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KIDNAPPED
BY CLAWS

CLUB FRAY

RAVEN HUSH



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Club Fray, 4

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Chapter One

Knox

“Take the night off. Both of you.” Rafe Astor glared at me and Cade.

Both of us folded our arms across identical, broad chests and glared straight back at him.

Rafe might be an apex predator and the owner of pub Fray, but on Christmas Eve, he was going to need more security than he could hope he could get. Cade and I shook our heads.

“No chance in hell,” Cade growled. “Right, Knox?”

I jerked a thumb in my boss’s direction. “What he says.”

Rafe stared at us across the wide expanse of his mostly bare desk, his face a mix of exasperation and bemusement that suited the cocky son of a bitch all too well. “I host a fucking Christmas Wish holiday party to get people I care about all the fantasies they could dream of, to have whatever they want, and I can’t even get the two guys who work the most for me to take a night off so they can damn well get some on the side without having to shave minutes off on their rostered hours in some random storage closet.”

I winced. The storage closet might have been me, but on the other hand, it had been Cade who’d fucked around—literally—during working hours. Still, for Rafe, that was one hell of a long speech.

A shadow behind us offered a subtle cough that only brought a laugh to the top of my throat. I fought it down with effort, but Rafe wasn't finished. "Fuck off out of my office. If I see either of you in uniform tonight or working in any capacity on Christmas Eve, I'll fire you and let the media eat up what's leftover."

The media had been sniffing around Rafe's ankles, and no one had seen Willow in a bit while she hid from the sport of spotlight she hated, but her significant other thrived in.

It remained an empty threat at best, and maybe a half pay cut for the month at worst. Rafe was a consummate protector, and it seemed to be the blood he ran his business on, which was one of the reasons I worked for him.

Cade and I exchanged sideways glances and offered the boss one-fingered salutes.

"You're on." I held the door for Cade while he pranced out like a fucking party pony.

"Out." Rafe barely contained the laughter that made it into his voice.

"See, I told you he wasn't a complete asshole," Cade muttered as he grabbed my arm and swung me out of the room.

"Maybe not always," I added, winking, fully aware Rafe's enhanced hearing would have caught every word clear as if we stood in the room beside him.

We headed downstairs and into the club proper. The large, open space was absent of people for a few more hours yet, except for the scant staff members still climbing ladders and adjusting decorations. Fray looked nothing less than an opulent Gentlemen's club.

The design hadn't happened by accident, but Rafe had put a lot of work into making sure that any law enforcement agency who came calling would see exactly what they were meant to see. Obsequious wealth, spoiled, oversized brats, and generally poor taste did its job in concealing the local Melbourne shifter community and their nasty holiday habit.

“We both have an hour left on shift. Do you think Rafe would be pissed if we kept working?” Cade leaned against the bar and wagged his eyebrows at Zoe, who stood behind the bar, wielding a bottle of Grey Goose in each hand.

She flipped him off with one long finger against the side of the bottle and continued pouring vodka one-handed. Row after row of shots lined the bar top. Zoe caught my eye and pushed a full glass my way. I took the offering, knocking back the mouthful and chasing it with a second sweetly tainted nip that collided with a third chaser of the same flavor.

“Oh, boy. One, dammit, Knox.” She whined, catching the shot glasses I tossed her way and shoving them in the dishwasher hidden behind the bar.

“Speak nicely to the man, Zoe,” Cade murmured his admonishment as he downed a pair of his own. She shot him a hard look that he ignored. “Nah, fuck it. If Rafe and Killian want to pack our asses out the door and tell us to have a little fun, then I’m all in. Dressing up?”

I shrugged. “Why the hell not? Are there any costumes out the back?”

“I’ve never seen a Santa quite like you.” Lux set my fuzzy red and white pom-pommed hat at a rakish slant across my forehead and tossed back a shot of her own from the remainder that littered the bar before Fray opened for the night. “Too tall, too skinny, and far too fucking cute. Where are the rough men when you need them?”

“Working. We’ve got the night off.”

Which meant Killian and Rafe were on duty, along with a skeleton crew team we’d likely trade off for NYE’s party in a week’s time. Not that I doubted either of the managers were capable of the job, but it would be a high-traffic night with plenty of opportunities for someone to sneak it.

And on a night where anything goes, it wasn’t the time we wanted mini-interlopers invading the club.

“Naturally.” She rolled her eyes. “Of course, Killian’s working. When is he fucking not.”

“All work and no play. Not that I know.”

“Yeah, you won’t bother—you play more than you work, asshole.” Lux sassed me again and reluctantly passed me another shot. “Tonight is all about fantasies. What the hell is yours supposed to be? A Stick Figure Santa?”

“Ha ha, you’re so fucking funny.”

“Oh, no.” She wheeled toward me, shimmying her shoulders and feathers my way in a move that was like me to get killed if Killian saw it, and downed three shots one after the other without breaking a sweat.

“Damn, girl.”

“Stop flirting, you beautiful little slut.” Killian slid his finger through the D ring on Lux’s collar and pulled her into him for a long, hot kiss.

I looked away, pretending his show of dominance didn’t affect me, but the truth was I had come to Fray seeking a submissive of my own. Nearly three weeks into the job, and I still hadn’t found one I liked enough to keep.

“I’d tell you to get a room, but I know she’s got an exhibition streak.” So did he, but I wasn’t ready to get into that sort of confrontation tonight. I had plans of my own. Namely to find a little submissive and quiet time to have some fun.

