6:50 pm. There

was a savage wrenching in his gut—much more intense than the dull one that had been there for the past two weeks since he broke things off with Kate. And it was coming from her. His connection with her should have weakened after two weeks without her blood, but he felt it clearly. What could have happened to upset her more?

The fact was, it was none of his business. Except that his own body was going haywire with the stress of experiencing it secondhand. And except that he still felt fiercely protective of her. She was playing at Club Congress tonight. He could flash over and just make sure everything was all right. Not that he had any right to comfort or help. But at least he would know.

He passed the next several hours sweating, pacing and even throwing a few things as he waited until ten o'clock. He flashed into a dark corner of the parking lot and walked into the old hotel. The Morphs were playing already, he could hear the sound pumping from the club. He paid the cover charge and went in, nudging his way through the crowd until he found a place he could get a good look at Kate.

It told him nothing. But she spotted him and fumbled her line, spinning around to sing the rest of it facing upstage. He didn't take his eyes off of Kate, but he could feel Fox glaring at him. When the song was over, Fox snatched the microphone out of her hand and said something to her in a low voice, giving her a shove toward the stairs off the stage. Fox started playing the next song, taking over vocal lead.

He pushed his way through the crowd to meet her where she came down off the stairs. She looked pissed.

“What are you doing here?” she snapped, her anger cracking into pain on the last word.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” Not expecting an answer, he opened up his senses, trying to feel into her energy for what was going on.

“None of your business!”

He couldn’t help it. It wasn’t right, but he had to know. He went fishing with his intuition. He got a clear image of a pregnancy test. Before he could digest it, she confessed it herself.

“I’m pregnant.” Pain and anger were in her face and it sounded like an accusation.

He held his face as blank as he possibly could while he tried to sort out what the fuck was happening.

“I thought you said vampires couldn’t make babies.”

Impossible. And she seemed to think it was his. That made his blood run cold. *Who had been with her that she couldn’t remember?*

“We can’t,” he said as gently as he could.

“I haven’t been with anyone else!”

“Permission to look in your mind?” Better to ask late than never.

“Fuck you!” She reached up to slap him. He started to grab her wrist reflexively, but then dropped his hand, letting her slap him across the face. She deserved that much, at least. She whirled away but he caught her arm, as gently as he could at the velocity she had taken off. She swung back to him with a little force, and one of the bouncers came over immediately, his chest puffed out.

“What’s going on here? You okay, Kate?”

“Everything’s fine,” he said, catching the bouncer’s eyes and changing his perception so that he nodded, mumbling, “that’s cool,” as he walked away.

“Kate, I believe you. I just want to see if something’s been erased from your memories, okay? None of this is making sense.”

That frightened her. Tears sprang to her eyes and she took a step backward. He held her shoulders and looked into her mind. Nothing. He found no gaps or twists that showed tampering. No other men, nothing. He got down on his knees and reached his senses in to feel the energy of the tiny spark of life inside her. His breath caught as the knowing hit him. *Female. His.*

His entire world tilted and slid around. In a flash, a rush of memories of his wife’s pregnancy and the incredible birth. Holding that tiny being in his arms. How fatherhood had changed him forever. Now here it was again—a new tiny being. His baby. Impossible. Impossible, but somehow true. The fiercest sense of protectiveness surged through him. He was a father. And Kate was the mother of his child. He had a mortal family.

His eyes filled with tears, and he looked up at Kate. She looked terrified. He could feel her knees shaking. Of course, his bloody tears didn’t help calm her. “What is it?” she whispered.

He stood up. “It’s mine,” he croaked. “I don’t know how it’s possible, but she’s my baby girl.” An iron resolve came over him and he felt clearer than he ever had. He took Kate’s shoulders again and pushed her back into the darkest corner at the entrance to the stage. There was a heavy curtain that shielded them mostly from view.

“Kate. Take me back. Please. I swear to you, I will love you and be there for you for the rest of your life. I will never leave you or hurt you again.”

She stared up at him, doubt and hope co-mingling on her face. Probably wondering if she dared trust him. Her lower lip trembled. He thought she would lean into him, but instead she pulled out of his grip. “Let me think about it,” she mumbled, taking a step away from him.

Oh God. He prayed he hadn’t lost her forever. A bloody tear streaked down his cheek. “Yeah, okay,” he choked.

He dematerialized before anyone registered the strange sight of a man crying blood.

Kate stumbled back on stage, trembling. Fox looked at her skeptically. “Go home. You’re no good here.”

Since she couldn’t think for herself, she just nodded and picked up her bag. “Sorry.”

Fox shook his head. “Go take care of yourself. Do you want me to come over after?”

She sniffled. “Um, I don’t know. Text me.”

“Okay.” He reached over and grabbed the back of her head, kissing her on the lips. A chaste kiss—sort of like an honest expression of love. It surprised her a little and touched her.

“Thanks,” she said, trying for a weak smile.

“Go,” he ordered and she obeyed.

At home she ran a hot bath and dumped in epsom salts and lavender essential oil. She was still trembling. “I’m sorry, baby,” she muttered to the little cells multiplying within her. “I’m going to try to calm down for you, okay?”

She slid down in the tub, crossing her legs yoga style and letting her head sink into the tub, so that almost all her body was underwater. Only her nose and mouth and the tops of her knees were dry. She stayed that way a long time, imagining she was her baby in the womb—a muffled, watery environ where she could just exist. Without desire, without need, without anyone or anything to disturb her peace.

She stayed until the water had cooled completely and she started to get cold. Then she dried off, pulled on her favorite pjs and climbed into her bed, falling into a deep sleep almost immediately.

She woke several hours later. It was 2 a.m. She was hungry. She couldn’t remember eating much the day before and now she realized the shaking was probably about her blood sugar level. She got up and padded to the kitchen and switched on the light.

And screamed.

It was Dom. It was just Dom. She took deep breaths, trying to calm herself. Dom had been sitting at the table, his hands buried in his hands. He stood up quickly now, holding his palms up. “Oh God, I’m sorry—sorry—I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Her heart was thumping painfully in her chest as she tried to recover from the adrenaline shock.

“Please, Kate. I just need to speak to you. Will you let me stay?”

Oh right. He couldn't come in without an invitation. Did that mean she could revoke her earlier one? But she didn't want to. The truth was, she was so grateful to see him there, unannounced, in her kitchen. She needed him, more than ever now. And even though she was still hurt and angry, the thing she wanted most in the world at that moment was to be standing in the warm circle of his arms.

She started crying. He walked around to her cautiously and then drew her to him, giving her what she wanted. She pressed her face into his chest and trembled against him, wetting his shirt with her tears.

"I'm hungry," she finally choked out.

"Sit down," he said, springing into action. "I'll find you something." He started rummaging around her kitchen, checking the refrigerator and cabinets. She sat watching him absently, numbly—unable to absorb all the changes her life had gone through in the past few weeks.

He fixed her a tuna melt sandwich, on rice bread. It was pure heaven. She ate the whole thing without stopping and washed it down with the glass of milk he had poured her. She wiped her mouth with a napkin, feeling more like herself than she had all day.

"Thank you," she said. "That was great."

He sat down in a chair next to her and studied her face. "Can we talk?"

She nodded, mutely.

He took her hand and took a deep breath. "Kate, *tesoro mio*, I was a coward. I told myself I was protecting you by keeping us apart, but it wasn't true. I was afraid. I had a wife, once. I watched her grow old and die, while I never changed. I

watched my daughter and grandchildren die.” He shrugged. “I didn’t think I could do it again.”

She looked away. She had known all this already. She understood it, but it didn’t change the pain in her heart.

“I was wrong. A life without love isn’t worth living. For more than 500 years I’ve just been walking around in some numb, existential crisis. It was you who forced me out of it. You, who showed me that my stony heart was still capable of love. You, who made me reach higher and break through to a higher realm of consciousness. And I’m a different person—vampire—now.

But I’m nothing without you. And these past two weeks I’ve known that. I’ve felt that. But I was still too much of a coward to admit it.

“But now…” His eyes filled with those bloody tears again. She held back a shudder. “Now…you tell me of this miracle. This impossible miracle.” His voice choked up.

Her own eyes filled with tears.

“And I see I have a second chance. And I want to do it right.”

She pressed her trembling lips together, too unsure of herself to speak.

“I meant what I said at Congress. If you take me back, I will never let you down again. I promise. But… I understand if… if you can’t. I know I hurt you, and I’m very, very sorry. I hope someday you will forgive me.

“I want you to know whether you want me in your life or not, I will take care of you and our baby. You’ll never want for anything if I can provide it. I don’t want you to feel trapped—

like you have to be with me because you can't afford to take care of her alone."

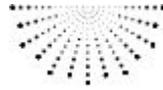
She shook her head. "No. It's not like that. I want you. Not your money."

The look of hope in Dom's face lifted the clamp she'd been holding around her heart. In a rush, she felt all the love and warmth she'd locked up spill out of her. She threw herself into his arms and he cradled her there in his lap, kissing her head and stroking her, murmuring softly in Italian.

After a while, he stood, lifting her easily in his arms, and carried her into her bedroom, where he lay her down and covered her body with his own, making love to her with a care that made it feel like a sacred ritual. Or a solemn promise.

"*Ti amo, piccola mia,*" he whispered. "I love you, little one."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



He woke to the feel of hot skin and hissed, realizing he had fallen asleep at Kate's and now the pre-dawn light was coming through the shades. He dematerialized immediately back to his place. A few moments later his phone rang.

“Good morning, *bambina*,” he said.

“Are you okay?” her voice was threaded with worry.

“Yes, I accidentally fell asleep at your place, but I'm safely home now.”

“Good,” she said with relief.

“What do you have going on today? May I take you to dinner tonight?”

“I don't have anything planned. Yeah. I'd like that.”

“Great. I'll pick you up at eight. Get some more sleep, okay?”

“Okay, you too.”

“Sweet dreams,” he said and hung up. Before he went and climbed in his own bed, he got online and ordered flowers to be delivered to her by noon with the note, “I'm sorry I hurt you.” He had plans for her that night, and he wanted to do his best to make amends before then.

After an hour or so of dozing, he found he couldn't sleep any more, anyway. He felt invigorated and a little nervous. After he showered, dressed and ate, he opened the safe in his office and picked out a big rectangular sapphire ring with diamonds around the band. If she didn't like it, they could go shopping for something else, but he didn't want to walk in empty handed.

Next, he called a local salon/spa and made an appointment for her to get the full treatment—facial, manicure/pedicure and cut and color. He decided she might be less likely to turn it down if he had them call her with the news, so he left it that way, with the instructions for them to call him back if she canceled or refused the appointments.

His final arrangement was with the restaurant, so he called there and asked to speak to a manager, cooking up a plan for their evening. He received the first text from Kate at 12:45 pm, that said, “Flowers made me cry. Thx.”

At 1:25 pm, after she would have heard from the salon, she texted, “I like when you take charge of me.” He was an absolute nancy because that nearly made *him* cry.

When he picked her up, she looked stunning. She had dyed her hair back to its natural whisky color, with several bold platinum chunks in the front for sass. It was cut shorter with an angle toward her chin, which emphasized her fine bone structure. She was wearing a retro sheath dress with wide, colored stripes. He felt little flutters of nervous energy coming from her. He drew her in for a kiss to calm her down. She rewarded him with one of her big smiles. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hi.”

“You look amazing.”

She blushed. “Thanks. Do you like it?” she asked, turning her head to show off her new style.

“Of course I do. I always like it,” he smiled at her and she blushed even more. He held out his arm. “Shall we?”

He escorted her to the Mercedes, and held the door open for her, handing her in like a gentleman. It was a short drive, filled with quiet tension.

“Thank you for the flowers,” she murmured.

He tried to figure out if the tension was just related to the formality of the date following their recent estrangement, or whether she had rethought their relationship. He gave her a sidelong look, but she was just looking at her hands, examining her new manicure.

“Your nails look nice,” he said.

Okay, this was getting worse by the minute. He found he was sweating a bit from nerves himself. He found a place in the parking garage and escorted Kate into Poca Cosa, the site of their first dinner date.

“I have a reservation, the name’s Dominic DeParma,” he told the hostess.

Her eyes flickered in recognition and she gave them a huge smile. “I have your table waiting for you. Follow me.” She led them to a corner table in the back and he pressed a small box into her hand before he sat down. She held it behind her back as she took their drink orders and gave him a shadow of a wink as she departed.

The waitress appeared shortly to explain the specials. “... and we also have a special item on the menu tonight just for your table.” She went on in the exact same didactic tone she had explained the specials, “It’s called the ‘Casado,’ which is a

marriage.” She looked at Kate, who had not caught on. “In this case it would be a marriage between you and Dominic DeParma. It comes with a ring and two glasses of champagne and your choice of a meal from the menu.”

Kate blinked several times at the waitress. He found he could not breathe. He should have simply got down on one knee at her place. This public setting proposal may have been creative, but he really was not sure of her answer, which could mean embarrassment for them both. He opened and closed his hands. The best he could hope for was a “maybe” from her at this point.

Kate covered her mouth with one hand in surprise, comprehension dawning on her. “W-what?” she asked shakily.

To hell with it. He’d already hung himself out there, he had no choice but to give it his best. He got out of his seat and dropped to one knee. “Kate, will you marry me?”

Her eyes filled with tears and she nodded wordlessly. The waitress, who had stepped back unobtrusively—probably ready to disappear if things didn’t go well—beamed at them. “I’ll be right back with that order,” she said brightly, as if she’d been rehearsing that line all night.

They were getting curious smiles from the tables nearby, who couldn’t fail to notice a man down on one knee. He stood up and pulled Kate to standing, kissing her fully on the lips. A smattering of applause broke out from their fellow diners.

“Dom,” Kate said in a strangled voice, clinging to him, pressing her cheek against his chest.

“*Dolcezza mia.*” Then he wished he hadn’t chosen a restaurant for his proposal for the simple reason that he wanted to keep her close to him, pressed against his body, breathing in

the scent of her freshly cut hair rather than sit down with a table separating their bodies.

But of course they did sit back down. The waitress returned with the little box and two glasses of champagne. He watched Kate's face closely as she opened the box. It lit up. He felt a surge of happiness as she beamed at him and put it on her left ring finger. He held up his glass of champagne to toast. She looked uncertain. He smiled indulgently. "A few sips won't hurt anything, Kate."

She looked relieved and picked up the glass, clinking it to his. "I'm so happy," she said in a low, honeyed voice and he felt the truth of it as her pleasure engulfed him like a warm blanket.

His heart surged with love. "Me too, *piccolina*," he said.

The waitress appeared and reminded them that they hadn't ordered anything to eat, so they both ordered the chef's pick.

"So I am going to take charge of you, *cara mia*."

She smiled at him and he caught the faint scent of her arousal.

"I am sending movers to your house to pack everything and move you into my place."

"But my lease isn't up till December," she protested.

He shrugged. "So we might have to pay a penalty. I'll worry about it, all right?"

"I have a cat," she said, her shoulders bracing as if she expected a fight.

He shrugged again. "I like cats."

She smiled her brilliant smile.

“I want you to have another appointment with my Feldenkrais practitioner to make sure the bones in your face are all right.”

She smiled demurely. “Whatever you say, Dom,” she said, as if trying on the phrase.

“And I guess we need to research obstetricians and make an appointment for you.” He felt a wave of pain at that thought. He wouldn’t be able to be a part of this aspect of her pregnancy—doctors only did business in the daylight.

“What is it?” she asked, noticing his sadness.

He picked up her hand. “I just wish I could go with you, that’s all.” He shook his head. “It’s all right. It is the first of many, many times I will not be able to include myself in your and our daughter’s lives. But I will find other ways to be involved.” He smiled at her weakly. “At least you don’t have to worry about who will take the night shift with the baby!”

She grasped his hand tightly. “We’ll figure it out. Together. We’ll figure it all out,” she said emphatically.

He smiled at her. “Yes, my love. I know we will.”

She liked cooking in Dom’s kitchen. No—her kitchen, now. Or soon it would be, anyway. That thought didn’t feel right yet, but hopefully it wouldn’t take long to settle in here. She cracked six eggs into a bowl and started whipping them, stopping every so often to admire the incredible ring Dom had given her the night before.

She rummaged in the refrigerator to see what kind of fresh vegetables they had and found broccoli, carrots and green

onions. She chopped them into tiny pieces and tossed them in a skillet with some olive oil to sauté. There wasn't any whipping cream, but milk would probably work. Fortunately, they had all kinds of cheese. She picked Swiss, and after locating a grater, started grating away.

Two hands squeezed her butt cheeks and she jumped, turning around to smile at Dom. She shrieked to see it was not Dom, but Stella, her fangs fully extended with lust. Stella laughed and tossed her shiny dark hair back. "Who's this hot mortal in my kitchen?"

She felt herself blush. "Good morning, Stella."

"*Buon giorno*. What are you making?"

"Quiche. Except without the crust." She wasn't about to get a spanking over unapproved wheat again.

"Mmm, yummy," she made a show of licking her beautiful lips. "Want me to make you a Bloody Mary?"

"Uh, no thanks."

"Latte?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks, though." *Thirty percent increased risk of miscarriage from coffee*, she heard the voice of one of her professors in her head. The poor woman was forty and had been trying to carry a pregnancy to term for the past five years.

She added the cheese and milk to the eggs and added garlic powder, salt and a little nutmeg. When the vegetables had cooled, she stirred it all together, poured it in a pan and sprinkled sliced almonds on the top before popping it in the oven.

"Morning," Fox said when he came in freshly showered. He fired up the espresso machine and plopped down at the

table. "I'm glad you're back," he said meaningfully.

She saddened at the memory of the traumatic two-week separation. "Thanks. I mean, me too," she mumbled.

"Me too," said Stella.

"Me too," said Dom, as he came in and wrapped his arms around her from behind. His fangs were a little elongated too. It must be like morning wood. He ran a fang up and down her neck, making her shiver.

"So, do you two have something to tell us?" asked Stella pointedly, raising her eyebrows as she nodded toward the ring on Kate's finger.

"As a matter of fact, we do," said Dom. She treasured the note of triumph in his voice. "Kate's having my baby," he said proudly.

"What?!" Stella and Fox said at the same time, dumbfounded.

"That's not possible," Fox said.

"I'm sure," Dom said firmly. "It's a girl and she's mine."

They all blinked at each other for a moment and then Fox was on his feet, and Stella lunged forward also, and the four of them fell into a flurry of hugs and back thumps. "Congratulations. I can't believe it! I just can't believe it!" Fox said.

"Oh my God, I'm so excited!" Stella said and promptly burst into tears. Kate wrapped her arms around her slim frame. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping at her eyes. "It's just...it's not possible. I don't understand... but I'm so happy. I can't believe we're going to have a baby around here!" Then she

pulled away and looked at Dom with startled eyes. “Please say you’re not moving out?”

Dom shook his head. “No way. No chance of that.” Then he faltered suddenly and looked at her. “Unless Kate makes me,” he said seriously and her heart fluttered at his consideration. “So you two better make her feel at home,” he said with mock sternness.

“I will. And your baby’s feet will never, ever touch the floor,” Stella swore.

Fox laughed. “I’ll bet that’s true.” Then he jumped up. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

“So how is this possible?” Stella asked.

Dom shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe somehow when I resisted Roxanna’s blood, I activated my own cells in a new way? Believe it or not, my hair has started growing for the first time since I was changed!”

Fox returned, his guitar in hand. “Do you think you could have more children?”

Dom looked poleaxed. “I don’t know. I hadn’t thought of it. Maybe I’ll have my sperm tested to see what the docs say.” He turned to her. “Would you have more?” he asked her softly, a vulnerable pleading in his voice.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, smiling.

“How many?”

“I don’t know...with four parents around to take care of them? I’m sure we could handle a whole litter.”

“Yes!” Dom said and Stella and Fox both gave him a high five.

“Here’s my baby girl’s theme song,” Fox said, grinning at them and struck up the Talking Heads “Stay Up Late.” “Baby, baby, please let me hold her, I wanna make her stay up all night. Sister, sister, she’s just a plaything, We wanna make her stay up all night...”

She rolled her eyes. “Great. How will she ever make it in kindergarten if you three have her staying up all night?”

They all laughed at that and Stella swatted her butt. “Now I know why you wouldn’t take any alcohol or coffee.”

“But you still haven’t told us what’s with the ring,” Fox pointed out.

She pulled the quiche out of the oven and served it up to exclamations of how good it smelled.

“Kate has agreed to marry me,” Dom said when she didn’t answer.

“Congratulations,” Fox said warmly. Stella gave her cheek a kiss. “I’m so happy for you both,” she said equally warmly, and she felt relieved. Though she’d never felt any jealousy from Stella, she didn’t want there to be any tension, especially with her moving in.

“When’s the big date?”

Dom looked at her. “We haven’t really discussed it yet. My vote is as soon as possible, but I know women have ideas about how these things should go, and I want Kate to have the wedding she always dreamed of.”

Her eyes misted and she slid out of her seat to sit on his lap and kiss his temple. “I love you,” she murmured.

“I’m pretty fond of you myself,” he teased, reminding her of the first time she’d inadvertently uttered those words.

He looked at his watch. “So, I have a moving crew meeting you down at your place at 4 pm.”

“What?” she exclaimed.

“Well, you don’t have to meet them, but I thought you might want to be there. In case there’s stuff you don’t want to move here.”

She stared at him and he held his hands up, palms out. “Not that I’m suggesting you can’t bring all of it.”

She laughed, touched again at the exaggerated way he showed his consideration of her feelings. “No, I’ll probably get rid of most of it. But I can’t stay long there, because we have somewhere to be after sundown tonight,” she said with what she hoped was an air of mystery.

“We do?” He looked surprised. She supposed it was unusual for her to take charge of him for a change.