“Knox has a little fantasy he wants to play out.” Killian shot me a shit-eating grin. “He likes his girls tied and terrified.”

I rolled my eyes, pretending for the second time not to be affected. Tied, maybe. Terrified? Not in the way he insinuated. I wanted a girl on her knees, ready to do anything I asked because she had no other choice except for the one she’d agreed on in coming with me in the first place. The rest was all consensual role play, and damn good fun at that.

“So he likes it a little rough?” Lux shrugged. “Who doesn’t?” Her arms wound around Killian’s waist, and she

rubbed her cheek against his chest, basically purring at him while he glared at her, pulling her tight into his body.

I groaned. “Stop it. You two are fucking killing me.” I drummed my fingers on the bar. “Fine. I have a kidnapping fetish. Not the real stuff—I’m not a fucking rapist. If I see fear in a playmate, it’s the sort that means she’s not sure where I’ll spank her next or when I’ll push her down and fuck her into next week. A little bondage, maybe, so she has to listen while I torment the fuck out of her. Good girls get rewarded.” I let my own insinuation drip from my lips as Lux stared at me with her mouth open.

A shiver rippled over her body where she pressed herself harder into Killian’s tall frame. “Sounds good to me,” she whispered, though I wasn’t sure who she said it to until she tipped her head back for another kiss.

Killian provided what she asked for so nicely, devouring her in front of everyone.

I pushed away from the bar before I had to suffer any more and wandered to the back of the bar where the utilitarian areas of the club were situated. A few rooms stood mostly empty, storage and the like. With a few little adjustments, I’d have the perfect place and privacy for a little quiet playtime with a willing sub.

Killian’s stare weighed on my back as I headed away from the main area, and I glanced over my shoulder to maintain eye contact with the big man. “I promise I won’t break any house rules.”

His eyes filled with understanding, but his lips settled in a tight line. Or maybe that was because Lux dropped to her knees, leaving her head bobbing around his crotch region. “Make sure you don’t.”

I nodded and wandered into the area I wanted to inspect, snagging bundled ropes and handcuffs from the storeroom as I went and whistled, “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.”

Chapter Two

Josie

I waited in the long line that curved around the better part of two blocks for entry to Club Fray's Christmas Wish party and tried to blend in. Not that it was hard, as half the incoming patrons were already blended. That would make my mission for the night all the easier, as inebriated people and crowded spaces tended to highlight people's mistakes, and that was key to what I needed to discover.

Fray had an exclusive clientele—the shifter community—but my boss, being a plain, boring human, didn't know that. What she did know was that the club had more going on and offered me the chance at an exposé and a letter to my university in thanks, along with a weekly paycheck ... and a place on the other side of the glassed door to the media conglomeration that housed her newspaper-cum-tabloid.

The side that faced the street front.

The man in front of me stumbled over his own feet and knelt by the gutter where he retched over his own clothes. I edged away as far as the sidewalk allowed, which wasn't far at all.

I knew Rafe Astor ran the club his own way, but surely serving alcohol to already inebriated patrons had to be against some sort of law.

Strike one for Mister Astor.

Why had I taken the assignment after all? Working a club on Christmas was the worst idea in hell. Any hell. I could be doing an article on the homeless or a feel-good piece on churches and morning services. Kids dressed as angels and houses lit up like, well, Christmas.

Instead, here I was, extending my internship hours by shoving my nose into a notorious club owner's personal playground and hoping my furry ass didn't end up getting warmed by a bouncer.

Which, in a BDSM shifter club, was a distinct

possibility.

If I can get in the door.

If I can get anyone to talk to me.

If I don't screw up and get hauled out by my half-changed furry backside.

My lack of ability to change completely was something of a legend in my family's social circle. Not so fondly considered the Neville Longbottom of the shifter world, I could get furry—or freaky—and that was about my limit. Which meant that I was shunted off to the human side of Melbourne with my parents' silent hope of breeding the fur out of me hanging over my head.

No wallaby paws, no cute-as-a-button twitching nose. No tail, claws, or bouncing habits, apart from my own nerves. All I managed to achieve was a light coating of soft gray fur that denoted me neither shifter nor human and left me in no-shifter's-land stuck somewhere between the two.

Totally not an acceptable position.

So I worked my butt off for a job in the human way, interning with my regular newspaper of the traditional variety, rather than working on an underground column in my own community.

Mine didn't want me, and I was pretty sure the skin walkers would consider me frightening as fuck if they witnessed my ability to transform, or lack thereof.

Clutching my glossy purple purse that held my recorder and a few notepads, as well as my matching lipstick, I finally made my way to the door and gave the tall bouncer my best, happiest smile. "Merry Christmas, Sir."

Dark eyes narrowed at me. I took in the silver-streaked hair and the three-piece suit complete with a red and black embroidered waistcoat featuring little Santa hats and reindeer sporting red noses. His dress screamed wealth and class and dominance, but I didn't recognize the face that went with it. This wasn't Rafe Astor. But the attitude said he had to be part of the in-house upper-floor hierarchy.

Uh-oh. Not my smartest move.

Unless the dude—okay, the big dude—had a daddy kink I could work with.

“A pretty little mouth like that could get you into a shit ton of trouble here, kid. Are you even of age?”

I raised an eyebrow at the man’s attitude. *Is this what passes as manners here?* Fray was getting the write-up of a lifetime if I could pull it off. Word was Rafe Astor would do anything to protect his little corner of the community, a threat I was willing to risk to earn my extra credits for my final semester prior to graduation. “Yes, I turned nineteen last week.”