She hid her face in his hair. “Yes.”

“Are you going to tell me about it?”

“No,” she said in a tiny voice. It was hard to keep it from him. She wanted to blurt out her surprise all at once, but that would ruin it, of course.

“I want a real wedding with a white dress and cake,” Kate announced when he picked her up after sundown. She stuck her chin out a little, as if it took some resolve for her to admit that.

“You got it,” he said. “Your dream wedding, whatever that is. So long as I’m the groom,” he added.

“It will have to be soon, I don’t want to be showing. But enough time to plan. How about in a month?”

“Yes. Now where are we going?”

“Take Broadway to Country Club.”

He sighed. As out of character as it was for Kate to lead their date, it was equally odd for him to be the follower. Not uncomfortable exactly. Well, maybe it was uncomfortable. He didn’t like not knowing what to expect, or where they were going. She directed him to a residential address. When he pulled up and parked, he turned to look at her. “You have to tell me what we’re doing here,” he said.

She smirked. “You can’t stand not being in control, can you?”

“Don’t get too sassy. I still haven’t tried out either of those paddles you bought me yet.”

That brought a beautiful blush to her cheeks and the sweet smell of her blooming arousal. “This is my doctor’s appointment,” she said, making quote marks with her fingers for “doctor’s appointment.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not using an Ob/Gyn. I’m using a midwife—her name is Jenny. We’re having a homebirth, so you can be there.”

He felt a wave of excitement and some undefined raw emotion pass through him at that.

They knocked on the door of Jenny’s house and were admitted by a classic Tucson hippie. She was about forty and sported two braids and a pair of overalls. Her face somehow managed to convey maternal wisdom, and her laid back manner did not come across as incapable. She let them into the

“exam room,” a bedroom that featured a scale, exam bed and a table and chairs. She indicated the chairs for them to be seated.

After they had imparted all their pertinent information, he grilled her on the safety aspects until he felt assured. She carried oxygen and could administer Pitocin in the event of hemorrhage. She had an entire list of possible events that would cause her to transport Kate to a hospital.

Jenny weighed Kate and had her pee on a stick. Then she gave Kate fillable forms to track her daily intake of protein and other required foods (two eggs per day, fruits, vegetables, etc). The amount of protein necessary was somewhat staggering.

The midwife’s fee was cash only, which didn’t bother him in the least, and at \$1800, was probably way less than a hospital birth would cost. Which reminded him that he needed to be sure Kate and their baby had health insurance.

“I told her about you working third shift a lot and that we were willing to pay extra for the evening appointments,” Kate said brightly in what he figured was the first of millions of lies she would speak on his behalf in their lifetime together.

On that cue, he pulled out his wallet and dropped five hundred-dollar bills on the table. “Yes, we really appreciate your seeing us this late. Thank you,” he said standing up.

Outside, he drew Kate into his arms. “Are you sure you’re comfortable with this?”

She grinned. “I’ve always known I wanted a home birth. It’s just a coincidence that it works out best for you, too.”

He stroked her cheek. “Thank you,” he said, his voice closing with emotion. “This was a wonderful surprise.”

“Except you hated the surprise part,” she teased him.

He smiled. “It stretched my comfort zone a little. But don’t worry, I know how to get you back,” he said wagging his eyebrows at her.

She kissed him and they got in the car. “You didn’t know I’m really a hippie at heart, did you?”

“Artist, hippie, they are somewhat interchangeable.”

“I plan on nursing our baby till she’s at least two. Maybe three,” she said with a note of challenge in her voice.

He smiled and shrugged. “That’s how it was done in my day,” he said mildly.

She looked surprised for a moment. “Oh yeah, right. And I’m sure you had a home birth then, too?”

He nodded, the memories of his daughter’s and granddaughter’s births rushing at him again, overwhelming him with emotion. He’d been this way since the moment he found out Kate was carrying his baby. And it was supposed to be the woman who was emotional during pregnancy.

“Are you going to spank our daughter?” Kate asked somewhat hesitantly.

“Of course not. Are you?”

She looked extremely relieved. “Of course not. I just wasn’t sure...”

“No, spanking is a pleasure I will reserve entirely for you.”

“So does this mean we’re going to have a domestic discipline marriage?”

“It’s hard to imagine us not, isn’t it?”

“Well, what if I don’t want to be spanked anymore? What if I change my mind and I...I just don’t want it in my life?”

He smiled affectionately at Kate. She had created a lot of little worries since he'd seen her last. "Then we won't have a domestic discipline marriage."

She looked at him doubtfully, as if she wasn't sure if she believed him. "I have many ways of maintaining my authority over people that don't involve spanking," he said and she giggled.

"True. Are you saying you'll be the head of household regardless of whether I give you my consent to be spanked?"

"Yes. Can you live with that?"

"Yes," she said with a satisfied note. He smelled her arousal. He took it to the next level.

"All right, so listen up. Those charts that Jenny gave you? I expect you to fill one out every day. If you haven't consumed the required 75 grams of protein by midnight, I'm going to pull down your panties and spank your bare bottom raw. *Capiche?*"

Kate squirmed in her seat. "Okay," she said in a tiny voice.

"Any time you make it to 90 grams, you'll be rewarded."

She shot him a sidelong glance, her mind clearly still on the imagined spanking.

"Dom?"

"*Piccolina?*"

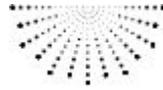
"How do you feel about me still singing in the band? You know, while I'm pregnant or after I have the baby?"

He looked over at her lovely profile. There was a nervous tension coming from her.

“Singing makes you happy, *amore mio*. I wouldn’t take that from you for the world. But if you’re getting too tired or stressed, we might need to put a limit on it. Okay?”

She nodded, and he felt the tension dissipate.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“I think you need a little stress relief.”

“Dom, you can’t spank me on our wedding day!” she said, her stomach plummeting. Not that she didn’t truly deserve it. She had just been horribly bitchy to her mom and sister who had stopped over for brunch and had already snapped at Dom three times, despite the raised eyebrow “look” he kept giving her. Her mom and sister had just left the house to get their hair done and she was busy cleaning up the dishes from brunch.

She stopped what she was doing now and stared at her husband-to-be in dismay.

He gave her a slow, lazy grin. “Oh yes I can, *cara mia*. Leave the dishes. Go downstairs.”

She felt childish tears burning in her eyes as she threw down the dish towel and stalked to the basement door. She felt like throwing an “it’s not fair” tantrum.

Dom didn’t make her wait more than a minute and he didn’t draw it out. He pulled her to sitting on his knee and said, “The way you spoke to your mother and sister was horrible. They flew all the way out here to celebrate with you, the least you could do is keep your temper.”

She started crying. She already knew that and she already felt badly. Dom lifted her off his lap. “Pull down your panties,” he commanded.

Her shoulders sagged. She complied slowly, feeling ridiculous. She started to take them all the way off, but he stopped her. “No, just down, not off.”

That was utterly humiliating. She was standing before him like a naughty girl with her panties pulled down to her knees. Dom guided her across his knee. She hunched her shoulders, waiting. Waiting for the first smack was always the worst part.

Smack. It was sharp. She gasped and felt the tingling burn spread across her skin. He continued slowly, deliberately, alternating first one cheek and then the other. After about ten slow spanks, he gave her twenty hard and fast smacks that made her gasp and writhe in pain. Then he stopped and rested his hand on her already blazing butt.

“I know you have a lot on your mind and a huge list of things to get done for the wedding,” he said and then launched another volley of smacks. Tears were starting to squeeze out of her eyes. “I’m going to help you relax.” She gritted her teeth and struggled against him.

“This is *not* relaxing me!” she bit out.

“I know, *cara*, I’m not finished,” Dom said as if he were being perfectly reasonable.

She struggled harder, knowing this meant it was not even close to being over. He only smacked harder and faster, not stopping to let her catch her breath, his hand slapping her again and again on her sit spots until the burning flesh started to go numb. He smarted the backs of her thighs a few times, causing her to yelp and wiggle helplessly.

“I want you to feel this spanking all night tonight and remember that you belong to me. You’re my *piccolina* and you always will be.”

Something in her released with those words. She felt a surge of love and appreciation for Dom that made her more willing to surrender to his judgment.

“This is the hand of love that I’m spanking you with.” His hand of love continued raining down on her very sorry bottom relentlessly. “I will always be here for you, through thick and thin.”

She surrendered completely then, and started crying in earnest. As he continued spanking, her tears flowed and her mind released all the worries she’d been harboring. The spanking went on a little longer, she couldn’t really say how much, but she’d stopped focusing on it, submitting to the sensation and to Dom, who loved her and would care for her for the rest of her life. After a moment she realized she was cradled in his arms as he carried to the bed and laid her down, stroking her hair and her back, speaking softly.

“Look at me, *amore mio*.”

She peeked out and he was holding his index finger and his middle fingers under his eyes, his signal that he was going to hypnotize her.

“I want you to take a short rest, and when you wake up you will feel relaxed and refreshed.”

“No—” she started to protest, but she felt herself drifting off before she could say anything more.

She woke up 45 minutes later, feeling great. Dom had her suitcase open on the bed and it looked like he’d packed everything she’d put on her list for their honeymoon to

Sedona. She looked around, but didn't see him in the room. She sat up too quickly and felt a wave of morning sickness.

Dom came in the bathroom while she was retching. He waited until she finished and then said, "Look at me," with the same gesture. The morning sickness instantly disappeared.

She frowned at him, still feeling a little sulky. "Why couldn't you just relax me that way?"

Dom's fangs got a little longer and he leaned into her and said in a sexy voice, "Because you were a naughty girl and you deserved to have your bare bottom spanked red."

She made a sound that was somewhere between a sigh and a moan. He hooked his fingers in her waistband and pulled her shorts and panties down again. "Let's see if I did a good enough job," he said huskily. He leaned over to kiss her butt cheek, caressing it with his hand. "This side looks good." He stood up and leaned over the other way, giving her other cheek the same treatment. He curled a finger between her legs and she groaned. "Have I made you sore enough to think of me all night long?"

"Yes," she moaned as his finger dipped into the silky moisture of her pussy.

"Are you going to be a good girl for the rest of your wedding day?" His fingers penetrated her.

"Yes," she breathed.

He turned her around and leaned her over the bathroom counter, lowering his own pants to push into her. He glided in and out of her slowly, as she groaned in pleasure.

"That's good," he said in her ear. "Because I much prefer your good-girl spankings."

She pushed back at him roughly then, eager for release, so he picked up his speed.

“Who do you belong to?”

“You, Dom!” she gasped as he pounded into her.

“Yesss,” he hissed as he continued to build the tempo until her voice was raised in little mewling cries as she teetered on the edge of release. He struck her neck and climaxed as he sucked her blood. She let go then and orgasmed with him, calling out, “Oh, Dom! *Yes!*”

The waves of euphoria that followed were not just about the sex. They were about the post- spanking languor and the words Dom had spoken. She absolutely *loved* belonging to Dom. She loved that he claimed her fully and called her his. That he’d committed himself fully.

She loved that he used her kink and his resulting authority over her for her own good, rather than his ego or pleasure. She loved his spankings and she loved his scoldings. His stern governance over her eating and resting had become the norm the past month. It made her feel very well-cared for.

It had taken her three spankings before she got the protein consummation down. The first two were light, erotic spankings, but when, according to Dom, she was still not taking it seriously, he gave her twenty spanks with the lexan paddle, she got it figured out fast. She kept buffalo burgers in the freezer (42 grams of protein!) and if she were lacking protein that day, she’d have one of those with a glass of whole milk (8 grams of protein) and that would fix any deficiency. It would often bump her into the “reward” category, which had included a massage, a gift card to buy maternity clothes, a special dinner out, and a very hot good girl spanking.

She felt incredibly relaxed as she finished up on her list of things to do, which she found Dom had already shortened considerably. The dishes upstairs were washed and put away. The list she'd made of things to go to the resort where they were having the wedding including the bridesmaid gifts for Kelly and her sister Sam had all been neatly packed in a crate and set by the front door.

She showered and threw on some clothes, grabbed the garment bag with her wedding dress, veil, shoes, garter, satin panties and jewelry and started loading everything in Dom's Mercedes.

"I'll see you over there after dark," she said, giving Dom a quick kiss.

"I can't wait," he said softly.

Kate was a vision walking down the aisle. It was an outdoor, evening wedding at one of the local resorts. Torches glowed and Christmas lights twinkled everywhere, giving it a magical quality. True to her own unique style, the wedding was overlaid with a wash of rock 'n roll.

Kate's white wedding dress was cropped with a flounce to mid-thigh and she wore baby blue suede cowboy boots underneath, which matched the wide baby blue sash around her waist. She carried a bouquet of white roses wrapped up with a blue ribbon. He'd given her a sapphire pendant and earrings to match her ring and she wore the pendant on a simple blue ribbon, tied up like a choker. A crystal hairpiece was tucked toward the back of her sassy bob, with a veil that fell down her back past her shoulders. In the periphery of his

vision he saw the dancing lights he sometimes saw around her—her fairies.

The guests were seated—about 60 in all. Mostly their mutual friends from the club as well as a handful of her friends from back home and the university. Fox was perched on a stool in front of a microphone at the front, providing the accompaniment with an acoustic guitar. He had sung Train’s “*Marry Me*” when Kate’s sister Sam and her friend Kelly walked down the aisle as her bridesmaids. Now, as Kate came toward him elbow-in-elbow with her mother, who was giving her away, Fox was singing the Beatles’ “*Something in the Way She Moves*.” Fox had chosen the perfect songs, as usual, and he had to fight not to tear up at the incredible power and beauty of the moment.

She had looked around at their guests when she first entered, smiling as she walked past them, but now she looked only at him as she took the last few steps to reach him. He took both her hands in his and stood facing her for their vows. Her expression was full of trust and love and sweet innocence. It made him feel like he was about a mile high.

He hardly noticed as Fox put the guitar away and slipped in between him and Stella as his groomsman. “We are gathered here tonight to witness the marriage of Katherine Ann Strand and Dominic DeParma,” the officiant announced. “The bride and groom have written their own vows which they will exchange now. Dominic?”

He pulled out the small card on which they had printed their vows. “I, Dom, take you, Kate, to be my best friend, my lover, the mother of my children and my wife. I love you and I choose to spend my life’s journey with you. You are my confidante and my inspiration. In the presence of God, our

family and friends, I offer you my solemn vow to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, and in joy as well as in sorrow. I promise to love you unconditionally, to support you in your goals, to honor and respect you, to laugh with you and cry with you, and to cherish you for as long as we both shall live.”

Kate’s lips trembled and tears glittered in her eyes but her voice rang out clearly as she repeated the same vows to him.

He’d had a wedding band made to match the diamond band of the engagement ring, and she’d picked out a plain gold band for his finger. They exchanged rings with the traditional words, “Take this ring as a token of my love, which has neither beginning nor end.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the officiant announced. “Dominic, you may kiss your bride.” They were words he had never thought he would hear in his long, long lifetime. This was a moment he never would’ve imagined could happen for him.

The sweetness of it all—the incredible change that Kate had brought to his life: her unconditional love, freeing his intuition from the prison of darkness, the tiny life that they had created together—it was nearly overwhelming. He bent to kiss his fairy-protected bride and gave thanks to God for the blessings in his life.

After dinner he held her close to him for the first dance, which was to Fox’s rendition of “*For Emily*” by Simon and Garfunkel. After that, Fox gave over the entertainment to a cover band they had hired. After several songs of dancing and mingling, Kate kissed him and excused herself. She went and took up the mic and the members of the Morphs took over the stage, plugging in their own instruments.

“All right, we’re going to pick things up just a little bit here,” Kate said, her on-stage persona shining brilliantly. “This next song is for my new husband,” Kate said, smiling warmly at him. Then the Morphs launched into a fast ska beat and she ripped out a punk version of Chicago’s “*You’re the Inspiration.*”

Only Kate could turn a cheesy love song into something so cool. She tore the song up through “I wanna have you near me, I want to have you hear me sayin’...” then the band went silent and she slowed the tempo way down, singing a breathy *a cappella*, looking right at him, “No one needs you more than I need you...” The guests all cheered but she saved her smile for him alone, giving the band a count to hit it again for the second verse.

When she came off the stage, he gathered her up into his arms and just looked down at her beautiful face. He wanted to remember this moment, this night, forever.

THE END

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Bought by the Zandians

Mastered by the Zandians

Zandian Lights

Kept by the Zandian

Claimed by the Zandian

Stolen by the Zandian

Other Sci-Fi

The Hand of Vengeance

Her Alien Masters

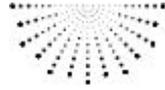
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR RENEE ROSE loves a dominant, dirty-talking alpha hero! She's sold over two million copies of steamy romance with varying levels of kink. Her books have been featured in USA Today's *Happily Ever After* and *Popsugar*. Named Eroticon USA's Next Top Erotic Author in 2013, she has also won *Spunky and Sassy's* Favorite Sci-Fi and Anthology author, *The Romance Reviews* Best Historical Romance, and *has* hit the *USA Today* list over a dozen times with her Chicago Bratva, Bad Boy Alpha and Wolf Ranch series, as well as various anthologies.

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REEL LOVE BY MAREN
SMITH



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Cover: Allycat Creations

NOTE FROM MAREN SMITH

The last two years have been... difficult, to say the least. But through the worst of the darkness, there has been a persistent light that never left me. No, not one light. Dozens... hundreds of them, from readers to fellow authors, you guys have made even the worst days of my life just a little better than they otherwise would have been.

I love you all. I am so grateful to all of you for everything. Every kind word. Every phone call and text that reminded me I wasn't in this alone. I don't have the words to say how much I appreciate you all.

Dedication:

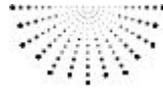
This book is dedicated to Rayanna Jamison, Laura Smith, Allysa Hart, Eden Bradley, Maggie Ryan, Tabitha Marks and everyone at Red Hot who picked up what I threw down when I just couldn't carry my part anymore. To Leslie McCullough, the best mama bear anyone could ever be so blessed to have. To every author and reader who reached out to check in on me—letting me know I wasn't alone; and to every author and reader who didn't—you guys gave me the time I needed to just

breathe, and grieve, while I figured out how to move on. And lastly, to all the authors who came together to support me with this anthology.

I love you guys. I will always love you.

Thank you.

CHAPTER ONE



Audrey flopped two body pillows and a huge floral quilt on the hardwood flooring in front of the entertainment center. She ran down her mental list of preparedness. Fire crackling in the fireplace? Check. Huge bowl of heavily buttered and salted popcorn? Check. Half-gallon container of strawberry cheesecake ice cream, with a bottle of Magic-Shell chocolate topping? Check. And finally, a two-quart plastic bottle of Diet Coke, which had just come out of the freezer and was chilled into a perfect state of half-ice and half-liquidness? Double check. She wasn't even going to use a glass. No, sir. Tonight, she was swigging straight from the bottle. Tonight was about decadence. It was about self-indulgence. It was about starting her three-day weekend, God-am-I-glad-to-be-off-work, and too-bad-I-don't-have-a-boyfriend-right-now vacation.

Not that she needed a boyfriend to have fun. Nope. Audrey plopped down on her pillows, the ice cream and Magic-Shell to her right, the popcorn and Diet Coke well within reach on the left. She rubbed her hands gleefully, ready to have fun all on her own.

Audrey bent towards the coffee table at her feet and pulled the short stack of video tapes closer. They were six of the most god-awful B-flick monster movies that she owned—Roger Corman notwithstanding. There was *Attack of the Eye*

Creature, The Thing That Couldn't Die, The Giant Gila Monster, Attack of the Giant Leeches, The Spider Feeds!, and her all-time favorite, *It Conquered the Earth*.

Outside there was a low rumble of thunder as spring decided to announce the growing season with a good hard rain storm. Audrey raised her head as a flurry of rain drops pelted the roof and windows. What a perfect night for a monster movie marathon. Now, for the perfect atmosphere...

She got up to shut off all the lights, casting her living room into cave-like darkness with flickering, demonic shadows that moved upon the walls to the whim of the dancing fire. She returned to her pillows on the floor and swaddled herself in her warm, comforting and monster-under-the-bed-proof rose quilt.

Awash in the blue glow of the blank tv screen, she agonized over what to watch first. Unable to decide, she finally closed her eyes and Eenie Meenie Minie Moed herself into sticking *The Giant Gila Monster* into the DVD player.

A flash of lightening briefly washed the room in an eerie, flickering light, but then the whir of the DVD player caught her attention and the blank blue screen was replaced by the start of the movie. She swigged a long drink from the Coke bottle, crunched contentedly on little crystals of Diet Coke ice, and reached for the ice cream and magic shell.

It'd take two weeks on the treadmill to recover from the cottage cheese thighs she was planning on developing tonight, but she still didn't care. Every nerve in her body came to life as she caught her first glimpse of the dreaded gila. She shivered into her ice cream just before it took its first two victims, and scooted up closer to the TV as the monster, through badly choreographed implication, derailed a train and made a smorgasbord of the riders. Her muscles jerked with the

explosion as Chase, the hero of the day, who sings whenever he sings whenever he sings, drove his car into the gigantic lizard. He destroyed the beast in the end, saving all of Texas.

As she ejected the DVD from the machine and bent down to select the next movie, a sudden strobe-like flash of lightning and a glass-rattling boom had her glancing over her shoulder at the nearest window. The rain beating against the house intensified, and Audrey frowned. She didn't really care how hard it rained, just so long as the power didn't go out and ruin her whole weekend.

She slid the blood-red cardboard cover off the video she'd seen the least, *The Spider Feeds!* Just as she was placing the DVD in the mouth of the player, another flickering strobe of blue-grey light lit up the inside of her house. Audrey felt the jolt and smelled the burning ozone as a line of blue electricity exploded out of the entertainment center in a shower of sparks and burning plastic.