He took the card I offered, turning the plastic over and scraping it with his thumbnail as he held my gaze.

Waiting had never been my strong suit. I stared back until the silver fox nodded, showing his evident reluctance as he caught my elbow and escorted me inside the club.

Maybe the daddy kink had been right on the money? With taste in waistcoats like his, I didn’t doubt my guess for a half second. Darkness filled every space, and the deep thrum of heavy bass slammed me with echoes in the darkened void where I stood stuck between two worlds yet again.

A clipboard was stuffed unceremoniously into my hands, and a pen rolled across it. I caught the damn thing in clumsy fingers that only partially worked and glared upward. “I don’t want to become a member.” No, tonight was strictly a one-appearance-only type event.

The tall bouncer offered a mirthless grin, showing a whole lotta teeth. “If you want in the door tonight, little fluff ball, then you fill in the form. Tell us all the things you do and don’t want to do, leave your name at the bottom, and you get a pretty bracelet for your efforts.” The big guy dangled a lurid pink and utterly tacky wristband before my eyes.

I huffed out a breath and peered at the form, barely able to make it out without my glasses, but those only offered a hindrance and were decidedly unsexy and very geek-worthy

all at once. The choice to forget them had seemed simple, but now maybe not so much.

I squinted at the form in the impending darkness that grew heavier with every passing second.

Behind me, the bouncer swore not so softly. A bright light illuminated the sheet, leaving me in no doubt about what sort of party tonight's would be.

Impact Play

Breath Play

CNC

Flogging

Kidnapping

Bondage

The list went on, running through terms I wanted to Google but couldn't. I blinked at the bright light, barely able to write my own name at the top of the paper.

Bouncer dude clucked his tongue. "Hurry up, kid. There's a line around the block. I don't have time to hold a torch for your squinty-eyed ass."

I ticked my gender and ticked three boxes in quick succession that I hoped wouldn't get me into too much trouble, not really watching what I was doing, intent on giving back as good as I got. "And here I thought you bent over and the sun shone out of your—"

The guy's laughter boomed around the small space, enveloping me. For a really bad, frozen moment, everything in the entire club seemed to pause and focus on him, and me by default.

I swallowed and shoved the clipboard his way, holding out my bare wrist. "Satisfied?"

"Far from it." He showed teeth again and tossed the clipboard over my shoulder without looking. I missed the clatter of it falling to the floor, and assumed someone had caught it, filing me away while I got the honor of wearing the

pink strip of plastic. “Be safe. Throw yourself this way if you need help, and use the lungs God gave you to announce you’ll kick anyone in the jingle bells if they try to hurt you.”

“And if it’s a woman?” I closed my eyes, willing the words back.

“Same difference. Stings like shit,” a tall woman in a long red dress murmured in my ear as she and her latex-clad partner sashayed past and slipped out the door.

“Do you prefer women?” Bouncer dude eyed me. “Your form said—”

“I didn’t know a security dog could read,” I snapped and spun on my heel to the music of his surprised laughter, intent on losing myself in the crowd before the man caused me further grief.

Who knew it could be so hard to get inside a sex club? Mind, this one hosted its own menagerie of crazy critters. I cringed inside at the thought of not fitting in yet again, but I’d been given a mission and I strode forward, wearing my determination not to fail like a shield.

A shield that lasted all of two seconds when I ran nose-first into an open and very bare chest that appeared to be comprised of an endless expanse of tanned skin and muscle. Hell, he even smelled like coconut and nougat. White Christmas. Like the sort that made it to the dinner table, not the sort that fell outside in the northern hemisphere, though I was sure that was pretty too.

I might have moaned if my mouth hadn’t filled with saliva and watered at the thought of the seasonal treat.

A hand settled firmly on my waist, and a knuckle beneath my chin drew my attention up and up and up to meet the brilliant blue glaze of a blond Santa who appeared to own the dessert-sized chest I’d been inhaling.

There was something wrong with that thought, but lost in the warmth of him, I couldn’t for the life of me work out what that was.

“Merry Christmas, cutie. You must be the one I’ve

been waiting for.” He dipped a little lower to whisper in my ear. “The one on my naughty list that I never, ever share with anyone.”

My mind was half drawn into his honeyed toes while the other half wrangled with the obvious pick-up line that could have at least suited his costume. “I don’t think—” I started.

“I do.” He flashed me a panty-melting grin and tossed what looked like my clipboard to the reception desk at my side.

It disappeared behind a goth-looking girl with a snake tattoo on her hand who snapped gum and slumped back in her seat, searching for someone outside my range of vision that wasn’t swamped with the Santa chest in front of me. His hand folded around mine in an intimate gesture more suited to a second date than a by-chance meeting. His warm touch wrapped around my wrist, calloused fingertips skating along my skin to leave sweet zings in their wake of his touch. His smile turned happy-predatory, if there was such a thing, that left my stomach fluttering and my panties in proverbial shreds. Interlacing our fingers, my Santa-sized dessert pulled me forward, into the throbbing crowd.

I twisted back, searching for the bouncer who’d told me to kick an aggressor in the nuts, but hadn’t he been the one who tossed my clipboard at the man behind me in the first place? Was everyone here colluding against me or had I done that myself?

What in the hell had I actually put on the form?

The man dragged me into the center of the room, and for the first time all night, I was part of a crowd, rather than off to the side of one. Safety in numbers and all that. Warm arms slipped around my middle, and before I realized what I was doing, my body took control and I leaned back into him. That sweet, tempting scent wafted around me as I watched people dance and touch and writhe around me. Beaded, glittering clothing lay half-shed around bodies that needed more sunlight on a regular basis while the hands that held me stayed in a

perfectly neutral position.