Let go of the machine! her brain screamed, but it was already too late. The current shot into her fingers, up her arm and for a moment, it felt as though she'd put her entire body in a light socket.

The next thing Audrey knew, her living room vanished and suddenly she was behind the wheel of a truck. A big truck. Old, with no suspension, she realized as she bounced along the unpaved road at what had to be no more than thirty miles an hour. It was hard to tell really, since the inside of the dash was entirely unlit and only one headlight on the driver's side illuminated the quickly passing wooded landscape to either side of her.

"What the hell?" she said.

The truck hit a rut and Audrey grabbed the wheel as the vehicle bounced precariously out of the center of the narrow road and headed for the trees. There was also no power steering, and she had to crank the wheel hard to get the truck back on the road, accidentally overcorrecting. The back half of the unfamiliar vehicle fish-tailed on the gravel, and Audrey screamed, yanking on the steering column to keep from driving clean off the road and crashing into the woods. Her feet stomped the floor, searching for the brakes and finding the clutch instead, and—oh my God—it was a manual drive!

The truck swerved wildly back towards the road, and she screamed again as she pulled the wheel back to the right. The vehicle came grudgingly back under control, and once more she found herself following that unpaved road in an unfamiliar truck, wide-eyed and panting, one foot still stomping for the brakes, although with a little less panic now that she was no longer fish-tailing.

Right up until a hairy, eight-legged, six-foot-high spider dashed across the road right in front of her single headlight. Audrey panicked all over again, both feet finding the brake at the same time. There could not have been a worse moment to stop the truck, and yet she could not get her body to react as fast as her brain. Gravel flew as the wheels skidded right off the road and she crashed head-on into the thick trunk of a monster pine.

The one headlight shattered, the motor died in a billow of smoke, the radiator hissed steam, and Audrey sat frozen in the sudden silence and stillness, clutching the steering wheel in both white-knuckled hands. She panted raggedly. Was she hurt? She looked down at herself. Despite the lack of a seatbelt, no. She didn't seem to be.

Suddenly it felt as though she were breathing in a vacuum. The whitest brightest light exploded all around her, blinding her for the barest second. Then the brightness simply disappeared, replaced by dull, flashing lights that rhythmically splashed up against the tree trunk before her and illuminated the grayness of the interior of the truck from behind.

Still gripping the steering wheel, dread creeping up her spine, Audrey turned around to see a black fifties-style police car with grey and white lights rotating on the roof. Grey and white? Audrey looked at the lights, at the cars, at the policemen conversing with one another back on the road, then down at her hands. Everything was in black and white, including herself. Not even her fingernails, which she'd painstakingly painted red just that afternoon.

What the hell was going on? Where was her living room?

Where was she?

More importantly, where the hell was that spider?

She leaned over the steering wheel, searching the surrounding woods through the cracked windshield for anything that looked even remotely arachnid-ish.

Tap-tap-tap!

She turned to look out the driver's window. A black and white, boyishly-faced, thirty-something man stood grinning back at her. He might have been blond, considering the lightness of his hair.

"Hello there." He smiled cheerfully. "How you doing? You hurt?"

Audrey didn't say a word.

He glanced back at the police officers, gave a wave, then grinned at her. He beckoned with two fingers. “Come on out of the truck.”

She shook her head.

His grin turned cajoling. “Come on. Get out of the truck. The nice policemen want to ask you a few questions, and I’m sure by now you’ve probably got one or two to ask yourself.”

Chilling fingers danced up her spine, spreading tingling tendrils of uncertainty through every nerve ending in her body before knotting in the pit of her stomach. This wasn’t real. It couldn’t possibly be. She must be in a coma or, dear lord, dying. Her mind had taken her, for whatever bizarre reason, into the movie she had been gearing herself up to watch. That had to be it. Which meant she was, in actuality, lying on her living room floor, dying from electrocution.

And if that was the case, well then, she felt a little bit cheated, to be honest. Where was the bright light that was supposed... oh, well, she supposed she had seen that. But not one spirit had beckoned her from the other side. Where were all the angels, or her Grandma and all the ancestors she’d lost over the years? Where was the warm glow welcoming her home? None of that had appeared for her. What *did* she get? A big-ass hairy spider, running across the road in front of a truck that wasn’t even hers.

Audrey gripped the steering wheel, her eyes widening all over again. She was in hell. That was the only explanation that fit. Not even God would let spiders into heaven. Well, crap! Mom had been right after all: the devil did love a potty-mouth.

Tap-tap-tap.

“Uh, hello?” the blonde man outside her window said. He half-smiled. “Unless you want to finish out the scene in the hospital, you should really make-up your mind and come out here. Police are either notoriously short tempered or Barney Fife in these old films.”

Audrey looked at him, her brain struggling to comprehend what he meant. Was she not in hell, after all? There was no way any of this was real. This might all be one big hallucination, and all she had to do was snap herself out of it.

She closed her eyes, but when she opened them back up, he was still there. She tried again, squeezing her eyes closed for a little longer this time. Nope, still there. She tried again. Nope. One more time. Still there. Damn. Maybe a series of rapid-fire blinks with a really energetic Samantha “Bewitched” nose wiggled thrown in...

She stopped when she noticed the blonde man had raised one eyebrow at her. Slowly, he turned his head to one side. “Are you... okay?”

“Oh damn,” Audrey blurted. “Are you real?”

He grinned. “Yes, I am.”

“But you *can't* be real!”

“No?” His grin began to fade. There went the eyebrow and the head turning again.

“No!” She thumped passionately upon her chest. “I refuse to go to hell! This is my hallucination! My twisted, dying-brain illusion, and my rules. If I’m going to die, I want my hallucinations to be in color, without police, and sure as hell without big-ass, hairy spiders running across the road!”

He smiled. “Trust me. You are not dying. This is not a hallucination. The police aren’t going to disappear until the

scene changes. And, if I were you, I really would not bring up the significantly larger than normal spider.”

“But it was huge! Big enough to eat people!”

“Yes, it was,” he agreed mildly. “And it will. But you’re not supposed to believe you really saw it.”

“I *don’t* believe I really saw it!”

“That’s my girl! Come on, now. Out of the truck.” He stepped back so she could unlock and open the door.

Glancing behind her at the two officers watching them from the road, she grudgingly reached for the handle. A gentleman of times long past, he helped her down, folded her hand into the crook of his arm and, as they walked back through the soft earth and ferns to the waiting police, whispered, “You’re a little shaky from the accident, but you feel fine. Something ran in front of your truck, you think maybe a rabbit.”

“No way was that a rabbit,” she insisted.

“Yes, it was. Because they’re not going to believe you if you say ‘spider.’ Also, your father disappeared last week—”

“My father’s been dead for ten years.”

“You’ve been searching for him all day,” the blonde man said with forced patience.

“He’s buried in Blodgett Cemetery!”

“You’re really worried.”

“About *me*, maybe,” Audrey snapped. “I don’t want to get eaten by a huge, hairy spider! Dad’s dead. There’s not a whole lot else that can happen to him!”

His voice dropped a little lower since they were almost to the police. “Just tell them what I told you, or we’re going to have to redo the scene.”

“You okay?” the first officer asked as they drew closer.

Jerking her hand out of the blond man’s grasp, she shouted, “No, I’m not okay!” She thrust an accusing finger at her unwelcome companion. “I don’t know who this man is, but he’s crazy as a loon! I am *not* looking for my father, because *my* father’s dead!” she barked up into the frowning blonde’s face. “And that was no six-foot-tall, hairy, eight-legged *bunny* I saw scampering in front of my truck. It was a spider!”

The man beside her sighed and ran a hand through his hair. The two officers looked at one another, and Audrey stamped her foot, shouting up at the tree tops, “And the world has until the count of five to switch back into color, by God! One!” She cast the night sky a baleful glare and her whole body bounced as she tapped her foot with impatient patience. “Two,” she warned the heavens.

Adjusting their hats, the two officers grabbed her. Audrey was handcuffed for her own protection and put into the back of their patrol car. Before one of the officers closed the door, the strange man came over and squatted down beside her.

Very calmly and very matter-of-factly, he said, “I have waited fifty years for a non-movie generated co-star. If I have to wait another fifty years for you to get your lines right, I’m going to be really, really cross with you.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, but as she looked angrily away, for a moment she couldn’t seem to make her lungs inhale. The sensation of breathing in a vacuum came again. It lasted less than a second before her stomach seemed to drop to

her toes, much like riding the downhill curve of a roller coaster, and the whitest, brightest light exploded all around her.

Suddenly, Audrey was back in the crashed truck, staring at the steering wheel, which was clenched tightly in her no-longer-cuffed hands. The radiator was still hissing in front of the pine tree, and the police lights flashed rhythmically through the rear window, occasionally lighting up the interior around her in all its black and white glory.

She glanced in the rearview mirror. The two police officers were still talking to one another back on the road, as though nothing had happened, as though they hadn't just cuffed her and put her in the back of the squad car.

Tap-tap-tap.

The strange man was back. Leaning his shoulder against the truck, his smile turned slightly weary. "Let's not try to make this any more difficult than it already has to be, all right?"

Audrey scrambled sideways out from behind the steering wheel and shoved open the passenger door. As fast as she could, she took off running into the surrounding woods.

The police yelled for her to stop, but it was the immediate set of footsteps that came crashing through the leaves and brush behind her that put wings on her feet. The man had given chase, and despite her best efforts, she could hear he was catching up.

It wasn't a very exciting escape attempt. It was an old forest, vastly overgrown and dense, with fallen trees and rotting stumps, all covered in moss and ferns.

He caught up to her, half-laughing as though unsure whether he ought to be amused or annoyed. “Okay, hang on...”

But there was no such thing as ‘hanging on’ when the entire world went suddenly crazy. When he tried to take hold of her arm, she swung around on him fist first. She missed his nose by a good eight inches, but the attempt alone was enough to leech some of the amusement from his eyes. His face took on a sterner expression.

“Have you lost your mind?” he demanded, and grabbed both of her arms to keep her from hitting him again. “I’m *trying to help* you.”

She couldn’t slug him, so she stepped on his foot instead—hard. When he let go of her with a shout and grabbed his own calf, she threw a leg over the top of the log in a renewed bid for freedom.

“All right, damn it. That’s enough.” The man grabbed the back of her shirt, pulling her back off the fallen tree. Catching her shoulders, he shook her once, the look in his eyes now anything but amused. “That hurt! Now, I know you’re scared —”

“Let go!” She stomped rapidly and angrily at his feet.

“Ow!” Through gritted teeth, he growled, “I’m trying to be patient with you, but I swear, if you do that one more time, I’m going to put you over my knee.”

She actually stopped fighting him for all of two seconds. Then her eyes narrowed and she kicked him smartly in the shin.

“*Ow!* That’s it!” he snapped and sat down on the log. “If this is the only way you’re going to settle down and listen to

me, then fine. We'll do it the hard way."

The next thing Audrey knew, she was face-down across his lap and he had both her legs pinned between his own. Her jaw dropped and her eyes widened in shock when she felt his open hand connect sharply with the seat of her pants. "Hey!"

It didn't hurt exactly, although it did sting. And maybe if he'd only left off with the one swat, it might not have developed into something more painful. But he didn't leave off. In fact, he kept right on walloping her, his palm cracking across her rapidly warming bottom with Levi-muffled smacks and pops that turned that slight stinging sensation into a full-blown burning ache with unbearable quickness.

As her level of discomfort increased, so did the volume on her protests. "Stop! Let go of me!"

She beat her fist against his leg and swung her elbow back, trying to catching him in the side. It wasn't very effective as far as self-defense went, and frankly, he was doing more damage with the fire he was vigorously paddling into her behind.

"I know you're scared," he started again, his hand never once breaking the angry tattooing rhythm he was delivering. "So was I when I first came here, but if you don't stop fighting me and start listening, we might damn well be here forever!"

"Ow! Ow!" The warmth in her jeans had become a bonfire of heat, the steady smacks of his hand imparting very real shocks of pain each time it landed. "Stop, please!" she yelped and squirmed. Her distress growing, she tried to reach back with her free hand and grab his arm. "No more, please! Ow!"

"Oh no, you don't." He caught her wrist. "You wouldn't settle down when I tried to talk to you, so now you're going to

do your listening like this.”

“Okay, okay!” Audrey bucked, desperate to twist her bottom out of his reach. “I’ll listen, I swear!”

He pulled her until she was centered over his knee, making her bottom an even better target and dropping her nose that much closer to the earthy ground. And he kept right on spanking, his hand seeming to grow harder and his swats more painful as he lectured, “Like it or not, we’re stuck with each other and without a whole lot of choices. So, you can either cooperate and make this easier on the both of us. Or you can continue acting like a little pain in the butt, and I’ll tell you right here and now, I’ve got no problem returning the favor.”

He finally stopped spanking her, shook his hand twice, then rested it on the surface of her sore and throbbing bottom.

Audrey lay over his hard thighs, gasping and panting and trying hard not to cry. This was quite possibly the meekest moment of her entire life. How embarrassing, to be taken across a stranger’s knee and spanked. She was thirty years old, for crying out loud. A grown woman, and grown women just didn’t get spanked. They for sure didn’t get spanked by hallucinations in dying-illusion forests where huge spiders were wandering freely about.

Blinking rapidly, she stammered, “Is this real?”

“Yes,” he said, exasperated.

“No, I mean is it” —she squeaked— “really, *really* real?”

The man holding her was quiet. Then, without the slightest hint of rancor, he softly said, “Yes. It’s really, really real.”

From behind them, the two police officers crashed into view through the underbrush, finally catching up to them and all of Audrey’s wounded pride came rushing back to her.

“Let me up! Stop man-handling me!” She bucked and kicked, fighting to get off his lap and getting absolutely nowhere. He’d pinned her just too darn effectively. Grunting, she tried one last time to heave herself up, then shouted to the police, “Don’t just stand there! Arrest the sonofabitch!”

Shaking his head, his mouth compressing in hard, tight line, the man raised his arm and attacked the bouncing swells of her bottom with renewed vigor.

While Audrey shouted and wailed, one of the officers took out a pocket knife. He clipped a thin branch from a nearby maple and trimmed it down before bringing it to them. “Here, son. Lord knows, you’ll wear out your hand before you wear down that wild cat.”

“Thanks,” the man said and took it. “God bless the fifties.”

Audrey screeched as that switch made its debut assault across the seat of her jeans. And though she exhausted herself trying to get away, reprieve from the relentless ‘swish-thwacks’ of that branch came only with the breathless vacuum sensation and the blinding flash of light that dumped her back behind the wheel of the truck.

Yowling like a trod-upon cat, she arched her hips in a vain attempt to get her oh-so-sore bottom up off the stiff leather seat. Tears streaked down her cheeks. Hiccupping and miserable, she cupped her butt with both hands and simply held them, wounded and throbbing, between splayed fingers.

Tap-tap-tap.

Gasping, she turned her head and looked into the very grim face of the man standing once more at her window. They stared at one another for a long time before, wincing, Audrey

lowered her bottom gingerly back onto the seat and reached over to roll down the truck window.

“What—” she sniffled, “what was th-that?”

“Scene change,” he told her, his tone once again mild and calm. “We made too many mistakes, the script couldn’t be carried through to the end, so we have to start the scene over. It feels odd, I know. It doesn’t make sense, I know that too. But you’ll get used to it.”

“Who are you?”

“Peter, according to the script. But my name is Morgan Kreiter.”

He put his hand through the open window and, after a moment, she meekly shook it and sniffled again. “Who am I?”

“According to the script, you are Beth.”

“My name’s Audrey.”

“Hello, Audrey.” He let go of her hand. “Come on. Let’s get this scene over with.”

She opened the door and gingerly climbed down to the ground. Groaning, she cupped her bottom again. The rasp of her jeans felt like sandpaper against her tenderized flesh. “What’s my father’s name?”

“Doctor Arthur Waller. He’s a local botanist and spends a lot of his time out here in the woods, which of course makes him prime spider fodder. But you don’t know that yet. Anyway, he went missing about a week ago, and you’re beside yourself with worry for him.”

Audrey sighed. She cast a slightly disgruntled side-long look at the police, who were waiting for them, once more on

the road and by their patrol car. Then she turned that same look on him. "I can't believe they let you spank me like that."

Morgan half smiled. "Yeah well, lucky you, you've landed in a movie that predates political correctness. Spanking young ladies isn't entirely considered wrong back now."

She glared at him, but when he held out his hand, she grudgingly took it and let herself be led up to the waiting policemen.

"Looks like a nasty crash," one officer commented as they were approaching. "Are you okay?"

Audrey gave Morgan another peevish look, but dutifully said, "I was feeling a little shaky, but I'm fine now."

"What happened?" the officer asked.

"Rabbit," she said shortly. "Just sort of... darted across the road in front of me."

The one man nodded. "That can happen, I suppose. You're lucky it wasn't a skunk."

"This is a school night, isn't it?" the second officer asked. "What are you doing all the way out here at this time of night?"

Her mouth twitched. "I'm looking for my father."

"Out here? The closest town's five miles away."

"He's a botanist," Morgan supplied. "He's been studying some of the local flora."

"At ten o'clock at night?" the second officer asked, his tone dubious.

"He disappeared last week. No one's seen or heard from him."

“I’m beside myself with worry,” Audrey dead-panned.

Both officers looked at her.

So did Morgan. He cleared his throat. “She’s, uh... probably still a little shaky from the accident.” He put his arm around her shoulder. “It’s all the stress. And she’s tired. Worried. Missing her daddy, and all. You know little girls and their daddies.”

Finally, one of the officers said, “You need a lift back to town?”

“Yes, thank you. That would be very nice. Come along, Beth.” Taking hold of her arm, Morgan walked with her to the back of the squad car. Very low and close to her ear, he whispered, “It wouldn’t kill you to put a little effort into this, you know.”

“This is a Roger Corman movie,” she whispered back. “I don’t have to act if I don’t want to.”

“How badly do you want to get out of here?” he asked bluntly, holding the car door for her.

Audrey looked at the seat, then at him, and then sighed. Very gingerly, she crawled in to kneel on the seat, facing backwards out the rear window.

“Sit down,” Morgan said, sliding onto the seat beside her. “Try and look normal.”

“I can’t sit down.”

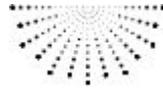
“You can, too. Now sit. Hurry up before they get in. If they see you like this, they’ll say something and that runs the risk of altering the script. We might have to redo the scene.”

“I can’t sit down,” Audrey huffed. “It hurts.”

“You want it to hurt even more?”

Scowling, Audrey turned on her knees and gradually lowered herself to actually sit on the seat. She wilted a little the instant her fanny made contact and, hissing a breath between her teeth, snarled, “Boy, I hope you get eaten next!”

CHAPTER TWO



“And I mean that, too,” Audrey grumbled, pushing her hands against the car seat in an effort to get her weight up off her tender bottom. “I hope you get eaten by the biggest, hugest, meanest spider out there.”

She was careful to keep her voice down so the two police officers in the front seat wouldn’t hear her.

“It wouldn’t be the first time that happened, but I think you’re heading for disappointment, sweetheart.” Morgan grinned at her, although it didn’t quite touch his blue eyes, and with his head cocked sideways like it was, it was a look that appeared almost evil. “I’m the hero. I actually survive this film.”

She tsked with disgust and turned her head to look out the window just in time to see everything go from black and white to... well, a grayer form of slightly unfocused black and white.

Audrey blinked twice. “What just happened?”

“We’re between scenes,” Morgan said. “Mind if I ask you a question?”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What?”

“What year is it? Back home, I mean.”

“Two thousand twenty-two.” Her mouth twisted with a grimace of distaste. “I know I’m probably not going to like the answer, but why?”

“Hm.” Morgan looked out the window on his side of the car. “Interesting.”

Silence reigned in the back seat of the squad car as they bumped and jostled down the unpaved road towards town. Finally, realizing he wasn’t going to say any more without some prompting, Audrey nudged him with her elbow. “Mind letting me in on whatever it is you find so interesting?”

“Time,” he said again, as if that should explain all. When she only gave him a blank look, he said, “It’s not constant; it’s relative. See, the movie runs for about an hour and a half, but for us, in this alternate dimension, it takes about a week to go smoothly from start to finish. As near as I can figure, I’ve been re-enacting this movie for fifty years, and apparently that was correct. But not a lot of time passes in here. I just,” he shrugged. “I find that interesting.”

“You don’t look over fifty. You don’t look over thirty-five.”

He cast her a very boyish smile. “Yeah. I find that interesting, too.”

“Alternate dimension,” Audrey mused. “Constant time, relative time. Are you a scientist?”

“Security guard. But I’ve seen a lot of Star Trek. Never missed a rerun. Nobody can watch that much Spock and not pick up a few things.”

Picking at her fingernails, in an uncharacteristic bout of timidity, she asked, “Have you picked up on how we can get out of here and back into our own dimension?”

“I’ve got a good idea. The way I figure it, we can do one of two things. We can play out the movie to its scripted conclusion, the reality will have been completed and it’s possible that we’ll end up back in our own reality.”

“Possible?”

“Well, I figure it’s either that or, when this dimension reaches its completion, the credits will roll and then the reality will collapse. We could end up fading into nothingness.”

“And if we don’t act out the movie to the end?”

“We stay, reenacting the same scenes over and over again until we do.”

She groaned “Do we have to play out every single scene? I mean, exactly like the script?”

“We have a little bit of leeway, as far as I can tell. The problem comes in when we alter the course of the script. I’ve made some little mistakes before and still completed the scenes to the end of the movie. If I veer too dramatically from the script though, then the scene starts over, and too many little mistakes spread out over several scenes can result in my going back two or three scenes. And of course, if I get killed or the spiders win, then the whole movie starts over.”