I wanted more and moved my body, encouraging his hands to slide along my green dress.

What the hell was I doing here in the first place? I wasn't in the club to get laid, and I had an assignment, a mission. A mission that fast transformed into an assignation as those palms drew up along my stomach and covered my breasts, kneading and squeezing. My body responded with a flush of heat that headed south in a heady rush and left me spinning though my feet stayed in one place.

A strong hand I was starting to recognize slipped higher to wrap around my throat and drew my head back to rest on his shoulder. His generous lips curved in a sharp smile, and for the second time in as many minutes, I was pinned in place by those startling, bright-blue eyes.

I needed to take the bouncer's advice and lash out, use my big girl words to save my ass. But the only thing that slipped from between my lips was a truly pathetic little moan that hung in the still, humid air between us while the song changed, ratcheting the energy in the club up a beat.

I stayed lost in his gaze.

My secret Santa's smile widened, twisting as his gaze became predatory. "I'm not a fan of crowds, are you? I can think of somewhere nice and quiet where we can play."

Ignoring every stuttered, half-baked objection I offered, he slung the red velvet sack off his shoulder and over me. I stood frozen in shock, breathing in my own scent as one arm bent me in half at the knees that buckled in an all too easy fashion. My darkened world tipped upside down.

My body formed a loose ball at the bottom of the sack where something sharp and crinkly and something else heavy and metal based tapped against my cheeks as he moved us through the crowd, meeting no resistance at all. My head banged against his legs as he strode away, still humming something. I opened my mouth to scream, but the music chose that moment to blast out a DJ's horrendous mix of mismatched

Christmas carols.

Then the music faded, and I recognized we were leaving the main area. My chest spiked in short fits of breath and pain, the onset of a panic attack leaving me in a series of breath-stealing palpitations. The idea of walking away from everyone in the club left me in abject fear, though not one of the party-goers had stopped to help me in my plight. I lashed and kicked but only managed to spin my body around in tight, dizzying circles.

Why had my manchest Santa just hauled me away in his red sack, in the middle of a crowded room, no less?

And what in all the hell had I written on that form?

Chapter Three

Knox

I whistled as the music swelled around us on the main dance floor, giving onlookers a jaunty salute. My personal wish list was far from a secret within the membership after Killian had done me the unspeakable favor of posting it by the door with a cute little snapshot he'd thieved from my membership profile tacked to the corner when Rafe had employed me.

Still, I wasn't about to let Old Grumpy get me down. I had my room all set up with the toys I wanted to use and a cute little submissive in my Santa sack. What more could a Dom want for Christmas?

A heel—or maybe a fist—punched me in the back of my thigh. I paused my whistling that no one but me could hear and winced. Damn, that was a good shot. She'd given me a dead leg straight up. Glad she was getting into the theme of the role play, I limped the rest of the way past the bar to my quiet area. I hadn't been sure about how to sack my little sub at first.

With her standing there in a deep, forest-green bustier that laced up the front and a skirt to match, I imagined they would both be easy to remove. I slid the bright red, plush bag over her head, then halted, unsure. The image of a girl standing frozen under the material had earned me more than one titter. In true showmanship style, I'd knocked an arm beneath her knees in the next breath, sweeping her feet out from beneath her, and tossed her over my shoulder, making sure I kept a tight grip on the ends of the Santa sack bunched in my fist.

Not that it mattered much—the girl couldn't weigh more than ninety pounds at most.

Light as a feather...

I pushed my way through the crowd at the bar and waved off the shot Lux offered over her head without looking. "Later," I called. "When the fun's been had."

She nodded, wiggling her ass in a pair of silver hot

pants I was certain Killian objected to, raised the glass she'd offered me, and knocked it back without hesitation.

The already noisy, crowded club swelled, borderline on raucous despite the early hour. I hoped Rafe and Killian knew what they were in for tonight. Shrugging the thought off, I kicked open the door to the storeroom I'd doctored up for effect and let the Santa sack roll gently across the floor. There was no sense in bruising the poor girl.

Well, not yet.

Flicking off my phone, I left us in the darkness as I stepped inside the room.

The last sliver of light showed a mousy little girl in a green and black corset ribbon dress emerging from the open end of the sack. Long, straight dark hair hung around her face in sweet curves, though the ends weren't as smooth as they had been in the bar a few minutes before.

Rosebud lips pursed, full and slightly swollen like she'd bitten them. Her pale skin enhanced the colors of her features where a dark red stained her cheeks. But it was the luminous, wide eyes framed by thick lashes that I lost myself in. Innocence and fire melded in a sweetheart face that would be my ultimate undoing tonight. I knew that already. I'd searched for the perfect little sub, and now I had one, bundled up like a fairy princess kneeling at my feet.

This was going to be a very good night.

Humming "I Wish You a Merry Christmas," I closed the door with a resounding, final click, blocking out the last sliver of light and leaving us locked together in darkness.

My eyes adjusted to the light fast enough for me to catch the girl who tried frantically to crawl past me in a somewhat desperate bid for escape.

"None of that," I cooed, catching her face in my palms and bringing her closer as I dipped and brushed my mouth over hers.

Fuck, that was a really bad damn idea. She tasted like lollipops and cotton candy and all things sugar and nice.

It was my job to ruin her innocence, if only for a few hours. Then we'd see if she liked my brand of darkness enough to stay.

"Who are you?" she asked in a soft voice that matched her mousy disposition.

I bared my teeth and refrained from giving a cringeworthy movie rejoinder. Just. Catching one slim wrist, I slipped it into the open rope loops wound around the utilitarian shelving I'd set up earlier before the club's floating population exploded for the holiday night.

The other wrist went the same way, spreading her arms wide as she watched me with some small degree of bemusement. I tucked the last strand of rope between her fingers, giving the escape cord to her as I stared into her eyes, though her return gaze left me heady with need.

No screams yet.

I wondered when they would start, and if I would enjoy hearing them from her.

Her lack of fight wasn't unexpected, but the way she stared at me was more than a little unsettling, like she drank in every minute detail to save for later.

Maybe that was her kink. Who knew.

I tugged on one key rope strategically threaded through both sets of loops. The smooth nylon tightened around her wrists just close enough to bite, and I pulled until I knew even her small hand wouldn't slip out of their firm embrace before I allowed her to roam free again.

She hung suspended, arms wide, up on her tiptoes, and stared at me. Finally, her breath shortened as she seemed to realize the predicament I'd put her in. "Let me down."

"No." I smiled and ran my fingers over my lips again. The taste of her lingered there, but there was something I wanted to taste more than a stolen kiss.

"Untie me," she insisted, her voice rising into something shrill. Panic set into her already blown pupils from the low light. "*Please.*"

She flapped uselessly at the shelving behind her and began to pull, but to no avail. I'd tested the room out for a bigger girl, as my tastes ran varied, but as she was almost half of that, her efforts resulted in no change to her situation at all.

"No." I grabbed a low stool that put me around her waist height and enjoyed looking up at her. "Why did you come to the club tonight?"

"What?" Her gaze flickered down to meet mine where I sat, and her breathing slowed, taking her panic level down a notch.

"Good girl," I murmured. "Keep breathing. Don't want you fading from an ongoing attack now, do we?" I ran the tips of my fingers soothingly along her calf then a little higher, grazing just beneath the hem of her short dress, then traced over the swell of her breasts where they pressed against the

tops of her corset top, fighting for breathing room.

Her breath hitched as I began my return journey, and I hid a smile.

“No,” she whispered, her voice cracking with uncertainty. She followed the path of my fingers with her gaze alone. “Please let me down.”

“Maybe later. After,” I murmured, dragging my fingers back up her legs to reach the soft, supple curve of her inner thigh.

Then back down again.

Her breath drew out, matching the constant stroke of my fingers, and I hid a smile.

“After what?” she almost whined the question, wobbling on her toes.

“Let me help you.” I traced along her calf to circle my fingers around her ankle, massaging as I lifted her foot off the ground and removed her heels. Leaving one foot resting on my knee, I massaged her tensed arch, working through the pressure points to her toes. “Better?”

“I— Yes. It feels good, but I have no idea who you are and I think you’ve mistaken me for—”

“Shhh.” I smiled, transferring her feet as the small room descended into silence.

I’d designed this part of the night as a method of calming her, but her silence prickled at me. Regardless, I continued with my plan. She’d call it if it got to be too much, and we hadn’t really started yet. Her right calf had some serious knots, and I worked them out gently one by one. “Have you had an old injury here?”

“I fell off a ladder years ago. Struggle with heels. Not a job perk. Can I come down now please?” Her voice descended into a hoarse whisper, and she flinched as I worked through the worst of the knots.

“You haven’t had this treated, ever, have you?”

“Why, are you some sort of mad doctor?”

“Mad?” I raised an eyebrow and dipped my head to lick along her calf, tasting her natural sweetness and the light layer of salt that covered her skin. Panic brought out the body’s most exquisite reactions. “No, I’m not mad.”

“I think you are.” She gasped, yanking upward. Her knee jerked in reflex, whacking into my shoulder. “A doctor, then.”

“A trainer, once.” I gripped her ankle tighter and pinched the pressure point at the back of her heel until she whimpered, then released her, offering a silent warning with my eyes.

She nodded and drew her feet tight together, back on her toes. “What happened?”

“They found out I had a furry problem. Not the chinchilla infestation sort in my home but the real sort of issue.” I let my skin darken and bit back the irritation at the fur that breached my skin for an instant, refusing to let my beast out just yet. “There. That’s going to undo all the work I just put into you, isn’t it?” I stared down at where she balanced, trying not to hop from side to side.

Pale-pink polish contrasted with a vine tattoo that crept along one foot.

“So you worked with humans?” she challenged, raising her chin as I towered over her.

Smiling with teeth, I placed one hand on the row of shelving above her on either side of her head and leaned into her space. “Trying to work me out, little chipmunk? That’s not going to happen.” I let energy flow through my body, lengthening my fingers into tight, hard claws and sharpening my teeth. My eyes would turn black, too, but she wouldn’t see that in the already dimmed light.

Grazing one claw along her cheek, I trailed it down her throat. She swallowed hard, again and again as I dipped my head to brush my mouth over her lips. “Be a good girl, won’t you? For me?”

“For you?” Bravado spat out of her with enough force to widen her eyes as she realized her mistake, though she repeated the effort a second time to seal her fate. “What are you?”

I let fur cover my face as my inner beast rose, snapping for release. As I lengthened my snout and teeth, I drew sharp canines across her cheek where my claws had traced mere moments before. Her fear hung in a palpable sweet and tangy scent that surrounded me, bringing out every inch of my need to the forefront of my psyche. Her rapid heartbeat insisted on thrashing her panic out inside her chest though it might as well have been next to my ears. My mouth watered as I stared at her, claws clenching at my sides.