Audrey raised her hand. “Excuse me. Killed? What do you mean, killed?”

Morgan scratched one eyebrow, ducking his head a little sheepishly. “Well, in the beginning, for about three months I was a little suicidal. When it finally hit me that I wasn’t going home anytime soon, I tried a lot of—other ways to get out of this place. Thankfully, they didn’t work.”

She groaned again, turning her face back to the window.

“It was depressing,” Morgan protested. “I’m thirty-five, still in high school, and no matter what I do I’m always failing history. I’m a nerd, the school bullies pick on me, and I had to learn how to play the ukulele so I could sing a dorky little song about a sad frog in scene nine. I absolutely hate that song, but I have to do it because it’s in the script.”

“A sad frog?”

“It was the age of Elvis and Frank Sinatra, and that was the best the director could come up with.” Morgan shook his head, but then he laughed and covered his eyes with one hand. “Oh, and you’re going to love scene thirteen.”

For some reason, when he said that the fine hairs at the nape of Audrey’s neck began to prickle. Warily, she asked, “Why? What happens in scene thirteen?”

“I spank you for being unreasonable.”

“Okay, stop the car,” Audrey told the policemen in the front seat.

Neither man turned around or spoke, and the one who had cut a switch for her continued driving as though she hadn’t said anything at all.

“Do you guys understand English?” she demanded. “I said pull over!”

Neither officer showed any signs of having heard her.

“We’re in between scenes,” Morgan repeated.

“What the hell does that mean?” she snapped.

“It means that between scene two and scene three, in the script there was a little line that said, ‘Cops drive Peter and Beth to Beth’s house.’ The camera didn’t cover that in the movie, but it was in the script so we have to reenact it. This

reality doesn't jump from scene to scene, it has gray periods when the 'camera' isn't on us and we can do pretty much anything we like without affecting the movie."

"Can you write the script out for me?" Audrey asked. "That way at least I'll know what to say and do."

"I could," Morgan said. "But the second the scene changed, whatever I give you will disappear. Reading from a script isn't in the script. Don't worry. It's an easy enough movie to pick up. We probably won't have to do many scenes over more than two or three times. You strike me as a pretty smart woman. I'm sure you'll pick this up in no time." He smiled at her. "How about you?"

"How about me, what? Do you think I'm going to argue with you for calling me smart?"

"Oo, we are a defensive one, aren't we?" Morgan said. "No. I meant; how did you get in here?"

"Lightning," Audrey said. "It got me as I was putting the tape in the DVD player."

Morgan brightened. "Hey, have they built flying cars yet?"

Audrey blinked twice. "Um...no."

"How many moon colonies do we have?"

"Um... As far as I know, NASA isn't even sending explorers to the moon anymore. We've pretty much found out everything we need to know about it."

Morgan's smile faded away. "Oh. That's too bad. I was kind of looking forward to living on the moon."

He turned his head to gaze out the window at the passing black and white landscape and was quiet.

After a moment, Audrey broke the silence with a tentative, “I hear Mars colonies might not be entirely out of the question.”

He turned back to her. “Mars? Really?”

“NASA’s sent some probes and supposedly they’ve found evidence that there was once an atmosphere and running water. Some folks are talking terra forming, though it probably won’t happen in our lifetime.”

Morgan’s face brightened with another big grin. “Oh well, that’s okay. Gives us something to look forward to, doesn’t it?”

The police car pulled up to the sidewalk in front of a small, but nice two-story house. Neither policeman made any acknowledgment of the stop. They didn’t look back in the rear-view mirror, say ‘get out’ or even ‘goodbye.’

“Are they just going to sit there?” Audrey whispered as Morgan opened the door and got out.

“It’s not in the script that they do anything but drive us home.” He held the door open for her and offered her his hand to help steady her as she gingerly climbed out of the backseat. “I once stripped them down to their underwear just to see if I’d get a reaction, but there was nothing. If it’s not in the script, during these gray periods, the movie generated characters don’t do anything.”

“This whole thing is just not right,” Audrey said, holding her head in her hands.

“Yeah, I know,” Morgan said, almost cheerfully. “I’ve been thinking that for the last fifty years.”

She blinked as the police car drove away and left them standing in front of the strange house. “When did you come

in?”

“August twelfth, nineteen-eighty-one.”

“Remember, time is relative,” Morgan said again. “Not constant. If I had to guess, I’d say this dimension is probably independent of our own. So, unless you’d like to stand out here all night.” He gestured to Beth’s dark house. “I’m not entirely sure, but I think you’ve got the house to yourself. I don’t think Beth had a mother written into the script.”

Audrey stared down the neat cement walkway at the nice suburban home, lit as it was only by the soft grey glow of the front porch light. She made absolutely no move towards it though, and instead asked, “How did you get here?”

“I was a security guard, working night shifts at MGM studios. Boring job, but it paid the bills and I got to see all the movies I wanted, so the perks were good. One night, I put a reel on the projector and reached to turn it on, the lights suddenly flickered, and the next thing I knew, I was standing outside of Beth’s crashed truck.”

“I wish I’d been watching something nice,” she said. “Little Women or Anne of Green Gables. Or a comedy maybe. Ghostbusters. I could do Ghostbusters. I wouldn’t mind seeing a ten-story-tall, Stay-Puffed marshmallow man right about now. Anything is better than huge, disgusting spiders.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Morgan said. “I can think of something worse.”

She gave him a dry look. “What?”

“We could be doing *The Story of O.*”

Her look turned incredulous. “Morgan! That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“No? Have you ever seen *‘The Story of O’*?”

“No.”

“Trust me,” he said. “If you’d seen it, you’d feel better.”

She shook her head and turned back around to stare up at the dark house.

“Just go inside,” Morgan said. “Try to get some sleep. I’ll come back and walk you to school in the morning.”

Audrey’s shoulders slumped. “I have to go to school?”

“We’re seventeen, according—”

“—according to the script,” she intoned with him, then sighed. “I don’t suppose I could just click my heels together, say, ‘There’s no place like home,’ and have all of this just disappear?”

“I’ll be cross if it does, since it didn’t work for me,” Morgan said. Then his tone turned soothing, “You’ll be okay, Audrey. I’m going to help you through this. We’ll do a scene-by-scene rundown of what you can expect tomorrow. Don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of warning before things start to get hairy. I’m going to do everything I can to keep you as safe as possible, all right?”

Audrey started slowly up the walkway, but only got a few steps before she spun around on her heel and came back to him. “Would, um... would you mind, Morgan, um... staying here tonight—I mean, sleep on the couch or... I know we don’t know each other, but...”

“Nothing’s going to happen tonight,” he assured her. “I know where all the spiders are; you’re perfectly safe.”

“I know, I—I just don’t want to be alone tonight.” She looked straight at his chest so she wouldn’t have to see him

laugh at her childishness.

Except that he didn't laugh. He didn't even smile. "Sure. If that's what you want."

"You'll sleep here with me?" she asked, then abruptly flushed. "Well, I don't mean *with* me, I meant—"

"I know what you meant." He grinned. "Just give me a pillow and blanket. I'll sleep on the floor."

And he did, too. He spent the whole night lying on the carpet by the twin bed in Beth's second-floor, baby-doll room. He didn't even complain. He snored like a chainsaw, but he didn't complain. He didn't make fun of her, either. That was almost enough right there to make her want to forgive him for spanking her.

She rolled from her belly onto her side. The instant her tender bottom touched the sheets and mattress, and she sucked a sharp breath and quickly turned back onto her stomach. An echo of her earlier burning sensation returned, and the word 'forgiveness' vanished from her personal dictionary.

She slugged him with one of her two pillows instead, then quickly closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"Huh?" He sat up blearily. "What?"

Though her actions were childish, they did make her feel a bit better.

She pretended to be asleep until Morgan yawned and scratched his chest. Then he picked up the pillow and set it on the bed next to her. He patted her hand lightly, before laying back down. A few minutes later, the snores rattled up from the floor again.

Opening her eyes, Audrey drew the returned pillow into a one-armed embrace, hugged it close to her body and sighed. Great. Now she felt guilty too. Cussed man. He was only being nice just to spite her.

Breakfast was scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast, all in varying shades of in-between-the-scenes, unappetizing gray. Audrey hadn't yet identified what he'd given her to drink. Might have been orange juice. Could have been milk. She'd probably know for sure if she ever worked up the courage to sip some, but uncertain what to set her taste buds to expect, she was understandably reluctant.

Morgan sat across the kitchen table from her in full 'ivy league' dress, complete with tie and cardigan sweater. He'd picked her clothes out for her, refusing to let her wear her 'dungarees,' as he'd called them, to school. Instead, she was decked out like a doll in a pale, belted, past-the-knee length dress (which might have been yellow or even a pale pink, judging by the gray shading), with clunky, white-and-black saddle shoes on her feet. And rather than partaking of normal breakfast time conversation, Morgan was content to pass the morning grilling her.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Unenthusiastic, she answered, "Beth Wallers."

"And mine?"

"Peter, from school."

"What grade are we in?"

"Twelfth."

“And what are you?”

“Bored to tears,” she said in barely concealed exasperation. She poked her fork at her eggs, which looked as though they’d sat too long in the fridge.

Swallowing the last of what was in his own mouth, Morgan set his fork aside and said, “Try again.”

Audrey wilted in her chair. “But we’ve been over this a million times!” She didn’t mean to whine, but that’s how it came out anyway. And she even kicked at the legs of her chair, an emphasis to her frustration.

He was completely unsympathetic. “Then make it one million and one.”

Growling with frustration, Audrey bouncing in her chair and stomped her clunky shoes on the floor. Then she sighed. “I’m worried about my father. I don’t know where he is. I want to go looking for him, and yet I’m going to school instead. Morgan, I’ve played hooky—for real—for lesser reasons!”

“The script says—”

“Oh, hang the script!” She scowled at her plate. “I don’t see what difference it makes if we go look for him now or later. The end result’s the same. We still go looking for him.”

“It makes a difference. There’re things that happen at school that progress the plot, such as it is. So, to school we go. Eat your breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

In the process of picking his fork up, Morgan put it right back down again. His good-natured smile faded into something slightly less amused, and that stern look in his eyes

grew a little grimmer. “Is this really how you want the day to go? Because if your highest aspiration is to be as difficult and as argumentative as possible, then we can start practicing for scene thirteen right now.”

“Practice for whatever the hell scene you want,” she grumbled into her eggs. “I could care less.”

It wasn't until he pushed his chair back that she remembered what scene thirteen was.

Her eyes widened and her head snapped up. “I'm sorry!” she blurted as he walked over to the stove and took a wooden spoon out of the utensil crock. “I didn't mean that! I—I'm just on edge, Morgan! I didn't sleep well!”

He came back to the table and pulled her chair out.

“I just—I don't want to be here!” she cried as he took hold of her arm and pulled her up.

“I don't want to be here either,” he said as he took her place on the chair. “I have also been here a heck of a lot longer than you, but you don't see me trying to make the situation worse.”

“You're right,” she babbled, digging in her feet and leaning back when he dragged her to him. He was stronger than she was, and despite her best efforts, he won the tug-of-war by slow inches. “You're absolutely right! I've seen the light, Morgan! I-I'm a changed woman! Oh no, please—I-I-I swear y-you won't hear another snarky word out of me! No, no wait! I-I'll be a ray of sunshine!” she cried desperately when he finally took her chair and, with a stern yank, pulled her face-down over his sturdy thighs. “Oh please, Morgan! I didn't mean to say that! It just came out!” She whimpered and reached back one handed to grab the back of her skirt to keep

him from raising it. “No, you can’t! What are you doing? I promise I’ll be good! Don’t—don’t spank me!”

He caught of her wrist, pressing it up into the small of her back and out of his way. As he worked her pale skirt and slip up over her hips, she began to kick and struggle with frantic desperation.

He wouldn’t need to bare her to make a lasting impression this morning. The switch had left its mark and dark lines streaked out around the edges of her elastic underpants as well as lower down where he had caught the tops of her thighs in two places. On that soft crease where her bottom met her thighs and her underwear failed to cover her, there were dark mottled prints that looked suspiciously a lot like his thumb and two long fingers.

He patted the seat of her white cotton panties with the wide flat head of the wooden spoon. “You remember what I said about choices and about being a pain in the butt instead of cooperative?”

Giving up the useless fight, Audrey sagged limply over his lap. She swallowed hard, tried feebly one last time to twist her wrist out of his grasp, then reluctantly answered, “You said you’d return the favor.”

“This would be a lot easier on us both if you’d make up your mind to believe me.”

The wooden spoon bit into the fleshiest part of her buttocks with sharp, crisp smacks that had her yelping and screeching within the first six whaps. He only gave her fifteen, but he made them hard enough to count. And he put them in all the right places so that by the time the last one fell, Audrey was performing a veritable shimmy of a dance over his thighs,

panting and gasping, her breaths like sobs although she stubbornly blinked back the tears gathering in her eyes.

When he let her go, she vaulted up off his knee, scrambling to get her skirt back down and then grabbed her bottom in both hands. She mewed in pain as she clutched herself, then rubbed, then clutched again and gave him the most wounded look.

“I think I’ll keep this until the scene changes,” he said, and as he stood, he slid the wooden spoon into his back trousers’ pocket.

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth turned down into a mutinous frown.

“Now, eat your breakfast,” he told her as he went back to his seat.

“It looks gross,” she muttered.

“True,” he said, picking up his toast. “But you’re going to be here a while, and the food won’t look any better later on.”

It was a weird thing to eat food that looked so awful and yet tasted so good. She managed to swallow five or six bites, but it sat like a lump in the pit of her stomach for a long time afterward, and she spent the entire walk down the grey streets to Beth and Peter’s high school trying to convince herself that she wasn’t going to throw it all up again.

“When do we start to get chased by spiders?” she asked Morgan. She had to scoot a little closer and slightly behind him as they passed two movie-generated teenagers—listless and non-conversational—also walking towards the high school. Everyone they passed looked just like that. To Audrey, it was like walking through a town full of zombies.

“Not for a good while yet,” he assured her. “Don’t worry. I’ll let you know before it happens.”

“I don’t think I want to know.”

Just as they were about to cross the street to the high school, Morgan stopped her. “This is a fifties-style movie and you’re the heroine, remember? That means you survive this too, okay?”

She nodded. “I’d just feel better if I knew what was going to happen. What if we survive the spiders only to have this reality collapse in on us? I don’t want to fade to black. I want to go home.”

“I know. It’ll be okay.” He smiled at her, and then without warning, leaned down to press a soft kiss on her forehead. In that instant, it felt as though her stomach dropped all the way to her toes. It wasn’t an unpleasant kiss and, delivered as it was in an almost brotherly fashion, the warm touch of his lips against her skin had her lips tingling to return the gesture.

The sensation shot down through her body, ignoring all of her innocent extremities to lodge in her suddenly stiffening nipples and even lower down in her belly. It was an entirely sexual response, one that was completely unexpected, unwarranted and was, frankly, unwelcome. This was, after all, the man who had unrepentantly spanked her. Not just once, but twice now. He wasn’t supposed to kiss her, and she really wasn’t supposed to like it.

By the look on Morgan’s face as he pulled back again, that kiss had been just as unnerving for him. “Um, that was just... for luck.”

“Right,” she agreed wholeheartedly. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” He abruptly let go of her and cleared his throat.
“Anytime.”

They started across the street and Audrey felt that by now familiar vacuum sensation begin to suck the air from her lungs. The entire world shifted into a brighter version of black and white. Suddenly, with a lightning flash of brilliance, disorientation hit her as her surroundings vanished.

She found herself standing at the foot of the school’s front steps, not far from the flag pole and with Morgan nowhere in sight.

“Hey, Beth!”

Audrey turned to see three giggling girls in poodle skirts and white-and-black shoes heading right for her.

“Well, has he asked you yet?” the first one gushed as they drew nearer.

“Uh, who?” she asked. “Asked me what?”

All three stared at her in astonishment. They probably couldn’t have been more surprised if she’d shucked off all her clothes and run down the sidewalk starkers.

“Has *Trevor* asked you to the dance?” one girl, her platinum blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail with a bright pink ribbon, slowly asked. “Remember Trevor? Your incredibly cute boyfriend, the most gorgeous hunk in the entire school, not to mention the captain of the football team.”

“How could you forget?” another, a dark-haired girl with a Lucille Ball hairdo, asked. “I thought you went out last night.”

“Uh, no, I went out looking for my father,” Audrey stammered, and darted a quick glance around for Morgan. “He’s missing. I’m very worried.”

“Beth?” The blonde peered at her closely. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I—I’m just very, very worried and don’t feel much like dating. I guess.”

The three girls looked at her, then at each other, then back at her.

“Well, then,” the blonde managed a smile. “We’ll see you in home-ec, okay, Beth?”

“Sure.” Audrey waved to them as they shuffled past her. They jogged quickly up the stairs, their heads ducking together in furtive whispers as they glanced back at her once before disappearing into the school.

That probably could have gone better.

“Beth!”

Audrey turned around to see Morgan jogging across the school grounds, headed straight for her. She started out to meet him when she noticed a group of four boys in letter jackets moving to meet him as well. There was no greeting exchanged, but as they drew close enough, one jock pulled away from the pack and stuck out his foot.

A briefly irritated look crossed Morgan’s face a second before he obligingly tripped over the proffered limb, stumbled, then went all the way down to the sidewalk in a nasty spill.

“Morgan!” Audrey broke into a run. “Are you okay?” she cried as she reached him.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Morgan said, picking himself up off the cement. He looked at his hands, then bent to brush the dirt from his trousers.

Audrey spun on the boys, her eyes narrowing and her hands clenching into fists at her sides. “You bullying bastards! You did that on purpose!”

All four of the young men looked stunned, but the one who had done the actual tripping gaped at her in disbelief. “Hey, chill out, doll face. I didn’t know the spaz was gonna fall down.”

“Doll face?” Audrey echoed, and then again with even more temper than before. “*Doll face? I’ll doll face you!*”

She punched him square in the nose. Cartilage crunched under her knuckles and his head snapped back.

Blood spurted between the young man’s fingers as he grabbed his face with both hands and fell to his knees. “*By dose! By dose!*”

“Audrey!” Morgan grabbed her from behind, pulling her sharply back and away from the stunned jocks.

“*Ew broke by dose!*” the young man cried, staring at his bloody hands in total astonishment.

His three friends stood like gaping statues, frozen in a half-circle of uncertainty around their downed companion.

Audrey struck a boxer’s pose, her fists up and ready, straining against Morgan’s tight grasp as she demanded, “Who’s next? You?” she barked at the taller of the three friends. “You want a piece of me? How about you, you want a piece of me? Come on! I am a woman on the edge; I’ll take you all on!”

“Ew broke by nose!” the man on the ground groaned, sniffing and checking the blood on his fingers.

“Get up,” she dared him, “I’ll give you the black eyes and fat lip to match!”

Without taking their eyes off her, the friends reached down to grab their fallen companion by his jacket. They quickly dragged him out of her reach until he could finally stagger back onto his feet.

Looking from his bloody fingers to her, the wounded jock shouted, “Led the *spaz* take ew to da dance, den! I’m trew wid ew!”

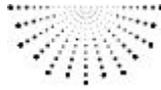
They fled to the school with Audrey shouting after them, “Yeah, you better fucking run! I’ll break the lot of you down to my size!”

Behind her, Morgan began to shake and then to laugh. He had to pick her up off the ground entirely to keep her from running after them. “Audrey, it’s all right. I’m fine. They were supposed to knock me down. It’s in the script.”

“Well, the script sucks!” she snapped back at him. Then glared at him over her shoulder as she added, “And don’t let this go to your head. I still don’t like you.”

Morgan flopped down to sit on the curb, holding a still seething Audrey tightly on his lap. Though she struggled briefly against his embrace, he continued to laugh and to hold her until the vacuum sensation began to suck at them and the whole scene started over.

CHAPTER THREE



Watching the bully spill Morgan flat on his face on the sidewalk without any more protest than what Beth, as a nineteen-fifties style maiden of the times would utter, had Audrey gritting her teeth in frustration. Thankfully, it was a scene that didn't last long. At least not once she got it right, a process that took six 'takes' before she managed it. Knocking Trevor on his ass turned out to be the highlight of them all.

In the second attempt, Audrey managed to contain herself while Morgan obligingly stumbled to the ground. But her skin crawled when Trevor threw his arm around her neck and pulled her close to his chest.

"My old man's giving me keys to the car on Friday," he said. "I'll be picking you up in style!"

"Peachy," she said flatly.

He hugged her neck until she was walking hunched over almost bent in half beside him. She wasn't sure whether he was being brutishly loverly, or if he was going to knuckle her head until she cried 'Uncle.'

She tried to push his arm back at least enough so that she could stand up straight. But then he grinned and tried to kiss her, and Audrey reacted without thinking. She grabbed his arm, twisted and then flipped him.

Trevor yelled out the instant he became airborne, and then hit the sidewalk flat on his back. He gaped, his mouth bobbing open and shut again as he sucked to refill his lung with the air that had just been knocked out of him.

“Audrey,” Morgan said grimly, brushing off his hands and knees as he stood up. “I’m getting a little tired of falling down. You need to make up your mind. Do you want to follow the script and eventually get out of here, or would you rather stay stuck in this B-flick limbo” —he grabbed the front of her blouse and pulled her so close that they almost bumped noses — “*with me* for the rest of all time?”

“All right, all right!” she huffed.

He let her go and Audrey shook out the willies that touching her ‘boyfriend’ had caused. Straightening her shirt, she grudgingly went back to the school’s front steps to wait for the scene to repeat itself.

In the third attempt, she made it all the way up to the kiss with minimal effort, but the sight of his smirking mouth, puckering up and zeroing in on her own, had her acting up again. She grabbed his bottom lip in self-defense and held on tightly to it.

Trevor yelled. “Hey—ow!”

Audrey would as soon have ripped his lips off except that Morgan came up behind her and caught hold of her arm.

“Drop him,” he said sternly.

She obeyed, but grudgingly, and Trevor clapped his hands over his mouth and quickly ducked out of her reach.

“Waz the matter wiv ‘ou?” he demanded, cupping his injured mouth protectively.

“I can’t do this,” Audrey told Morgan. “I’m trying, but I just can’t.”

“Itch!” Trevor spat out. He stuck out his bottom lip, his eyes crossing as he tried to see the extent of the damage done to him without the aid of a mirror.

Morgan held up a finger. “Will you excuse us for just one quick second, please?” He took hold of Audrey’s arm and pulled her over to the flagpole to talk.

Trevor didn’t bother trying to stop them. He rubbed at his mouth. “Knock ‘ourseff ou’.” He turned to his cronies and pointed at his bottom lip. “Did you see that? Did you see what she did?”

“What part of the concept ‘stuck in this repeating universe for all eternity’ are you having a problem with?” Morgan demanded once they were far enough away to be considered alone.

“Hey!” She jerked her arm out of his grasp. “You want to get out of here so bad, you kiss him. He’d be more interested in you than me anyway.”

Folding her arms across her chest, she huffed indignantly.

Morgan only blinked at her. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, come on! Like you don’t know!”

“Know what? Aside from the fact that you’re not following the script, what’s there to know?”

She gave him a knowing look. “That’s Touch Collins.”

“So?”

“So, it’s not me he’s wanting to lock lips with. You’re standing in the direction his door swings anyway.”

Morgan stepped back from her. His hands went to his hips and, for a moment, he only stared at her. Finally, he said, “No, I’m not.”

Audrey gestured to where her ‘boyfriend’ was currently getting his mouth closely examined by a friend. “Touch Collins,” she said, as if the name alone should explain all.

Morgan looked from her to him, and then back again. “So? So Touch Collins is the actor, and he likes men. That means you can’t kiss him?”

“I don’t care if he likes men, women, or rutabagas,” Audrey said. “It doesn’t change the fact that he’s playing a mean character. If you want to move this scene along, then you kiss him. That’s all I’m saying.”

“My kissing him isn’t in the script.”

“Saved by the All-Mighty script. How convenient for you.”

Frowning, Morgan loomed closer to her. “Okay, let’s put this in a way that even someone as argumentative as you can understand. I have been here for fifty years; you have been here two days. When you have been here for fifty years, then you may say what you will and will not do in accordance with how this movie goes. Until then, you are going to do what I tell you to or, if you back me into that corner, then I will be more than happy to spank you at the beginning of each and every new scene, just to make sure you do them right. Now, do we understand each other?”

She glared at him, before forcing her mouth to curl into a very grim smile. “Perfectly.”

The grey changed all around them, brightening.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Pretend it’s Robert Redford.”

“Gross.”

The vacuum sucked them into the fourth ‘take’ of the scene.

This time she didn’t wait for Morgan to spill himself to the sidewalk. Instead, she made a beeline straight for Touch, reaching him just as Morgan was making his faithful and obligatory trip. She flung open her arms to engulf her surprised boyfriend in an overly-intimate embrace.

“Darling!” Audrey declared. Grabbing his shoulders, she jumped on him, wrapping her legs around his waist, and kissed him full on the mouth.

He even kissed like a two-dimensional black and white man. As she swept her tongue inside his mouth, the taste, texture and feel of him all seemed so very... well, grey. But she made herself do it, and when the entanglement of their lips finally did break, she was careful to keep her expression as sultry and beguiling as she knew how. That part of it was rather vindicating, actually. She’d always known, somewhere in the back of her mind, all those pre-prom hours spent practicing in front of her bedroom mirror would eventually pay off.

“Hi,” Touch gushed, swallowing her performance hook, line, and sinker. His hands settled around her waist, and one even dipped low enough to cup her bottom.

“Do you love me?” she asked him huskily, combing her fingers through his hair, much to the whooping amusement of the surrounding high school boys.

His hand squeezed her right bottom cheek and his breathing got a little heavier. “Gosh, yeah.”

Glancing back over her shoulder, Audrey looked at Morgan.

Already beginning to pick himself up off the ground, he stared warily back. In a low voice, he warned, “Don’t even think about it.”

She cocked an eyebrow at his arrogance and, even though she knew she shouldn’t, she turned back to Touch anyway. Pressing her breasts against his chest, she cooed, “Prove your love.” Unwrapping her legs, she climbed down off of him and indicated to Morgan with a toss of her head. “The spaz keeps threatening to hurt me. Beat him up.”

Touch, along with all his thug cronies, looked at Morgan.

“Shit,” Morgan said. He took off running with the schoolyard bullies in hot pursuit.

Audrey enjoyed her revenge for the rest of the scene. Of course, as the fifth take began, watching Morgan run wasn’t anywhere near as amusing once she realized the direction he was taking culminated in the very spot in which she was standing.

For the first time all morning, he hopped clean over Touch’s out thrust leg, shoving the bully to one side and kept right on coming. Straight at her.

Dropping her books, Audrey raced for the safety of the school.

Some boyfriend Touch turned out to be!

“Hey!” he shouted after them, but didn’t bother coming to her rescue. He only watched as they disappeared one after the

other through the front school doors.

Audrey ran into the main office with Morgan only a scant few paces behind her. Flinging herself into the principal's office, she tried to slam and lock the door, but he caught the edge of it in both hands, wedged his leg in the threshold and forced his way into the room.

"Excuse me!" the secretary shouted after them.

"Help!" Audrey screamed back, but Morgan slammed the door and locked it before anyone could come to her rescue.

"I am doing my damndest to get along with you," Morgan growled.

Ducking around the principal's desk, she pointed at him. "Don't you touch me!"

"I want to go home!" he snapped.

"So do I!"

"Then quit messing around!"

"Quit threatening me! It's not my fault we're stuck here!"

"Newsflash," he said hotly. "It's not my fault, either. But every time you screw up, all you do is ensure that we stay stuck here for this much longer."

"All right!" she shouted, and then held up her hands placatingly. "You're right. That was a mean trick I just pulled, and I'm sorry. I-I'll try to be more cooperative, but I don't want you spanking me anymore. It doesn't feel good."

"It's not intended to." He lunged at her, grabbing hold of her arms and pulling her face down over the desktop. He swung his arm, his hand cracking hard across the summit of her rounded bottom three times in rapid succession. Just as

quickly, he let go of her and she scrambled backwards onto the floor. She clutched her bottom in both hands and glared at him in wide-eyed anger, panic and even a little relief that it hadn't been worse.

He pointed at her. "Now, you can either acknowledge that we're even and settle down. Or, we can keep fighting and picking at one another, making this whole experience just that much worse, until I get fed up again and really let you have it."

She rubbed her bottom, her chest heaving as she considered her options. There still weren't any.

"I could have spanked you a whole lot harder and a heck of a lot longer than that," he added. "I'd also like to point out one more time that spanking errant, troublesome young women these days, isn't considered wrong back now."

Her mouth pursed, her bottom lip protruding slightly. "Truce?" she asked.

He nodded. "Truce."

The vacuum sucked at them again, and Audrey closed her eyes an instant before the bright light flashed them back to the beginning of the scene. This time, she got it right.

It looked exactly like any other science room that she could remember having studied in throughout her high school days. There was a fake skeleton hanging from a metal pole behind the instructor's desk, a chart of the periodic tables hung on the wall, and the blackboard had a ten-page reading assignment chalked next to a list of chemical liquids.

The professor himself looked like Albert Einstein without the mustache and wearing coke-bottle-thick, black-rimmed eyeglasses. He was old, his curly white hair frizzed out all around his head, and he walked between the students' individual science labs with a back that was slightly hunched.

"Hello, study buddy," Morgan said, startling Audrey as he dropped into the seat next to her.

"Now what?" she asked, her eyes darting furtively between the other students sitting around them.

"No 'Hello, Morgan, thanks for getting me through that last scene'?"

"No," she said shortly.

"What's the matter?"

"It just occurred to me: the more I cooperate with you, the further into this movie we're going to go and the closer we'll get to the part where the spiders start eating people. I don't want to see that. And I really don't want to be in it!"

He caught her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "I'll warn you before that starts to happen. Besides, you're the heroine, remember? You survive this, too."

"That's *if* everything goes as the script dictates."

"Right."

"But I don't know the script. And you may or may not have noticed, but my skills in following directions aren't really as fine-tuned as they could be."

"If worse comes to worst and we do get eaten," he squeezed her hand again, "it's a short-lived discomfort and then the movie starts over again. No big deal."

She arched her eyebrows. “A short-lived discomfort?”

He nodded. “Really. I’ve had paper cuts that hurt more than being speared by those giant spider fangs, injected with a poison and enzymes that slowly turned my body into a liquified goo, right before I was used as a spider Slurpee.”

Audrey stood up, but Morgan caught her arm and sat her back down again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. That wasn’t funny. I’m sorry.”

“I hate spiders,” she said. “If I survive this, I’m going to dedicate the rest of my life to squishing every single one of the little eight-legged freaks I find.”

“Say, ‘Is it possible for a spider to grow as big as a man?’”

Audrey blinked at him. “What?”

“You two aren’t doing your work.”

Audrey jumped when the elderly teacher suddenly appeared at her elbow. “Oh, Mister, er...”

“Russell,” Morgan supplied.

“Right.” Audrey cleared her throat. “I, uh, was wondering if you could answer a question for me.”

The teacher halfway smiled. “My dear, I have been employed in this capacity for almost forty years just so I could do that very thing. What would you like to know?”

She tapped two fingers on her desktop and tried not to look too crazy as she mumbled, “Can spiders grow big enough to eat people?”

Mr. Russell’s bushy white eyebrows arched up into his hairline. “An interesting question.”

“One that’s going to have a very interesting answer,” Morgan said out of the corner of his mouth. Elbow on the desk, he cupped his chin in the palm of his hand and leaned into it while he listened. “This is my absolute favorite part of the whole movie. I remember smoking stuff that was good enough to give me epiphanies as convoluted as this.”

“Can spiders grow big enough to eat people?” the science teacher mused, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “You know, I’m not entirely sure that they can’t. There are some species of tarantula that live out in the desert, which can grow to be as big as a fist or more. I’ve heard of a species in Africa that’s as large as a dinner plate. I suppose it is conceivable, if given enough food, shelter, the right growing conditions, and of course let’s not forget the undeniable influences of a nuclear waste facility, such as the one we have just two short miles down the road—”

“Naturally,” Morgan said, winking at Audrey.

“Nuclear waste facility?” she echoed.

“I suppose anything is possible,” Mr. Russell finished. Then he laughed. “Although highly unlikely, my dear girl. After all, ours is a world of science. For a spider to grow large enough to become a significant danger to human beings, well now... that would be the discovery of the twentieth century! But I’m certain if such a monster did exist, we’d have seen some sight of it by now.”

“Absolutely,” Morgan said, nodding.

“It would have been all over the news. We could read all sorts of articles about it in our morning newspapers.”

“Absolutely.”

“Rest easy, my girl,” the teacher patted her cheek. “There is no such monster living on this world. And certainly not in this town.”

“Oh boy, did those ever sound like famous last words,” Audrey said as he turned and walked away.

“They were,” Morgan said cheerfully.

Folding her arms on top of her desk, Audrey dropped her head down upon them. She groaned. “He seemed like such a nice man, too.”

Morgan patted her shoulder. “Try not to get attached.”

“Is this the scene where we get attacked for the first time?” Audrey huddled close to Morgan’s side, constantly scanning the forest of trees and underbrush that shadowed both sides of the unpaved road. It was night, and the only thing that either of them had to protect themselves against any eight-legged creatures that might go ‘bump’ in the night, were a pair of flashlights. “Why not just hang a sign around our necks? Free spider kibble, while supplies last.”

Morgan only smiled. “Relax. We don’t get attacked for another couple scenes yet. Remember, B-Flicks generally start off slow and work their way up to suspenseful—and yet, oddly enough, hokey—endings.”

“So why come out here?” Audrey asked.

“We’re looking for your father, remember? Where else should we start but where the first large spider was sighted?”

“The first spider?” Audrey whipped around to stare at him. “How about a million miles in the opposite direction?”

They rounded a bend in the unpaved road and Audrey saw two things. First, her truck was where she'd left it: crashed against a tree with the driver's side door wide open and the lights still on. Good battery, that.

Secondly, there was a sixteen-foot spider web stretched across the road between the vehicle and themselves.

"Oh, shit!" Audrey jumped back, but a wide-eyed scan of the surroundings revealed no menacing web-builder anywhere in sight. "What does it hope to catch, a Buick?"

"This," Morgan said, gesturing to the web, "is our first real evidence that things are not all rainbows and joy in our lovely little town. Take a good look at it. Tell me what you see."

Reluctantly, Audrey shone her light over the web, following strands that were as thick as her forearm from one side of the road all the way over to the left, where the loose ends were tied to a tree. She blinked twice. "Is that a clove hitch? Is our spider a sailor?"

"Takes some of the scariness right out of the situation, doesn't it?" Morgan patted her back and then went over to the tree. "Whatever you do, don't touch the web."

Unwilling to be left by herself on the open road in the dark, she followed him at least as far as the web. While Morgan began to dig around in the bushes, she shone her flash light on the strands. For the most part, they looked like ordinary lengths of white rope, sprinkled in glitter that made the web almost sparkle under the light of the half moon. She glanced over at Morgan's back, then stuck out her hand and touched the nearest strand with the tip of her finger. The glitter must have covered glue because the instant she made contact with it, her finger stuck to the web. And it stuck fast.

Audrey glanced at Morgan's back guiltily and tried to pull her finger free. She pulled until it hurt, but the web refused to let her go.

"Um," she said. She closed her eyes, dreading having to confess to something this stupid. "Morgan?"

"Yeah, hang on." He crawled deeper into the bushes.

A branch snapped off to her right and Audrey snapped toward the sound. She shone her flashlight into the trees, freezing when she spotted eight unblinking, beady-black eyes stared back at her. Eight long legs unfurled, and the huge spider came down out of the tall tree branches, venturing out of the shadows and into the flashlight's glow to touch its front legs to the web.

Her knees almost buckled beneath her, and all of Audrey's breath whooshed out of her lungs in one gasping exhale. "Oh, sh—"

"Okay, I've got it!" Morgan called, climbing back up out of the bushes and onto the road. He held up the clawed tip of a spider's leg, then saw what loomed at the end of her flashlight's quaking beam. "Did I or did I not tell you not to touch the web?"

"Please help me." Audrey shivered and the spider inched closer, plucking and feeling at the glittery rope strands with its front legs.

"Don't move a muscle," Morgan said from behind her, but at the same time the spider's fangs parted and the mouth rubbed together as it made a low hissing noise. As far as Audrey was concerned, that was all, folks!

She dropped her flashlight with a scream and jerked wildly on her arm to either free her finger or remove it from her hand

completely.

“Don’t!” Morgan yelled. The spider lunged even as he charging in front of Audrey, waving his arms and the clawed leg and shouting, “Hi-yah! Get out of here! Get!”

But it was too late. The spider jumped on her.

The instant the vacuum dropped them back on the unpaved stretch of road leading to the truck, Audrey started running. Morgan tackled her to the ground, quickly rolling her onto her back, both flattening himself over her and hugging her tight while she became a kicking, shouting, bucking mass of wildly flailing arms and legs.

“Get off me!” Audrey screamed. Gravel dug into her back and the memory of the spider wrapping its legs around her and sinking its fangs into her shoulder tingled in every one of her nerve endings. “Let me go!”

Morgan caught her face in his hands. “Shh, it’s okay. Audrey, honey, calm down.”

She beat her fists against his shoulders and the side of his neck, hitting and shoving, struggling to either knock him off or to scramble out from under his weight. But as determined as she was to get away, Morgan continued to hold her until her strength waned and the edge of her panic wore down.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “You’re okay.”

Exhaustion and raw fear left her shaking in his arms. She hit his shoulders again, and then began to cry. “You lied to me!”

“No, I didn’t.” He wrapped his arms around her, simply holding her.

“You said we wouldn’t get eaten!”

“I said we wouldn’t get attacked for another couple of scenes.” Morgan raised his head to look at her. He touched her face, smoothing her hair back from her eyes and wiping the tears and dirt from her cheeks. “I also said, don’t touch the web. We weren’t supposed to know that spider was there. If you’d held perfectly still, the scene would have started over again before the spider reached you, but your struggles elicited a feeding response.”

Sobbing, she hit his shoulder one last time, a half-hearted and useless attempt to budge him. “Please, just let me go.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “Don’t cry, honey.”

She shuddered. “I felt its fangs go through me.”

“I know.” He held her face in the cup of his palms. “Believe me, I know.”

“It was going to eat me.”

He lowered his head and his lips gently brushed across hers. She shivered again, tasting the salt of her own tears, but didn’t say anything more. Sniffling, she raised her chin, a shy invitation for him to do that again.

“The timing is all wrong for this,” he murmured, the touch of his breath and the warmth of his body completely different from that of Touch’s.

She turned her cheek into his palm, and against his lips, whispered, “Comfort me.”

The timing might have been wrong, but his body responded to the touch of hers like... well, like a man who’d

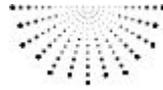
spent that last fifty years without a partner. And the feel of him, hard as a post as he pressed against her, his hips grinding into the cradle of hers, made her heart pound.

She twined her arms around his shoulders, a soft, throaty moan escaping as his kiss deepened hungrily. Her fingers wove through his hair, and he reached down to catch her bottom. He pulled her hard against him even as she arched into his embrace.

It was entirely the wrong time for this, she thought again as the first hints of an impending scene change filtered in through her consciousness, tickling at her sense of reality and refusing to be ignored.

Morgan raised his head, his eyes stormy with desire. All around them the night brightened, and she heard him swear an instant before she vanished right out of his arms.

CHAPTER FOUR



“Where did you find this?” Mr. Russell, the high school science teacher asked as he turned the huge foot-long clawed tip of the massive spider leg over in his hands. He ran his fingers over the sporadic hairs, staring and shaking his head in wonder, then looked up at both Morgan and Audrey. “Is this a practical joke? It can’t be real.”

“It is,” Morgan said somberly.

It was nine o’clock at night, and what he was still doing at the school Audrey couldn’t fathom, but she stood silently beside Morgan, leaned up against the teacher’s desk and waited for the scene to complete itself so she could go to bed. Not that she was tired. She reached up and rub at her neck and shoulder, the skin there still tingling with the memory of being speared by the fangs of that spider. No, she wasn’t tired. Not at all. In fact, it would be nothing short of a miracle if she ever slept again without the aid of some serious prescription medication.

“You should have seen it, Mr. Russell,” Morgan said, affecting a wide-eyed, golly-gee, Leave-It-To- Beaver tone. “The web stretched across the entire road. The spider that must have made it was huge.”

There was a brief pause, and then his foot stepped not so gently down on hers.

“Peter will be happy to show you where we found it,” Audrey said. He pressed a little harder on her foot, and she reluctantly amended herself. “We both will.”

The teacher turned the leg over in his hands yet again, making no acknowledgment of her deliberately fumbled lines. “It must be that nuclear waste facility,” he murmured. “Only radiation could have such an effect on a spider.”

For anyone to make such a conclusive leap in logic was ludicrous, but Audrey only nodded. “Damn those forward-thinking scientists, the politicians that back them and the rabid, extremist environmentalists who have yet to be born. Damn them all to hell.”

Russell furrowed his brows in confusion. “Envi... vironmen... what did you say?”

“Heh,” Morgan tried to laugh. “She’s having a hard day.” He moved his foot off of hers, but maintained physical contact with her when he lay his hand on her backside instead.

Audrey stiffened, but he wasn’t fondling her. His hand was flat across her right bottom cheek, pressing slightly into the soft, vulnerable flesh with unmistakable warning.

“A very hard day,” she agreed, and swallowed hard, the tiny hairs along her nape still prickling with dread. Her bottom prickled now, too. Beneath his hand. Around his hand. He had a very hard hand, and her bottom remembered what kind of punishment he was capable of dishing out, even if her brain and mouth chose not to.

“Ah,” the grey-haired teacher said, his attention shifting momentarily back to Audrey. He looked at her over the top of

his glasses. “Your father still missing, is he? Very sorry to hear that.” His gaze shifted, as if unable to be distracted, back to the leg. “Very sorry indeed.”

Morgan moved his hand, two gentle warning pats and glared at her.

Audrey stiffened, holding herself perfectly still while she waited for him to remove his palm. When he didn’t, she cleared her throat. “Yes, uh... I fear what may have happened to him.”

“As you should,” their teacher said. “This,” he shook the spider leg at her. “*This* is nothing to take lightly.” Then he turned back to Morgan. “Would you mind if I kept this, my boy? I have colleagues back at the university that I’d like to consult with.”

Morgan stuck out his hand to shake Russell’s. “Thank you for all your help,” he said. But though he smiled when he said it, there was an odd note to his tone that caught Audrey’s attention. To her, it almost sounded like he was bidding the man farewell.

As they were leaving the classroom, Audrey said, “You were telling him goodbye, weren’t you?”

“I told you not to get attached.”

“Are...” Audrey swallowed hard. “We’re not going to have to watch him getting eaten, are we?”

“No,” Morgan assured her. “It’ll happen sometime in the night. We won’t see anything at all.”

As they walked out of the school, the lights shifted around them, becoming a slightly darker shade of grey.

“The scene stopped,” Audrey said, looking up at the seemingly dimmer light from the street lamps that lined the road. “What now?”

Morgan arched his eyebrows in a kind of shrug. “Now I walk you home and we get some sleep. Tomorrow’s Saturday. So, we’ll get up early and continue searching spider-infested countryside for your father.”