Not. Yet.

Sweat broke out in tiny beads across her décolletage. I licked at them, taking in the sharp tang the salt elicited, overriding her natural sweetness as my features returned to my human-looking side.

“Should have stayed so sweet. Pity,” I murmured and slashed my claws straight through her clothes, shredding first the ribbons then the material into a flurry of glittering confetti and leaving her bare before me.

Sweeping curves highlighted alabaster skin that almost glowed in the darkened space. Dusky nipples budded tight against the gentle swell of small but full breasts that matched her bald little pussy already glistening with her need.

Needs I fully intended to fulfill tonight.

She drew in a sharp breath, and my gaze returned to her face to find her swollen lips half open and her eyes glazed with lust.

Perfection.

Chapter Four

Josie

My captor is a giant freaking Tasmanian Devil.

If I didn't think I'd pass out from that fact alone, I would have gratefully left my body. But the man who'd thrown me over his shoulder in a sack, who'd trussed me up in a storeroom away from everyone else ... had also massaged my feet.

And licked my leg.

It should have been icky, a strange man tasting me like I was a degustation platter laid out before him. And the way his eyes fixed on mine as he drew his tongue over my calf. I wondered what else he might taste, if he had any other talents than massaging feet and leg-licking.

And turning into a ginormous, sharp-toothed, deadly, clawed monster.

That same clawed hand that had shredded my clothing and left me naked and shivering closed around my throat. All the way around and stayed there, tipped with razor-sharp spikes and loosely encircling the one thing that left me breathing.

He stared down at me, tipping my chin up to make sure I met his gaze, his threat implicit.

Be a good girl, and keep your snark trapped well away.

Or what? I had no idea. Sometimes, it felt like he was having fun, and this was just a game to him. Right now, nothing seemed to be a game, and my situation—tied, unable to run, and afraid—was all too real.

I whimpered, and his black, fathomless gaze sharpened into something predatory.

A shiver drifted its way languidly along my body, starting in my aching feet and working its way upward in fingers of ice that contrasted with the heat pooling between my legs, tightening my nipples in an invisible caress until they

tautened into hard beads. Light, aching pain slipped across my breasts, mirroring the throb between my legs.

My captor inhaled, his gaze locked on mine as his hand, his *claws*, for fuck's sake, slowly closed around my throat, restricting my breathing while my body betrayed me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. Please let me go—" Words tumbled from between my lips, cut off when he sealed his mouth over mine.

My words kept flowing, apologies and panic melding as he pressed his mouth against my lips, breathing in my terror like it was life breath. Maybe to him, it was.

"You haven't screamed yet," he whispered against my mouth in an intimate caress. "Why haven't you screamed?"

"Do you want me to?" I asked—or tried to ask—but his tongue sliding between my lips ruined my response.

The man might look like a cream puff on the outside and a monster hidden within, but by all the gods, could he *kiss*.

He slanted his mouth to slide across mine as his tongue danced and twirled, leaving me heady and legless. His bare chest pressed to mine, his heartbeat matching my own rhythm as it raced to keep up with the sensations assailing my body against his head-spin-worthy kiss.

A large, warm hand closed over my hip, massaging each sensitive spot as he had my feet earlier. I moaned into his mouth, arching up and needing more of him pressed to me. My mind tried to send a different message, but my body ached and pulsed, ignoring all but the high need washing through me. Liquid heat deluged south as I rose higher on my toes, pressing my mouth harder against his—only for my progress to be halted by the claws that bore sharp pressure against my throat, pushing me back to where he'd tied me.

The arrogant ass drew away, licking his lips, and held me at bay as though I'd been the one trying to take advantage of him. Mind, with a defined jawline like his and the Sahara version of chests bared, he made the traditional daddy Santa figure a whole lot sexy. Add in the claws and another whimper

tore from my throat, the same one being held hostage by the razor-sharp tips that could end my life in less than a heartbeat.

The corners of lips turned up, and he dropped his hands—claws—from my throat.

I swallowed air like it was in short supply. “Thank you,” I choked out, too busy inhaling to bother with menial things like proper words. Not that he’d stolen my air, just restricted it for a bit.

My body had responded to that, had liked it. What the fuck was wrong with me?

“You’re welcome,” he purred, scraping his claws along my sides. Not hard enough to draw blood, but I’d certainly bear his marks come tomorrow.

I blinked, realization dawning on why I was in the club in the first place, and tried to focus.

Which was really freaking hard when he towed that short, stumpy little stool of his forward and planted his fuzzy-clad Santa ass between my legs.

“We’re going to play a little game of questions, pretty girl.” He stroked my inner thighs with warm fingertips.

I sighed as his claws receded to where they had come from.

Any other day, I might have looked at his ability to change at will in jealousy, but tonight, all I could do was nod my relief. “Okay.” My nodding became frantic, never-ending, and I stopped the repetitive motion with effort before the bobblehead effect became permanent. “What are you going to do—”

“I love a bald little pussy. So soft. Sweet.” His tongue swiped my pussy lips in a long, hot stroke, smearing my arousal across swollen, needy flesh.

“*Ohh.*” The world lit up and maybe spun around as he tasted me, proving just how talented his tongue really was.

“What kind of questions?”

His tongue did that thing again, and I let a soft, wanton moan slip from mine.