The movie world was very still as they walked home. There was no breeze or croaking frogs and chirping crickets to serenade the way. No other people strolled the sidewalks in the night, no cars drove past in the streets. For the most part, the houses they passed were dark, although here and there a light could be seen behind curtain-drawn and silhouette-less windows.

“I hate the nights here,” Audrey said. “They feel so eerie.”

She hugged her shoulders as if she could hold back a shiver that had nothing to do with being cold.

“I’ve gotten used to them,” Morgan said. “It kind of makes me wonder how I’ll adjust to having a world full of sound again.”

“That’s assuming we can go home when this is over.”

“I hope we will.”

Audrey snuck a quick look at him out of the corner of her eye. She lacked his positive outlook. She knew it was just as likely that the movie would simply fade to black, taking both her and Morgan with it, once the final scene had played. Everything here would simply cease to be. She dropped her eyes to the sidewalk. That was a possibility that she couldn’t bear to think on.

“It’ll be all right,” Morgan said again, his hand taking hold of hers. He gave her a comforting squeeze.

And yet, deep down inside Audrey had no confidence that it really would. And that fear inside her just got worse the closer they drew to movie-character Beth Walker’s house.

“Here we go,” Morgan said as they turned down her street. When they reached her house, he held open the front gate for her and together they walked past the azaleas and the morning glories that twined up the trellises that lined the porch. Under the yellow glow of the Walker’s front porch light, he said, “Home sweet temporary home.”

Audrey glanced up at him and for a moment they stood facing one another, neither moving or speaking, just studying one another in the pale light.

“Well,” Morgan finally said. “Good night.”

He turned to go, but Audrey caught his elbow. “Stay,” she begged. “Please, I just... I want you to stay. You can even have the bed; I’ll sleep on the floor. I...” She hesitated before confessing, “I don’t want to be alone here.”

Morgan gave her a lopsided smile. He reached out to cup her cheek, smoothing her skin with the pad of his thumb. “Nothing will happen tonight, I promise.”

“Stay anyway,” she whispered.

And Morgan gave in.

“Ow!” Audrey cried out. “OW! Stop! It won’t fit!”

“It’ll fit,” Morgan assured her.

“It’s too big!”

“It’ll fit,” Morgan repeated, and began to push again. “You know, it would help if you pushed too.”

“I am,” Audrey grunted, “pushing!”

“Wiggle your end.”

“I am!”

“Wiggle harder!”

“Yell at me one more time and you’ll be doing this by yourself!”

“Yell at me once more time, and you won’t sit for the rest of this movie.” He frowned at her and then looked down between them. “Maybe if we switched positions...”

With a sigh that blew her bangs up off her forehead, Audrey dropped her end of the couch and stood up. “This isn’t working, Morgan.”

“It’s halfway through the doorway, we can’t stop now.” He squatted down and picked up his end. “Tip it on its side.”

Audrey groaned and grunted as she yanked on the wooden feet of the couch, struggling to turn it over. On her third shove, she thought she heard the snap of breaking wood, either the frame or something in the couch—possible her back—but after two quick shoves the long sofa finally popped the rest of the way into Beth Walker’s room.

She was too out of breath and tired to cheer.

“Team work,” Morgan said, both panting and grinning as he gave her a jaunty thumbs-up. “Works every time.”

He tipped the couch upright and shoved the heavy piece of furniture out of the way so she could stagger past him into the

room. Pushing it up against the louver closet doors, he flopped down to rest on the cushions.

“Ah yes.” He bounced in the center experimentally. “Much more comfortable than the floor.”

Feeling both grateful and a little bit sheepish for having imposed on him two nights in a row, Audrey stripped her bed of two blankets and a pillow and handed them to him. “Thanks,” she said.

“Thank you,” he replied. “I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have been able to move this on my own.”

“No, I mean... thank you for sleeping here the night... so I wouldn’t have to be alone.”

“Oh.” He arched his eyebrows, then nodded. “It’s all right, really. If ever a place could cause nightmares and evoke a fear of the dark, it would be this one. Believe it or not,” he flashed her a wry grin. “Beneath this devil-may-care grin and strong, masculine veneer, I had a hard time getting used to this place when I first arrived, too.”

Audrey matched his smile with one of her own, which gradually faded away as she found herself staring at him again. And he back at her. A lengthy silence stretched between them, filling the room with an odd awkwardness that she hadn’t experienced before.

Morgan really was a good-looking man, black and white notwithstanding. His shoulders were the right kind of broad; his waist the right kind of narrow. And his ass... yup, the man was the right kind of everything from head to black and white sock-hop shoes.

“Well,” she reluctantly said. “Good night.”

“Good night,” he replied.

They sat watching each other for another minute more before she shed her shoes and crawled under the blankets of the bed. Fully dressed, she rolled her back to him, closed her eyes and tried her best to sleep when she really didn't feel like it. A moment later, all her attempts became null and void when, after hearing each of his shoes hitting the floor one at a time and listening to the soft rustle as he made up his impromptu bed, she heard the unmistakable sound of an unzipping zipper.

Her eyes snapped open. He was taking his pants off?

Her whole body flushed hot as she locked her eyes on the wall dead ahead of her. Morgan hummed a brief tune under his breath, but then lay down and the room fell quiet once more.

She was still wide awake a good half hour later when he let out the first of many soft snores. The burning heat in her cheeks was only half as uncomfortable as it was between her tightly clenched thighs. She didn't want him, she told herself furiously. She didn't even like him.

And she especially was not fond of snorers, she thought as he let out a particularly loud one at decibels sufficient to rattle the glass in the window frames.

She had to be out of her mind.

Covering her head with her pillow, she tried to get some sleep.

The next morning breakfast was bacon and eggs, buttered toast and grey-tinted orange juice that tasted just like it looked—a dull echo of what it should have been—and still her breakfast

sat like an indigestible lump inside her. Particularly when Morgan said, “You wanted me to warn you before we got attacked by spiders, so consider this it. We’ve got a while before it actually happens, but just so you know, from here on out, things are going to get a bit hairy.”

“Oh,” Audrey said, putting the last sliver of toast back down on her plate. “Great.”

Morgan brushed his hands together over his own plate and said with a grin, “Well, are you ready to go hunt down your father?”

“Do we actually find the man?” she asked.

“Nope. Although we do find the biggest spider on the face of the planet.”

Audrey slunk down even lower in her chair. “Great,” she repeated, with even less enthusiasm.

“It’ll be all right,” Morgan assured her. “Remember, we’re the heroes. Heroes make it through everything.”

There wasn’t a lot of comfort in that, but there was also no way for her to get out of this. So, when Morgan left the house that morning in search of her father, she went with him. She dragged her feet the whole way, but she went.

It was a bright, clear, sunny grey morning, and yet they were the only two people on the streets. Just like the night before, no pedestrians, morning joggers or cars passed them on the roads, but then the vacuum hadn’t sucked at her so she knew the movie hadn’t started ‘rolling’ either.

“This is just too quiet,” she commented as they walked side-by-side toward the end of town. “It’s just as bad as last night. Only worse now, because it’s daylight.”

“I think it’s peaceful,” Morgan said with a smile. He walked with his hands tucked into his back jeans’ pockets. “Everything is quiet, serene. No motorists drag racing up and down the street with holes in their mufflers.”

“No birds singing or gentle breezes, or insects buzzing over the flowers or crickets chirping,” Audrey pointed out. “Or frogs at night or the odd dog or cat darting through the yards or across the road. There’s nothing. Just... nothing.”

“There’s you,” Morgan said, smiling down at her.

Audrey ignored the compliment. “I can’t imagine fifty years of walking this road without another person to offer companionship or conversation. How could you stand it?”

“I didn’t,” he said. When she glanced over at him, he suddenly crossed his eyes. “I went crazy about forty-nine years ago.”

Audrey stepped off the sidewalk and started to cross the street, but he caught her arm, laughing as he pulled her back to him. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding!”

Chuckling in spite of the situation, she shook her head, and they continued walking until town faded away and the street become the same backwoods country road that they’d traversed the day before. “Are we going back to the web?”

“Nope. It only looks like same. They had limited quantities of film when they shot this flick and had to get creative with the scenery.” Morgan looked up at the trees above and, as if judging by some cue she couldn’t see, said, “And... here we go...”

The grey all around them brightened and her stomach tightened as the now familiar pull of the vacuumed sucked the air from her lungs. She shut her eyes against the blinding flash

of light and when she opened them again the world was a brighter place. Birds were now singing and the branches in the towering evergreen pines above were swaying in the slight wind that played with her hair. An invisible director had just called action and the movie was once again playing.

“This way.” Morgan took her elbow, leading her off the road and down a short incline into the woods.

“What are we looking for?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” he said cryptically. “It’s right over here.”

With him leading the way, they picked through a rolling green wave of blackberry bushes and stinging nettles.

On the lookout for spiders and spider webs, when they ran across the car it took Audrey a moment to realize what she was looking at. The long green station wagon was wedged between two towering pines. Both the driver’s and passenger doors were wide open and the headlights were on. Seriously, cars back now must have had Energizer batteries. They just kept on going.

Twin splashes of illumination fell across the bushes and trees spread out before the crashed vehicle and lit up the glittering spider silks that ran across the headlights and which covered everything in area. The trees, car, ground; all was blanketed in fine gossamer lines.

Although still a good thirty feet from the nearest part of the cocoon-like web, Audrey froze. “Is that—?” she paused, unable to finish the sentence.

“Your father’s car,” Morgan said for her. “Yup.”

Her gaze darted up into the treetops, and then all around them. “I don’t see any spiders.”

“Don’t worry. They’re long gone. Go ahead and call to him.”

Audrey looked back at him in surprise. “Isn’t he—I thought he was—”

“Dead as a door nail,” he affirmed. “But it’s in the script. You’re supposed to call three times.”

“And bring every spider within hearing distance running straight to us?” Audrey laughed. “Forget it! The script can go hang, for all I care. I’m not doing it!”

Morgan held up his hand, palm flat and at the ready to deliver a necessary spanking. “One...” he counted. Counted! As if she were five! His smile didn’t waver, but a steely determination entered his eyes. “Two...”

Audrey cupped her hands around her mouth. “Dr. Walker!”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “You call your father ‘Doctor Walker’?”

“No,” she said sarcastically. “I call *my* father stone-cold deceased and buried in Blodgett Cemetery.”

He held his upturned palm out for her perusal. “Do we need to discuss this with Mr. Hand?”

That took her from five-years-old all the way down to three. She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Father!”

“Beth called her father daddy.”

“I’m not doing that!” she snapped. “It feels weird. I’m a grown woman, and grown women don’t call their father’s daddy. Except in the South. And only because it’s a different world down here.”

“With a little incentive, I’ll bet I could make you call me daddy.”

Her jaw dropped and yet there it was again, all that glorious heat sparking to life down low in the pit of her belly. It flowed molten even lower, as her face burned.

Morgan moved his menacing palm several inches closer. “Does Daddy need to swat his little girl so she’ll behave?”

She looked at his hand, damn near mesmerized by the threat of it. The soft skin of her bottom tingled, suddenly very sensitive and very aware of just how near he was to her. “No.”

The word came out as barely a squeak.

“I think Daddy does.” He took a step towards her, and, when she tried to back away, grabbed hold of the waist of her pants and pulled her so close that their chests would have bumped, if only she hadn’t braced her hands against his. He was very solid beneath her awestruck palms.

A spark of something she’d never before seen come alive in his eyes. “You’re not following directions very well, and frankly I think you’re going to keep right on not following them until Daddy makes you.”

“N-no,” she said meekly. “I just think it’s silly and—”

“It *is* silly,” Morgan agreed. “But unless you do it, and do it the way Daddy tells you, this hand,” he held it up for emphasis, “and your bottom are going to become reacquainted in a very short, sharp, unpleasant way.”

“Daddy!” Audrey squealed, hating the way her voice warbled the cry. “Daddy, where are you?”

A corner of Morgan’s mouth turned smugly upwards. Letting go of her pants, he headed for the car.

“I feel like such a tool,” Audrey muttered, and stuck her tongue out at his retreating back. Cupping her hands around her mouth again, she continued to call for the missing doctor until Morgan summoned her to him.

“Take a look at this,” he said as she picked her way through the underbrush to his side. He bent down, crawling halfway onto the driver’s seat before reemerging a minute later with a shiny gold bracelet in his grasp.

“What is that?” she asked.

“A gift,” he said and held it out to her. “From your movie parent.”

For a split second, Audrey felt like a heel for every mean thought she’d entertained about the missing Doctor Walker. It took her a minute to remember that none of this was real.

Thank God.

“You’re supposed to put it on,” Morgan said, his arm still extended for her to accept the bracelet.

Audrey made a slight face. “I feel like I’m stealing someone else’s life.”

Half sighing and laughing, Morgan held up his palm again. “You know, I don’t think you’re quite getting the point.”

“Oh, all right!” She snatched the bracelet from his hand before he started calling himself her Daddy again. Her stomach performing giddy acrobatics inside her, she glared at him as she squeezed the band of gold jewelry over the meatiest part of her hand and onto her wrist. “There, happy?”

“Ecstatic. If I have to do remind you to do what I tell you one more time, I’m going to do my talking on your behind.”

For God's sake, was she actually *enjoying* his threats? Embarrassed, Audrey moved aside so Morgan could shut the car door. She fell into step behind him where she could continue to make faces at his back without his knowing.

Instead of climbing back up the short hill to the road, Morgan took her further into the dark woods. Just before they reached the bottom of the incline, Audrey saw the trees around her brighten and felt as the vacuum began to pull at her.

"Ugh," she said, just before it overtook her once more.

Suddenly the forest was gone and a vast and rocky desert stretched out before and behind them, with high rocky cliffs flanking either side of them as far as the eye could follow. The ground beneath her feet was hard and cracked, like an ancient, dried-up riverbed. The heat burned through the soles of her shoes as hot as the gray sun beating down upon her back.

She stopped in her tracks.

"What the hell? Where did the woods go?" Audrey turned around, but the dry river bed and rocks extended as far as she could see behind her, too. "Where's the town? How can you have a dried-up desert and a lush evergreen forest within a few seconds of walking from one another?"

He laughed. "Yeah, I know. Fun, isn't it?"

"My God," she said. "This place comes with everything: sand, cactus, baking hot sun, scrub brush, dead cow's skull..."

"Spider cave at the top of the cliff," Morgan interjected, then thumbed behind them.

Audrey turned to look up, shading her eyes against the glare of the sun. "Holy cow, that's way up there." She sized up the rock wall, and then looked down at the jagged rocks that

cascaded down the side to the bottom of the river bed. “This looks so familiar. Where have I seen this before?”

“Deep in the burning desert, where nothing can survive, lives the dreaded Gila monster,” Morgan said in a deep, melodramatic voice.

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Audrey said. “This is the set for The Giant Gila Monster? I just watched this movie.”

He grinned.

Her eyes narrowed as she raised her face to the sun to study the cave again. “What’s the shiny thing, up there?”

“That would be Mr. Russell’s car.”

“If there’s a road up there, what are we doing way down here?”

Morgan patted her shoulder. “Blame the script.”

The climb was steep, but not difficult and Morgan took the lead to show her the easiest places to put her hands and feet. About a hundred feet up, the wall gave way to a ledge of a road that supported Mr. Russell’s car and the crowning feature, the spider’s cave. Complete with a lot of gossamer webbing across the rocks, Audrey noted as she grabbed Morgan’s hand and heaved herself over the lip of the ledge. She supposed that meant a spider must be at home.

No longer making faces, she fell into step behind Morgan again. But while he skirted around the car, heading for the cave, she paused to look inside the driver’s window. Sure enough, the clawed tarsus was still lying across the passenger seat.

Audrey glanced up at the cave and swallowed hard. “We live through this,” she whispered as she followed Morgan.

“We live through this.”

A chill due more to just the change in temperature trickled down her spine as she passed beyond the sunlight and into the shadows of the cave. Once, this had been a mining shaft. Old railway tracks lined the ground, strewn with wood debris and the odd and end strip of rebar. There was only one tunnel to take and that descended down a gradual slope farther than the fading sunlight would follow. Like a perpetually leaky faucet, a soft plink of falling water drops echoed up from somewhere below.

Audrey would never have described herself as cowardly or excessively girlish, but knowing somewhere inside this tunnel there lurked a man-eating arachnid had her creeping as close to Morgan as she could get without fusing their bodies into one. She all but pushed him ahead of her while she clung to the shirt at his back and stumbled over the cocoon-like bundles of spider silk that littered their path.

“Be careful,” he cautioned, half turning to place a hand on top of her head and helping her to duck beneath a web that stretched the width of the tunnel. He must have known it was there by experience. Now that she was looking for it, she could see it in the darkness. “We don’t want another repeat of last night.”

Audrey shivered and touched her shoulder where she’d been bitten. “No,” she agreed, and as if their voices triggered the next cue, in the distance the soft shifting of pebbles whispered up through the tunnel. Not twenty feet directly ahead of them, the darkness shifted and the shadows began to move.

Audrey’s hands became claws in Morgan’s shirt. “Please tell me that’s my eyes.”

“Pay attention,” Morgan told her as the shadows solidified into a thorax, eight eyes and legs, and the largest pair of fangs that she’d ever seen in her life. “This is where you can read ‘Tonka’ on the underbelly. Kind of makes you wonder if anyone even bothered to edit this film, doesn’t it?”

Tonka, like in the toy-makers? Audrey couldn’t have cared less if it had ‘Made in Taiwan’ stamped in gold letters on every one of its hairy legs. It was a spider. A huge, living, breathing spider, extending at least eight feet from the end to end and growing ever bigger as it lowered itself from the ceiling to the ground and faced them.

Audrey’s mouth ran dry. She wanted to scream, but her breath came out a barely audible whimper.

“When it comes charging at us, we’re going to run like hell back to the surface,” Morgan said. “Don’t worry about the cave in; I’ll start that. You just try not to get caught in the webs, okay? Audrey?”

Her eyes widening the bigger the spider seemed to get, she trembled and backed up a step. Then two, and then kept going until she felt the cool stone of the cave wall at her back. Her hand touched something metallic and, out of reflex, she closed her fingers around it. She looked down at the length of rebar in her hand.

“Audrey?” Morgan said, a touch of impatience creeping into his tone. “Did you hear me?”

Lifting the length of rebar, Audrey held it in front of her like a club. “Yes,” she choked, her fear leaving her panting. “Run like hell. Don’t get caught. Cave-in. I heard you.”

A clicking of clawed leg-tips tapped against the rocks as the spider shifted closer, the whisper of feeler hairs rubbing

together as it stroked its fangs with its mouth palps. All eight of its dreadful eyes fixed intently on her and Morgan.

“Get ready,” he said.

Audrey backed fully against the wall, pressing herself against the rocks as the spider stalked them and then crouched as if preparing to spring.

“Run!” Morgan snapped.

He turned, but Audrey didn't follow. When the spider jumped after him, she let out a blood-curdling scream, hefted the pipe and brought it crashing back down again on the spider's head. She drove the rebar like a spike all the way through it and into the hard ground.

“Jesus!” Morgan shouted.

The spider crumpled in on itself, its legs folding, its fangs clicking weakly, its body sinking lifeless to the rocks. Slowly, Audrey let go of the rebar and stumbled backwards until she fell against the wall again. Her hands shook. Her legs felt as though they were about to give out any second.

“What did you do that for?” Morgan demanded.

She looked at him in shock, barely able to distinguish him from the rest of the darkness. “What do you mean? I've killed it! The movie's over!”

Hands on hips, he glared at her. “That was *not* the plan!”

“That's the object of the whole, damn film, isn't it? Kill the spider and save the day?”

“We're only thirty minutes into it!”

Audrey gave him another incredulous look. “It's a Roger Corman film!” she exclaimed. “He can *pad* it! Didn't you see

King Dinosaur? Forty minutes of that film was rock climbing for God's sake!"

Morgan took an ominous step towards her. "You seem to be having difficulty grasping this one, little, simple concept: I am in charge. You do what I tell you, when I tell you. You killed the villain," he waved one hand back at the dead spider, "and that means we're going to have to start all over again from the very beginning! That's two more days that we're stuck in this stupid, pointless existence!"

Still shaking, Audrey snapped around and started walking back up the incline to the sunny mouth of the cave.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Back to town," she snarled back over one shoulder. "Maybe I can find a real man there. Preferably one with a backbone!"

"What?" he said stiffly.

"You heard me!"

The last threads of what few good-natured tendencies he'd been clinging to snapped. "That's it. I've had enough."

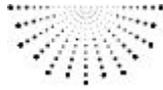
Heedless of the danger brewing behind her, Audrey said, "Good! I've had enough of you too!" She marched out of the shadows and back into the sunlight. Pulling stray wisps of gossamer spider silks from her hair and clothes, she was too busy muttering hateful comments that questioned his legitimacy as well as his human parentage to notice when he unbuckled his belt and yanked it free of his pants.

She caught a flash of movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see him stalking up out of the shadows after her, his head lowered and an ominous look in his eyes. Her

gaze dropped to the long loop of leather clutched tightly in his right hand. The dangerous hand. The one that meant business.

Audrey never thought twice. She ran for her life with Morgan fast at her heels.

CHAPTER FIVE



Audrey sat in the crashed truck, the radiator still hissing steam, smoking still billowing from the engine to dance in front of the single remaining headlight. She sat with her arms folded across her chest and glared out at the darkened forest, the trees before her sporadically brightening into clear focus as the flashing police lights from behind her illuminated all.

Morgan had his forehead pressed to the glass of the locked driver's side door while he glared at her through the window from out beneath a very heavy and angry brow. "You can't stay in there forever."

The hell she couldn't.