“The sort that when you answer with what I need to hear from you, it earns you a reward.” Another tongue flick and a matching moan was drawn from me. “When you give me an answer I like.”

My body loved what he was doing, craved it, and for fuck’s sake! I was so fucking broken inside, it took a twisted madman licking me to show me the reality I needed, all that I wanted.

“What if I only have answers that you don’t like?” I let out a shuddery breath, suddenly desperate for his approval.

I needed to please him. Right now, nothing else mattered. Not giving him the truth, any rendition of it, or creating lies for him that I thought fit the profile. No, all I wanted was to avoid seeing disappointment on his face because I had done something wrong or something bad. My heart sank in my chest as he stopped and looked up at me, that disappointment I’d envisaged written across the features I knew well already.

“Are they the only sort you’ll have?” He answered my question with a question, leaving me searching for the answer that would please him again.

I shook my head frantically, pushing up on my toes to ease the ache in my pussy, and spread my legs a little wider.

“I didn’t think so.” He brushed his mouth up and down my lips and reached the apex, the center of me, and spread me wide. “I didn’t think so. See? You are a good girl.”

“Yes,” I whispered, not sure if I was agreeing with him or fighting with him. Or maybe just offering my body that seemed determined to run at its own speed and agenda without prior consultation.

Whatever he was doing, every inch of me liked that, and I couldn’t do anything more than stop and watch him work.

Really, really broken.

“What’s your name?”

“Josie.” My own name got stuck in my throat. “Josie Stranger. Who are you?” I didn’t really expect him to answer, but asking a question seemed preferable to dealing with a mood change that might result in those claws again.

“Knox Townsend.” Brilliant blue, sea-side eyes stared up at me as he stroked my inner thighs like a seasoned lover.

But the truth that hit me was far darker than a man taking liberties with my body. Shit, he’d given me his full name. I’d watched my fair share of psycho reality television late at night while drinking cheap wine in my first weeks at university, and I’d learned a lot.

The first thing being that if you get their identity, run for the hills, because Mister Psycho Santa wasn’t about to let you share that coveted information with his nemesis, Mister Law Enforcement.

Funnily enough, we shared the same foe.

Shifters were far from common knowledge, and in a community prepared to keep it that way, it meant outsiders were not our friends. The same sort of outsiders I’d stupidly tried to work beside, tried to befriend. Look where that got me.

A tiny groan that had nothing to do with my current situation tore from my lips.

My aggressor stared at me, curiosity lighting his darkened gaze.

Maybe I can be his biology experiment. He could take my body back to the university and leave me there as a failed experiment or cage me as a freak show.

Both thoughts tightened my ribcage to the point of implosion, and I gasped for air in short gulps.

“Easy, pretty face. Nice and easy.” His palms stroked my thighs in long, soothing motions.

I nodded and rested my head back, my heart slowing from its frantic beat inside my chest.

His next question ruined the peace he'd managed to blanket me with. "Why did you come to the club tonight?" Deadly light, his teasing touch became intimate, gliding along the crease of my inner thighs, though the coldness in his gaze left a different variety of goose bumps rioting over my bare skin.

I shook my head. The one question he'd asked, and I couldn't answer it—at least, not in the way he wanted.

My boss kept telling me that honesty wasn't a desired trait in a journalist, that I needed to be able to hide my feelings, but that had never been the case with me. Everything I thought got displayed straight across my face. Right when I wanted to be dishonest, I knew he would be able to see my lie as soon as I opened my mouth.

"Why did you come to the club tonight?" His tone hardened as his fingertips dug pinpricks into my skin.

The whimpers slipping past my lips transformed into a fully fledged squeal. I shrank back into the shelving, ignoring the brutal razor edges digging into my spine. "I-I-I—"

"Come on, Josie. You can come up with a better lie than that."

His sneer told me exactly what he would do to me if I did fib, and I swallowed down the truth, burying it deep, and sent a desperate, silent prayer to a god who had never spoken to me.

"I wanted to see what Fray's Christmas party was like. The legend and all." The lie left my lips on a trembling breath that might've been excused if I hadn't tried to hold his jet gaze at the same time.

Induct me into the fail army hall of fame right now, please.

Knox didn't buy into my half-truth for a minute. I knew, reading it in those unforgiving voids where his eyes should be before he opened his mouth that I'd sealed my fate.

"Bullshit." His claws dug a little deeper, not enough to draw blood, but enough to leave tiny depressions, like the sort

you'd get from a pincushion if you pressed too hard. I'd be full of little perforations by the time he released me.

If he released me at all.

"I don't want to lie to you!" The admission sprang from my lips before I could bite it back. "I don't want you to hurt me. Please," I begged, wishing I had a real truth to tell him, but I couldn't.

Knox stared up at me and canted his head to one side. Disappointment rolled off him in waves. "Fuck me, chipmunk." His teeth elongated, his claws forming fully where they already pressed into my skin, so fragile against something designed to rip and tear creatures just like me.

I screamed, and his smooth, easygoing features twisted. If I hadn't been looking down at that moment, I mightn't have believed that his violence toward me caused him pain as well.

"Let's try this again." His claws and teeth retracted, leaving smoothness in their wake. I whimpered as he rubbed over the tenderized spots, encouraging blood flow to return as he seemed to consider his word. "What's your favorite fantasy?"

Oh, that one I could answer. Leaping into the peace offering he extended, I opened my mouth and let all my truths fall out. "I love being licked," I replied honestly, looking down at him so he could read whatever he wanted out of my face. "And I love returning the favor."