This was the thirty-third time in a row that they'd had to reenact this particular scene. So far, she'd refused to crash the truck sixteen times, tried to drive back to town before the scene changed and started the movie all over again eight times. She ran over spiders twice, and even ran over Morgan once, kind of halfway sort of by accident. Each time the scene re-set, so did time as well. Audrey's body was telling her they'd spent hours out here, methodically messing up one lousy five-minute sequence after another, and Morgan had spanked her twice. Once with the belt, and again with his hand seven scene

attempts later. Her butt hurt like the blazes, but she still wasn't ready to cooperate.

One look at Morgan's face told her quite plainly that if he ever got her out of the truck, she'd wind up wishing she'd been born without a butt. As if she wasn't already wishing that!

Sitting on the hard leather of the truck's seat, all Audrey could feel was the hot, dull pulsing hurt blazing through her buttocks. "Get out of the truck," Morgan drawled.

"Get bent," she snapped back and didn't move.

"I am willing to forgive you everything that you've done so far, even your attempt to make me like a splattered bug on the grill. But if you don't get out of the god damn truck right now, I am going to rip this door off its hinges and strangle you with my bare hands."

She gave him a withering look, but didn't budge.

"I'm serious," he warned.

"Go to hell," Audrey said back.

"Why must you make everything so difficult?" Morgan snapped, exasperated. "What part about 'follow the script so we can go home' do you find objectionable?"

"I did follow the script! I killed the spider!"

"You weren't supposed to kill it. We were supposed to start a cave in!"

"What does it matter when it dies, so long as it dies?"

Morgan threw back his head with a muted roar of frustration, then looked at her again. "We are going to kill it,

Audrey, but it has to be done a certain way at a certain time, or we don't get out of here."

"That thing," Audrey whipped halfway around, on the worn leather seating, wincing at the reawakening hurt of that movement, and pointed back up at the road, "is going to start killing people unless we kill it in the cave."

Morgan placed his hands on the window. "Sweetheart... darling...babygirl..." he said, painstakingly calm and patient and even kind. "The movie is called *The Spider Feeds!* It is not called *The Spider Skips Gaily Through A Field Of Tulips*. When you have a title like that, you almost have to expect a few expendable movie characters to be killed and messily devoured."

"But *we* are in the movie!" She thumped her chest with both hands for emphasis. "The way you keep throwing us in front of the spiders makes us prime targets."

"Is everything all right down there?" one of the impatiently waiting police officers called down at them.

They both turned to look up the hillside. Morgan waved; Audrey just frowned. "We could be in here forever."

"The way you keep fumbling your lines," Morgan said, "it wouldn't surprise me."

"Yeah, well, as long as we're going to be trapped here forever, I'd rather spend my forever sitting quietly and not getting eaten, thank you very much. And you're not going to spank me anymore either. I've had enough of that."

Morgan snorted. "If you'd really had enough, you'd be obediently working your way back through the script right now."

“I’m serious,” she snapped. “Your belt put bruises on me. I can feel them.”

“You brought that on yourself.”

“Yeah,” she snorted. “Sure I did. I remember it all clearly now. I threw myself down on the rocks, yanked my own pants and panties down to my ankles and blistered my own butt with your belt. Using that twisted stream of logic, you must be responsible then for biting your own leg.”

“If I get tetanus from that, by the way, you’re really going to get it,” he growled at her. They glared at one another for a moment in silence, then Morgan said, “If you’re waiting for me to apologize, you’re going to be waiting a very long time.”

She folded her arms back across her chest and faced forward again, scowling even more blackly than before. “Guess you’re going to be waiting a long time before I cooperate, too.”

He sighed. “You can’t stay in there forever. Sooner or later, you’re going to have to eat.”

As if in agreement, her stomach rumbled. Audrey folded her arms tighter across it and pretended to ignore the grumbling. “I could stand to lose some weight, anyway.”

“You’re a stick as it is,” Morgan grumbled. He took hold of the locked door handle and shook it. “Get out of the cussed truck!”

“All right,” Audrey snapped. “I’ll get out, but only if you promise not to spank me anymore.”

His eyes narrowed at her. Leaning his hands against the vehicle’s frame, he said, “I can make that promise. I can make it easily. In fact, let me spell it out for you. I will one hundred percent promise never to spank you ever again, as long as you

follow the stupid script so we can both get the hell out of this damn movie!”

“Fine!” Audrey unlocked the door and shoved it open. She pointed one finger at him sternly, a smug grin curling her mouth as she said, “But I’m going to hold you to that promise, buster! And you’d better not break it!”

She was halfway up the hill to the waiting police officers before she realized that she’d just hung herself in his carefully worded loophole. She stopped, frozen in tightly fisted surprise at her own stupidity, and Morgan passed right by her, giving her a smug smile of his own.

Sure enough, there it was: the words ‘Tonka’ written as bold as day along the underside and down one leg of the spider. Despite her promises to behave, Morgan kept her very close at hand. Unfortunately, that also meant getting very close to the spider.

No other part of this rotten film had special effects remotely as good as it did with the spider. Knowing that the props guy out in the real world had cobbled the thing together out of truck parts and latex was of precious little consolation to Audrey now, as she huddled against Morgan’s back in the spider’s lair. No, sir. Right now, right here, in whatever movie generated and lightning induced space she was presently occupying, this spider was one-hundred-percent real—wiry legs and swollen belly, rotten egg-yolk eyes and bony mandibles dripping with goo—and the way the word TONKA pulsed and stretched as the spider groped and scratched restlessly at the cave ceiling did absolutely nothing for her peace of mind.

“Get ready to run,” he murmured somewhere to the right of her in the cave’s darkness.

Run, she thought wildly. Sure, she’d run. Just as soon as she regained mastery over her legs. Right now, it was a wonder she could stand. Her knees were shaking so badly that, from the ankle upward, it felt as though she were standing on Jell-O.

“And don’t forget,” he said, “you want to drop the bracelet at the entrance, right before I start the cave-in.”

The spider’s mandibles were making an awful clicking noise, a sound which made her spine prickle and every hair she possessed stand straight up on end out of sheer alarm.

The spider’s legs unfolded and the thorax slightly scraped the rocks as it dropped from the ceiling to the floor. All of its eight legs remained steady and stable beneath it as the spider stalked them in the near darkness of the cave; in contrast, hers nearly gave out beneath her.

“I’m going to die,” she quavered fearfully.

“We can’t die,” Morgan reminded her, but his warm hand found her stomach in the dark, pressing flat against it and pushing her protectively behind him. “Even if we get killed, we can’t die. So, relax and get ready to run.”

The spider inched forward, then crouched, the swollen abdomen bobbing as the spinners twitched to make their silk.

“Run!” Morgan barked.

Audrey turned and ran smack into the wall before she reoriented herself in the darkness. She tripped over a broken barrel and the junk strips of rebar and nearly fell except for Morgan, who grabbed her arm and practically dragged her before she got her feet under her. After that, she had no trouble

out-distancing either him or the spider. She ran all the way back up the steep incline to the mouth of the cave and the warm sunshine of the desert beyond. It was a beacon of welcoming heat that she embraced with both arms as she dashed out into the light.

“Drop the bracelet!” Morgan shouted from behind her.

Audrey spun around, and just as fast screamed until her throat felt clawed. The spider was coming up fast just behind Morgan. Looking dumbly down at the band of gray gold around her wrist, she grabbed it. She tugged and wrested at it, a lopsided and frantic one-woman tug-o-war with her own arm, but the bracelet refused to be dislodged.

“It’s stuck!” she yelled, as Morgan reached her side.

He grabbed at the bracelet too and they both pulled. For such a thin band of gold, with both of them yanking in opposite directions, it felt as though the precious metal were skinning her hand from the wrist on down.

“OW!” she shrieked. “It won’t come off!”

“Hold still.” Morgan bent over to spit on her arm and Audrey saw the dark shape of the spider coming up the steep incline fast behind him. The bright light of the sun fell across it in time for her to watch as saliva dripped from its fangs in anticipation of its impending meal, and she screamed all over again.

She hardly felt the pain as Morgan skinned the bracelet off her wrist, dislocating her thumb as he jerked, spun and threw it on the ground at the spider’s feet.

She barely noticed when Morgan touched the side of the cave, and yet the entire ceiling structure buckled with a deep earthy roar and fell inward, crushing the spider just before it

reached them. Morgan missed being crushed in the gusting avalanche of rocks and dust by inches.

She had no idea what she tripped on, but when she fell, she rolled onto her stomach and covered her head as a rain of pebbles and small rocks fell over her. Morgan dropped over her and stayed there, shielding her under the almost comforting weight of his own body. He pressed her into the hot sand, wrapping his arms over her head and burying his face in the side of her neck even as he covered her head with his hands.

They had just risked their lives, and yet she could think of no more erotic a sensation than that of feeling his hips pushing against her buttocks. His chest was flat and hard against her back. His hot breath billowed across her nape and along the shell of her ear as they waited for the rocks to stop falling. She turned her head to keep from choking on the dust only to stop when she felt the sun-diminishing heat of his lips brush her cheek.

Behind them, the rumbling of the falling rocks eased into silence with the occasional clatter of stones bouncing on stones keeping them flat on the ground for a full minute longer just to make sure the danger was past. With the taste of dirt in her mouth, Audrey tentatively raised her head and looked at him.

Morgan's eyes were open and he was staring back, unsmiling, the look on his face intense in a way that probably should have frightened her if only she hadn't already felt the bulge of him stiffening against the cradle of her buttocks.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Don't look at me," he said back. "If you do, I'm going to make love to you and then we'll have to redo this scene over

again.”

Insanely, she actually found herself thinking she wouldn't mind, but then she moved her hands off her head and her thumb began to hurt. Pain was a good distraction; she glanced back over his shoulder to the cave instead.

From out beneath the avalanche of rocks, the base of which lay less than two feet from the bottoms of their shoes, protruded the clawed tips of two spider legs.

“You get to kill it, but I don't?” she asked.

Morgan shifted, sliding his legs apart to straddle her hips, lifting his greater weight off her without actually having to get up. “It's in the script,” he said simply, and followed it with a husky, “God, you're beautiful when you're covered in dirt.”

His erection was still pressed snugly against her. It hadn't diminished with the slight distance that he'd put between them. Neither had the intensity of her urge to reach back and cup it with her hand. “Maybe you'd better get off me.”

“Right.” Coughing on the dusty air, he pushed to his feet. Slapping the worst of the sand from his clothes, he then reached down to help her to her feet.

She tried not to look at him and, failing that, not to look any lower than his waist. And failing that, she did her best not to look like she was looking, particularly not while he was readjusting his jeans.

“Focus on the scene,” she told him, hiding a smile as he swore.

“Right. But in my defense, you make it hard when you keep staring at me like that.”

“It was hard before I ever looked at it,” she teased, wiping the dirt from her mouth.

He gave her a very dry glare. “Go ahead. Keep that up and see where it gets us both.”

She walked her gaze slowly down the length of his body to the crux of his jeans. “Dealing with something hard, I hope.”

Morgan turned to face her fully, his expression both dark and erotically delightful to behold. “Finish the scene,” he told her.

“Isn’t it over?” she asked, lightly running her fingers up over her legs to the waist of her dress. She began to inch her skirt upwards by the barest degrees.

“Yes, it’s dead,” he said flatly, advancing on her with measured steps.

“Now look who’s not putting his best effort into acting.”

“Finish your damn lines.”

Her nipples were perked, scraping against the soft cotton of her clothes until they felt raw from the stimulation. Each breath she drew rasped them against fabric that suddenly felt as rough as sandpaper and, with each touch, sent a deep aching pull all the way down into her womb. She lowered her head, licked her teeth and meant not a word of it as she said, “Let’s go back to town.”

The brightness of their grey and white world dimmed and Morgan tore her dress in his haste to bare her breasts. His fingers dug into her bottom as he lifted her into the air before lowering her all the way to the ground again. Audrey had rocks digging into her shoulders and into her legs and she could have cared less, particularly not when he shoved his pants down just far enough to be out of the way, yanked her

skirt up to her waist, her underwear all the way off her, and in a single hard thrust had himself imbedded deep inside her.

“Oh yes,” she breathed, lifting her hips to meet the forceful rhythm he set, weaving her fingers through his hair as the heat of his mouth suckled, nipped and teased the aching tips of her breast one after the other. “Very hard indeed.”

The soda shop was packed full of teenagers and there was a jukebox in the corner playing music old enough for her grandmother to have danced to it. Being the gentleman he was, Morgan had bought her a drink and Audrey sat across from him at a window booth, under the grey candy-striped window awning, playing footsy with him under the table.

“I guess that successfully lays to rest everything they say about men over fifty.” She walked her feet up his legs and sidled them between his knees.

“This is a PG movie,” he reminded her. “We need to keep it that way.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“I don’t want to, either. But we’ll never get out of here if we don’t.”

Audrey slowly lost her smile. “Do you suppose we’ll see each other once we do?”

“Back home? Sure.” He didn’t look at her. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Are we both going to come out of my DVD player and live happily ever after screwing on my living room floor?”

“You don’t have a bed?”

“Answer the question.”

“I have no idea,” Morgan told her. “The world has changed since I’ve been in here, so I suspect I’m going to have a hell of an adjustment to make when we get home. But will I be in the studio or your house, I have no idea.”

She stroked his leg under the table. “Do you even want to see me when we get back?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Why won’t you look at me when you say that?”

“Because I don’t see the point in making plans for a happy future together when we don’t even know if we’re going home or fading into nothing.”

Audrey took her feet off his legs and put them back into her shoes. She played with her drink in silence, not wanting to look at him now either. “I think it’s rather chauvinistic that you got to kill the spider, but I couldn’t.”

“It’s a man-dominate time period.”

“Hardly anybody’s been eaten.”

“That’ll change.”

She pushed her glass away. “What does that mean?”

Hands folded on the table, Morgan turned his head to look out the window. “It means we got the adult spider but the movie isn’t over yet.”

“Great.” She leaned back against the booth. “So how long before the little buggers burst forth from their giant egg sac and swarm the town?”

Morgan half smiled. “We’ve got a few hours yet. But on the bright side, this is where the movie starts to pick up.”

“Oh God,” she groaned. “Can’t I just hide in a closet until the end of the film?”

“Trust me, they look in all the closets.”

The bell above the door chimed brightly as Touch and two of his buddies strolled inside. They came up to their table and while Touch flopped onto the seat beside Audrey, nearly sitting on her before she relented and scooted closer to the window to give him room, his friends squeezed in next to Morgan. She barely had time to stuff a napkin between her cheek and his lips before her ‘boyfriend’ kissed her. Under the table, Morgan covered her foot with his own. She startled, but it took her a moment to realize that he wasn’t finally playing footsy back at her. He was warning her.

“What’s the matter with you?” Touch demanded, snatching the napkin aside. “Why are you all of a sudden hanging around with this dweeb?”

Morgan mouthed, ‘Study partners,’ but Audrey never had a chance to repeat the excuse.

“Hey!” Touch snapped. “I saw that! What, you think you’re going to move in on my girl?” He reached across the table to punch him in the arm.

“Don’t!” Audrey told him. When he turned a jealous glare on her, she dutifully added, “Nobody’s moving in on me. Mor—I mean, Peter’s been helping me look for my”—she rolled her eyes and sighed—“my father.”

Touch looked from Morgan to her. Gradually, seeming to accept the excuse, he leaned back in his chair. “Oh. How’s that

going, then? You think you'll find the old man in time to go with me to the dance?"

Audrey opened her mouth and Morgan applied a little more pressure to the top of her foot. "Yes," she said unenthusiastically. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. Unfortunately."

Touch wrapped his arm around her shoulders, hooking her around the neck and hugging her close. "Great. I'll pick you up at five on Friday."

Audrey couldn't get out of his arm fast enough to avoid a full front-on kiss on the lips, but the minute her 'boyfriend' and his high school aged thugs got up from the table, she swiped the back of her hand across her lips. "I'm not going," she said flatly, a disgusted look on her face.

"Yes, you are," Morgan corrected. He flexed his right hand meaningfully.

Audrey slumped in her seat, cursing her promise and the fact that she seemed perpetually unable to run faster than he could. "Fine. I'll go. But if he gets fresh with me in the car, I'm going to take his head off."

"No, you won't. Because it's not in the script."

Jerking her foot out from under his beneath the table, she snapped, "This script needed better writers."

He chuckled. "I won't argue that."

Two giggling girls came up to their table, sliding into the booth to sit beside Morgan while giving him wide-eyed adulating stares.

"Will you sing something for us, Peter?" asked the little blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty-queen wannabe as she lay her

hand coyly upon his forearm, surreptitious feeling him up.

Not making future happy plans aside, Audrey had the most absurd urge to snatch the teenie-bopper bald. She struggled to swallow the tidbit of jealousy she felt when Morgan draped his arm across the back of the seat, encompassing both girls and said, “Sure.” Her jealousy turned to barely contained laughter, however, when he added. “Hand me my ukulele.”

“Ukulele?” she echoed. “What are you? School yard geek by day and soda shop Sinatra by night?”

Scooting the girls out of the booth, he smiled at her though it didn’t quite reach as far as his eyes and stood up. “I hate this song. Words cannot describe how much I hate it. I could have sung Elvis, or even the Beatles. Hell, I could have sung the Monkeys. But no. What do I sing?”

One of the cutesy twins handed him a ukulele out of nowhere and said, “Sing the one about the frog!”

Audrey covered her mouth with her hand, hiding her laugh. Morgan didn’t miss it. Without losing his smile, he stood and leaned towards her. “Only four more scenes to go.”

“For what?” she asked, before she did the math in her head and the realization hit her. “Oh yeah.” She frowned, slumping down that much further in the booth. As if her bottom wasn’t already sore enough as it was. Of course, even that wasn’t as sore as some other parts of her. She rubbed her right shoulder where a particularly sharp rock had left a fist-sized bruise on her skin.

“If you’re very good,” he said, “I’ll only pretend to spank your adorably cute and ever so wiggly bottom.” He ruined the promise by winking, then hefted the musical instrument to serenade his adoring audience.

“Yeah, sure you will,” Audrey drawled, drilling a knowing look into his back. She didn’t think it was in her to be that good for another four scenes.

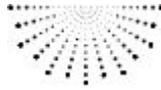
Sipping on the soda he’d bought her, Audrey sat in the gray sunlight of only a partially victorious day, and listened with a half-astonished ear while Morgan crooned four off-key refrains about a melancholy toad. Someone must have licked it, she decided partway through the second chorus, to have written such a song in the first place.

And yet Morgan looked very cute singing it. His broad shoulders moved ever so slightly, the muscles of his back barely rippling as he strummed the silly ukulele. His big hands moved over the strings with a comfort most likely born of learning how to play the instrument only because he lacked something else to do. And damn if his tight little butt wasn’t packed into form-revealing jeans, leaned up against the edge of the table close enough for her to goose him.

No future happy plans, Audrey told herself. She sighed.

Right.

CHAPTER 6



The happy strains of Bill Haley and His Comet's *'Rock Around the Clock'* were pouring from the record jockey's station inside the school gymnasium. There were lights everywhere, including on the outside basketball court, and teenagers were flocking in couples and small groups towards the open gym doors. Poodle skirts, bobbysocks and ducktails abounded. James Dean wannabes snuck away from the well-lit areas to sneak a smoke outside of the watchful eyes of the teachers, principal and moral chaperones. One in particular, still safely ensconced in his father's station wagon, was sneaking a drink out of a stolen silver flask.

"I got it out of my father's dresser," Trevor said, wincing and coughing even as he took a drink and passed the rest to Audrey. "Good whiskey," he wheezed.

Audrey looked from him to the flask and then to the gym. Be cranky and grumpy in this scene, Morgan had told her. Herself, in other words. Well, Audrey certainly didn't need any extra encouragement for that. Her hair was pinned up in a beehive, she was dressed in a corset and pink poodle skirt, with a very itchy crinoline, and her shoes looked like something she remembered, as a child, seeing in her grandmother's closet.

She glared at Trevor as she took the flask from him. Wiping the rim with her palm, she took a deep draught from the tin. The liquor burned all the way down her throat to her stomach. It was just the fortitude she needed to keep sitting next to Trevor, butch-waxed hair and all.

“Golly gee whiz!” he said appreciatively. “I love a woman who can put it away.” Draping an arm across the back of the seat, leather creaking beneath them, he scooted closer to her. “And you sure do look every inch a beautiful woman in that dress.”

Audrey gave him a very dry look as he angled his head to see down the front of her dress. She rolled her eyes and stifled a heavy sigh as she turned to look out the window again, sweeping over the students as they drifted in happy couples towards the open doors. Morgan wasn't among them, but she was certain he'd show up when the script dictated. With any luck, that would happen without her first having to kiss, touch, or suffer through his juvenile attempts at putting the moves on her. She hadn't thought fifties movies this sexually graphic.

Trevor began to play with her hair, twining a thick lock of it around his finger. She took another hearty swig from the flask. She was going to need a heck of a lot more fortifying to put up with this.

“Are we going to go in and dance at some point this evening?” she asked.

“Plenty of time for that,” Trevor told her, leaning close enough that she could feel his breath caressing her neck.

She gave him back his flask. Hard. Her elbow stabbed into his gut and the flask slammed down on his thigh a half inch too low to ‘accidentally’ strike anything that would result in an automatic do-over of the scene.

Trevor jumped, grabbing both the flask and his stomach. He stared at her in shock. “What did you do that for?”

“Get out of the car,” she told him, and followed her own advice. Slamming the door behind her, she started walking across the parking lot.

“Hey!” Trevor shouted after her. He scrambled out of the car and chased after her. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” she said shortly, and kept walking.

Trevor grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Don’t think I don’t get it,” he hissed at her. “Don’t think I don’t know about you and that geek. You’ve been together nearly every night this week, or maybe you think I’m too stupid to have noticed!”

“I plead the Fifth,” she said, pulling her arm from his grasp. She frowned, shaking her head. Of all the years to have to re-do, why oh why did it have to be the teenaged years? With pimples, parents and boy problems galore. And in the fifties no less, with big hairy spiders threatening to swoop down and destroy the town at any second.

“I want my jacket back!” Trevor yelled after her.

Audrey took it off and dropped it in the parking lot. She kept right on walking, past several gawking teen girls that were supposed to be her friends, and up the steps into the school. Let them fight over him if they wanted, she didn’t want him. And of course, the one she did want she couldn’t have. All she needed now was a terminal illness and the tragedy would be complete.

Audrey sighed. She should have been zapped into a soap opera.

For the first time in fifty years, Morgan dressed with care for the sock hop. He brushed his hair, and adjusted his clothes, not in his bedroom as young men were supposed to, but from the point that the script brought him back into the movie... in the parking lot under one of the street lamps.

He was the epitome of a geek: his trouser legs were a tad too short, his dress jacket was plaid and he wore a red bow tie. He rather hoped Audrey didn't laugh him out of the gym.

Of course, the instant he walked into the school he realized he needn't have worried. Audrey was where he'd always met Beth, standing at the refreshment table. Only instead of sipping her punch and chatting with her giggling schoolmates, Audrey had her back to them and she was tossing back punch as if it were hard liquor. Then he saw which bowl she was taking her fortitude from. It was the one with that little extra something added to it.

Morgan shook his head and headed for her.

"Watch out," he cautioned as he neared her. "That stuff is spiked."

"I know," Audrey said without turning around. She tossed another cup back as though it were whiskey, straight up. Handing the glass back to the punch attendant, she rapped upon the table and said, "Keep them coming, my good man."

Catching her arm as Audrey raised the next cup, Morgan took the liquored punch from her fingers and set it back on the table. "Dance with me."

He pulled her onto the dance floor, bringing her into his arm in time for the melody to change from Tennessee Ernie Ford's '*Sixteen Ton*' beat to a slow and lovely, cheek-to-cheek '*Earth Angel*.'

"You look beautiful tonight," he said, winning an actual laugh from Audrey, who backed away enough to look down at herself.

"Poodle skirt and all?"

Morgan grinned. "Absolutely. And those bobby socks... it doesn't get any sexier than that, baby girl."

He pulled her close again and spun her in a gentle turn, even dipping her romantically low though it didn't match the music, before dragging her back to him.

"So?" she asked when she was finally upright again. "Now what do we do?"

"We kill the villains and end the film. Then we should be able to go home."

"I already killed the villain. If you recall, you got cranky with me and smacked my bottom for it." She lifted her chin, smiling playfully. "Rather hard, too, I might add."

"We're coming up on Scene Seventeen, so I'm going to get to smack your bottom some more."

"Not too hard though, right?"

"That depends entirely on how well you perform your duties in reclaiming your bracelet," Morgan said.

"You killed my hand trying to get that damn—"

"Language," he said dryly.

“That thing,” she quickly amended, and cleared her throat because his hand had moved low enough to pat her right bottom cheek, “off my wrist. Now you want me to go back after it? Why?”

“Because it was a gift from your father and it has sentimental value.”

“Blodgett Cemetery,” Audrey softly sang.

“It’s also the main reason why you’re going to get spanked afterward,” Morgan told her. “Although if the writers of this film knew you as well as I do, they’d have added a heck of a lot more spanks to the script and given me a hairbrush to dispense them. Sadly, as the script stands, for doing something so foolish as to sneak away from the dance, putting yourself into an incredibly dangerous situation, and forcing me to chase you down, I’m only going to give you eleven blistering swats on camera and six off as the credits begin to roll.”

“Seventeen swats?!” Audrey stopped dancing and glared at him. “Blistering?! I still can’t sit from the last one you gave me!”

“I promise, until the writers provide that much beloved hairbrush, for the Scene Seventeen spanking, I’ll only use my hand.”

“I’d just as soon not go to the cave and not get spanked for it, thank you very much.”

“Hey, it’s in the script.” Morgan shrugged. “I’ve got no choice. And neither do you. Not if we want to go home.”

“Right. And we do want that, don’t we?” She sounded sulky, and he leaned back to check her face.

Sighing, Morgan pulled her close again. “You have to go, Audrey. It’s—”

“If you say it’s in the script one more time,” she growled, “I’m going to punch you right in the nose.”

“Just one more time and then it’ll all be over.”

“And then things really will be over,” she muttered. The teasing light had gone completely out of her and she was frowning intensely.

“What?” Morgan asked.

“Nothing.” Audrey turned her face away from him, glaring out across the dance floor, hardly seeing the other students or the decorations and spinning lights.

“Audrey.” Morgan cupped her chin, trying to bring her back so he could see her eyes. “Look at me.”

Suddenly, she shoved him back and ran for the door.

“Audrey!” He chased her out through the parking lot. It didn’t quite occur to him that they’d likely have to redo the scene until he caught up to her by the flagpole. “Hey!”

He grabbed her arm, swinging her around so he could catch her shoulders with both hands. She had tears pouring down her face that she couldn’t scrub away fast enough.

“Oh baby,” he said, laying her head upon his shoulder. “It’ll be all right. I’m almost positive that we’ll be home after the credits roll.”

“What does that matter?” she demanded, not moving in his arms. He hugged her tightly, but her arms remained limp at her sides and she made no move to accept the comfort he offered or even to comfort him in return. “We’ll both be back in our separate homes. We might even be back in our separate times. What’s our chances of ever seeing one another again?”

“We won’t be on different planets,” he told her.

Audrey laughed. It was a bitter sound. “It doesn’t matter. No future plans, right?”

She tried to pull away, but Morgan refused to let her go. “Don’t. Let’s not worry about this now. We still have to get out of the film, so let’s just take it one step at a time. All right?” When Audrey didn’t respond, he cupped her face and met her watery gaze. “All right?”

Sniffling, she nodded. “Whatever you say. You’re the boss.”

It wasn’t the kind of acquiescence she knew he would have preferred, but at this point in the film, beggars couldn’t be choosers. The light around them began to dim and experience told her the vacuum was coming.

“We’re going to have to redo the scene,” Morgan told her.

“Right,” she said unenthusiastically.

“Do you remember what you have to do?”

“Argue with Trevor, dance with you,” Audrey reached up to cup his cheek, “realize my bracelet is missing and then leave early.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” he assured her. “Just grab the bracelet and get out of the cave again, running as fast as you can.”

“And you’ll be right behind me,” she finished as the air changed all around them. The light became blinding and she though she tried to hold onto him, the vacuum sucked her from his arms.

The desert sun was beating down upon her shoulders as the vacuum swept Audrey from the sock hop to the spider's cave. She stood on the cliffside, her feet seemingly rooted to the rocky ground as she stared into the darkness. Both the huge spider and the debris from the rockslide that had hopefully killed the monstrous thing were completely cleared from the mouth of the cave, leaving the gaping blackness of the tunnel waiting before her like the open maw of a nightmare.

Audrey took two hesitant steps forward, close enough to peer down the inclined tunnel as far as the daylight would illuminate, but there was no sign of the bracelet. She took two steps back again. She'd have felt so much better about going in there if only she could see the body of that smashed, crushed, totally dead spider somewhere out here.

Of course, there was still the egg sac tucked safely in some hitherto unknown place to contend with.

Maybe baby spiders were like kittens. Maybe their eyes and ears didn't open right away. Maybe they needed their mother to hunt for them or they died right away.

Audrey fidgeted her fingers. Somehow, she doubted it. Monster restrictions that tight did not make for very exciting horror movies.

The scene reset itself twice before Audrey managed to drum up enough courage to venture into the mouth of the cave. Creeping in past the edge of the light into the dusky darkness, she felt her way along the wall, searching the ground for signs of the bracelet. There were only rocks, however. Nothing at all sparkled in the dim and failing light, but from deep in the cave ahead there came a soft rustling sound. Like the ticking of spiders' legs clicking over the rocks.

The sound froze Audrey for a moment. Her knees trembled and her breath caught in the back of her throat.

The rustling faded into silence, and after a moment of strained listening, Audrey dropped to her knees, sweeping her hands through the dirt and rocks. She crawled deeper into the darkness, feeling through the rocks and the dirt for that stupid bracelet until she heard the rustling again.

The sound successfully froze her in her place. She stared into the darkness until it faded back to silence. Every hair on her body was crawling and suddenly the cave seemed to close in suffocatingly around her. She swung her arms wide apart, sifting through the dirt in her desperate search for the bracelet once more.

Nothing. There was nothing this way.

Turning back towards the light of the cave's entrance, she felt her way back up the path while behind her the rustling noise became clicking, like the clicking of many spiders' exoskeletons against the rocks.

Jumping to her feet, Audrey ran for daylight, without the bracelet. She could have cared less if the scene was doomed to repeat. Glancing back over her shoulder, just before the vacuum and bright light reclaimed her, she saw the entire mouth of the cave swarming with hundreds of spiders as tall as her knee was high.

The breath was sucked from her lungs before she could scream. When she finally regained her equilibrium, she found herself standing at the entrance of an ominously still and quiet cave. There were no spiders in sight, no sound but for the faint calling of some distant desert birds and the whisper of a breeze. The warmth of the sun beat down across her shoulders once again.

And through all this, there was no sign of Morgan.

“Like hell I’m going back in there,” Audrey muttered, but she made no move to leave. She had to go back inside; there was no other way around it. She had to get the bracelet or spend the rest of her life standing here, staring at this stupid cave.

“This is ridiculous,” she scolded herself, wiping her sweat-dampened palms on her skirts. “Just find the damn thing and get out again. You’re the heroine. You’re not going to die.”

And look on the bright side, at least now she knew one area of the cave where the bracelet was not. She wouldn’t have to look there again.

Once again, she ventured into the darkness, dropping to her knees right there at the entrance as she crawled, sweeping her hands from side to side in search of the necessary jewelry. Crawling deeper into the dark, she widened her search until she heard the clicking of the spiders coming up out of the earth.

She continued searching for as long as she dared, and then ran back out into the sunlight. On her fourth trip in, just as the clicking began, she finally found it. She glimpsed the sparkle of gray gold an instant before her fingers touched upon it and Audrey scooped the bracelet up with a cry of victory.

A deep rumbling sound not unlike the earth-shaking boom of hell suddenly break loose, the bowels of the cave below released a tidal flood of spiders and the blackness came alive with movement. Baby spiders as big and large cats came crawling out from everywhere—the ground, the walls. Even the ceiling. Audrey screamed, but though her mind yelled ‘run’, her feet rooted her to the ground. They swarmed over

her, the clicking of hungry mandibles drowning out her horrified wail.

The light flashed, the vacuum sucked, and Audrey was deposited, still screaming, back at the beginning of the cave. That was one experience that she didn't need to repeat twice. And now she knew exactly where the bracelet was.

Audrey ran down into the cave, dropping to her knees within a foot of the bracelet and she found it in seconds. Again, the darkness exploded into movement as spiders swarmed up out of the back of the cave and headed right for her, their legs clicking on stone, their fangs salivating for another taste of her.

Leaping to her feet, she ran like hell for the daylight with a wave of hungry spiders washing up out of the dark right behind her. As fast as she was moving, they were closing the gap between them with frightening speed.

She ran without looking back and for the first time in the entire scene she heard Morgan shouting out, "Run, baby, run!"

No sooner had she cleared the shadows into the sunlight, then did she hear the first of many explosions. Rock shattering vibrations trembled up from deep in the earth. The quaking knocked her off her feet and right into Morgan's arms. He all but picked her up and ran with her back down the opposite side of the hill, great clouds of dust billowing at their back until they both fell.

Morgan landed on top of her, shielding her from a sudden rainstorm of falling rock and debris and they both lay panting, coughing and gasping together until the vibrations and explosions finally ceased. Small pebbles and rocks trickled down the hillside and fell across the backs of her legs for a long time before everything suddenly fell unnatural still.

Silence overwhelmed them, broken only by their own coughing as they struggled to breathe through the cloud of dust.

“Why—” gulped Audrey, tentatively. “Why the *hell* are those things the *only* realistic effect in this whole damn movie?”

“They were animated in the studio afterwards,” Morgan coughed. “The film doesn’t know how to compensate, so it just made them real.”

“They’re real because they were animated *later?!?*” Her voice shook at the unfairness of it.

“The studio got an award for it. The Golden Squid or something, I don’t know.”

“Oh *joy!*” Audrey cried, her voice shaking another minor avalanche free from the hill above them... or words to that effect.

“Look on the bright side,” Morgan panted against the back of her neck. “It’s done now. We did it.”

Wiping dirt away from her mouth, Audrey said, “What exploded?” She waved her hands, trying to clear enough air to breathe.

A gruff male voice bit out through the dissipating dust cloud, “What the hell are you kids doing?”

Audrey jumped, but Morgan only smiled. “Beth, may I introduce Sargent Pelosi from the U.S. army.”

With an incredulous look, Audrey stared from him to the forms of three men dressed in split pea soup green as they materialized out of the settling debris. “Army? *Army?!?*” She flung her hands up in the air. “*Now* they send in the army!”

“Are you kids okay?” Sargent Pelosi asked again.

“Oh, we’re just hunky-dory,” Audrey snapped back at him. “We’ve been fighting spiders for weeks now; where have you been? Nice to know our national security tax dollars are being well spent.”

Offering both her and Morgan a helping hand up, Pelosi gave Audrey a cross look. “You are one very lucky young lady. You had no business being in there. You could have been killed!”

“I was! Twice!”

Morgan took her by the shoulders and gave her a small shake, but he was grinning as he said, “Beth, how could you have been so foolish?”

“Oh, I would just like to slap you,” Audrey told him.

He grinned and gave her another gentle shake. “No amount of jewelry is worth your life.”

“I know that!” Audrey flung her hands into the air. “Who are you, and what have you done with ‘it’s in the script’ boy?”

Morgan pulled her close, forehead to forehead, nose to nose and smiled. “I’m so glad you are okay.”

“No thanks to you, buster,” she told him grumpily, but his good humor was infectious and eventually she smiled back. “So, now we’re done, right?”

“Almost.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Alm—” Her eyes widened as she recalled the crowning event of Scene Seventeen.

Morgan caught her by the arm before she could pull away and he dropped down to one knee, pulling her down and

spilling her across his thigh before she could run. He wasted little time in bringing his hand down hard across her skirt-clad bottom.

“You are never to endanger yourself like that again!” he told her, grinning as she stiffened across his knee with a yelp.

“Ouch!” Audrey snapped a hand back to protect her smarting right bottom cheek, but he only dodged her splayed fingers and walloped the left side just as vigorously as the right. “Morgan!” she wailed. “I-I mean Peter! I-I mean—I—ow!”

She kicked her legs and screamed. Seventeen smacks could easily have been a hundred. Her bottom was on fire by the time Morgan let her up. There was also music playing loudly from out of nowhere and the light all around her seemed... odd.

Holding her bottom with both hands, Audrey looked up at the dimming sky. “Are we going home?” she whispered.

“I don’t know,” Morgan said, looking up as well. “Something’s happening. In all the years I’ve been doing this, I’ve never seen this.”

The sky gradually turned as black as night. Only belatedly did Audrey realize, it wasn’t the sky. It was everything. Including her. She held up her hands, a stab of panic sinking all through her when she could barely make out her fingertips.

“Eight-oh-three, five-two-five, sixty-seven eleven,” she blurted, catching hold of Morgan’s shirt. She clung to him, knowing the vacuum was about to forever rip him away from her. “Remember that. It’s my phone number. Eight-oh-three,” her voice was growing tinny and she shouted the rest, “five-two-five, sixty...”

There was no sound at all after that.

Audrey stood in the middle of her living room, alone. The carton of ice cream was melted all over the floor and her favorite pillows. The bottle of Diet Coke was now flat stale, and her impromptu bed on the floor lay strewn all over the room. The TV was a blue screen and, although lightning had struck the house and coursed through the DVD player, the machine didn't look at all damaged.

Turning in a full circle, she looked up at the clock on the wall. It was just past two and from the sky outside, that had to be two in the morning. She caught a whiff of something sour as she walked through the kitchen towards the den room. There were two bowls in the kitchen sink that were growing some really nasty looking mold cultures, and the date on the computer showed she had been gone for seventeen days.

So much for her job.

She had kind of liked that job, too.

Two in the morning or not, Audrey picked up the telephone and called her mother, and promptly spent the next forty-five minutes assuring her that she was all right. She debated on whether or not to call her boss, but figured calling in the morning would likely be better for her career than 2 am.

She should probably call the police, too. As she sat there debating on whether or not it could also wait until morning, the phone rang. There were only two people that it could be: her mother, calling to assure herself that Audrey really was home, or it could be Morgan.

Her hands trembled a little as she reached for the phone, almost afraid to find out. “Hello,” she whispered, closing her eyes in heartfelt prayer.

Every bone in her body melted when she heard Morgan’s smiling voice. “Hello, baby girl. How long have you been back?”

“About an hour?” Audrey burst out, on the verge of both laughter and tears, if only she could decide which emotion to indulge first. “You?”

“About the same.”

“Where are you?” Tears were winning out and she turned in a full circle trying to locate a box of Kleenex.

“California,” came his cheerful reply.

“Where in California?” There weren’t any tissues, only window curtains. She sniffled, wiping her eyes and then her nose on it. Oh well, she’d never liked the pattern anyway...

“Did you re-appear back where you disappeared from?” he asked.

“Yes, in my living room. You?”

“Back where I disappeared from,” Morgan said easily. “After all this time, MGM is still a studio. Who’d have thunk it? I must have set off some silent alarms while I was stumbling around in the dark. Anyway, the nice officers that arrested me said I got one free phone call.”

“I’ll come and get you,” Audrey said instantly. “If I drive all night, I can be there before noon.”

“I’ll see you then,” Morgan said. “Drive carefully.”

Audrey ran to get her purse, her excitement making her so jittery that she dropped her keys twice on the way out the door. Halfway down the walk, she realized she forgot to lock the door and had to go back. Securing the house, she again got halfway down the walk before she stopped, turned around and went back.

She all but yanked the DVD player out of the wall, hardly stopping to disconnect the wires. Opening the front door, she threw the machine down on the cement walkway and stomped on it twice before dumping it in the trash. It was a brand-new machine; she still didn't care. Streaming services were the wave of the future anyway.

"I've got two interviews tomorrow," Morgan said, coming out into the living room with the freshly popped microwave popcorn. "With any luck, I'll land one of them and be able to pay you back every bit of that bail money by the end of the month."

"I've got an interview, too." Audrey followed behind him with the movies in one hand and a two-liter bottle of half frozen Diet Coke in the other. "And don't worry about paying me back. You got us out of that horrible movie. Believe me, that's payment enough."

Dropping down to sit on a nest of pillows in front of the TV, Audrey began to shuffle through the movie selections. "What do you want to watch? Drama, comedy, action/adventure, or horror?"

"Depends. What kind of movies are they?" He started to sit down behind her, but she held up her hand to take stop him.

“Check list,” she said.

“Right.” Handing her the popcorn, Morgan walked over to the window and parted the drapes. “The skies are clear and cloudless. No storm in sight. Hence, no lightning.” He turned back around and smiled. “Tonight is all clear for movie-watching.” He climbed onto the cushions behind her, pulling her back into the cradle of his legs. “Let’s do horror, so long as it’s not a b-flick film.”

“Nope,” Audrey said. “No b-flicks here. I’m cured of my love for b-flicks.” She looked over some of her movies, a slight smile curving her lips. “Well, okay, I’m cured of my love for older b-flicks. The modern ones don’t count.”

Morgan kissed the back of her neck. “Put in the movie.”

Audrey closed her eyes. She picked up the first film she lay her hands on and popped it into the brand-new DVD player that she’d picked up at Walmart the same night she’d brought Morgan home from jail.

“Deep Rising,” Morgan read the title. “What’s this about?”

“Sea monsters,” Audrey said, picking up the remote control and cuddling back into his arms. “You’re going to love the special effects. Things have changed since you were last in the real world.”

“So long as there are no spiders, I’m good.”

She laughed, tipping her head backwards to kiss him. “No spiders. I promise.”

Raising the remote, she hit play and a streak of blue-green light shot out of the machine, hitting both her and Morgan instantly. The living room, pillows, remote control, popcorn and soda all vanished, and the cold grey steel of a cruise ship’s deck and cabins took their place. A cool ocean breeze tussled

through Audrey's hair as she turned her shocked expression out towards the endless miles of ocean. In the distance she could hear music and laughter, and the soft rustle of her bright red and sequined evening dress moving around her hips and legs.

"I can't believe this," she whispered, clutching her face and hair. "I can't be in the movie."

Audrey turned at the sound of footsteps and watched in horror as one of the ship's crewmen walked by with a tray of drinks.

"I'm in the movie!" she wailed. "Oh no! Not again!" Her panic suddenly died into an unnatural calm as she spun back around and stared across the water. "Oh my God, I'm in '*Deep Rising*'. I'm Famke Janssen."

Any minute now tentacles with teeth were going to shoot out of the water and start devouring people.

Audrey heard footsteps behind her again and spun back around. One of the senior officers was on his way to the bridge when she grabbed him by the white lapels of his uniform jacket.

"Quick!" she cried, shaking him in her urgency. "I've been robbing the passengers blind! Lock me in the kitchen! Lock me in the kitchen!"

ABOUT MAREN SMITH

I am a Little, coffee fanatic, dog and cat mom, was an administrator for six years at my local BDSM dungeon, and have since become a Utah resident. An International and USA Bestselling Author several times over, I have penned more than 160 novels, novellas and short stories, and am the author of the Masters of the Castle and Daddy's Little series.

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