"I didn't ask what you liked, chipmunk." Disappointment framed his features again. "I asked about your favorite fantasy."

"Oh."

People had more than one? I worked, studied, slept, and worked again. The only fantasy I had was of going to sleep without setting an alarm to get up with the sun, but I doubted Knox would like that response, either.

Or maybe he would—but I wasn't prepared to risk it. I didn't get the time to consider more than that as his claws

skated along my ribs, and he licked my inner thighs in a matching stroke. Heady and spiraling, I could barely think.

“Stop doing that!” I cursed without thinking it through. Knox paused and narrowed his gaze. My tongue tripped over itself as I threw the first thing at him that came to the front of my mind. Again. “My favorite fantasy is... Being held down by two men while one kisses me and the other fucks me.” I blinked at what erupted from my mouth in desperation. “I—”

My God, what had I just admitted? And to who? He already had me strung across the shelving like I was meat. Would he invite a friend in to fulfill this fantasy, too? Horror and more than a little arousal washed over me at the thought.

“I don’t know where that came from!” I blurted, yanking at my bonds.

“Interesting, isn’t it, what our minds say when the body’s defenses are down? Good girl.” He growled this last part, sweeping his tongue across my pussy.

I gushed, heat coating my thighs. Hell, I could smell myself. Could this get any worse?

“Have you ever been tied up before?” He propped his chin on my pelvic bone and looked up at me like we were just Santa and an elf having a normal conversation, not this fucked-up situation where my body called the shots and responded just the way he wanted.

This wasn’t a form of surrender or anything I might have thought I’d have to mentally deal with tonight. No, this was an interrogation.

“No.” Another easy answer.

“Not even for a demo of something?” He waggled blond eyebrows.

“Nope.”

“Hmmm.” He hummed against my clit and swept his tongue over it a few times until my body was liquid again. “Never tied up, but likes the idea of a threesome. Probably with someone you trust. What did you tick on the form

tonight?” He glanced up at me sharply, and a lock of sandy blond hair fell across his bright-blue eyes.

“I don’t remember.” I shook my head and braced, waiting for the oncoming sting.

“You don’t remember?” he scoffed. “Come on, Josie. What did you tick? Which boxes?”

“I— I—” And we were back to stuttering land. “I just crossed the first few that didn’t scare the shit out of me.”

“So, you don’t share my kink then?” The disappointment in his eyes cut me to the bone, ice wreathed in blue flame slicing through my veins better than his claws could ever do.

Something cold and calculating shredded the kind man I’d become accustomed to seeing as he rose and slammed both hands to the bench beside my head. “Why are you in the club tonight, Josie?”

Chapter Five

Knox

I glared at her, seething inside and out. How fucking stupid had I been? Not on duty and had a few drinks to boot. It was like I'd given her an open door to come in and homewreck the whole damn place. "What are you?" I snapped in her face, not giving her a chance to answer. "Undercover cop? Lawyer? Reporter?"

Her face whitened further, though it should have been impossible, and I swore.

"I— I— I—"

"Stop fucking stuttering at me and tell me who you are, Josie," I snarled.

The sweet and sharp tang of her fear boiled my blood and hardened my cock all at once. I gripped the shelf behind her head hard enough to warp the thing out of shape. Better than her. All tied up like a Christmas turkey I wanted to stuff, except that she wasn't. Josie was prey, though more than that—there was something not quite right about her. I leaned in closer and inhaled her, then drew back in shock. "You're only half?"

"Shifter? No, I'm full. Bit broken, though. I can get furry, but not change. I can't." She looked up at me shyly. Red stained her cheeks in a deep shadow that tracked down her throat and blazed across the tops of her bare breasts.

I gripped the shelf all the harder and willed myself not to worship the gorgeous little creature before me.

A sly and gorgeous shifter who could bring everything Rafe and Killian had built crashing around us all in a burning torrent. Part of me hoped she was a cop because then it would just be me who burned, though for more than one reason. The idea of taking handcuffs from her and reversing the roles only hardened my resolve—*yeah, that's what I'm going with*—to work her out.

One mind shift, and she became a puzzle to solve.

Time to play that game again.

I unhooked stiff fingers from the shelving and trailed them over her breast, along her stomach. My knuckles grazed her navel. “Cop?”

“No.” She shook her head, adamant.

That was good. Good and bad. But she answered me. I dropped my hand lower and stroked her clit lightly, teasing.

She swayed at my touch, her mouth half open. A breath kissed my lips, but there was no sigh on it. Yet.

“Lawyer?”

“No. Don’t have the smarts—*ohhh.*”

There it was, that little whimper when I slid my fingers along her slick, swollen flesh. Her thighs quivered as I nudged her legs wider, and she let me.

Not a cop, not a lawyer, and while she could be just a curious cat out for a night’s play, I didn’t think so. She’d come here with a mission in mind, so frazzled at Killian’s mini-interrogation that she’d thrown down any answer on the page.

My gut curled at that. It meant she didn’t share my kink, or maybe she just thought she didn’t. The way her body responded to me, to the situation I’d put her in, said differently.

I should cut her down and hand her straight over to Rafe. Walk the fuck away. But I couldn’t. I wasn’t ready to give up my little toy, not yet.

Which left... “Reporter, then.” I didn’t bother to phrase it as a question. Her eyes never widened, and her mouth didn’t pop opening in a sweet-as-fuck little *O* shape. She knew I’d ask, and she’d been waiting.

Still, we were playing my favorite game.

“Yes.” Another breathy admission, and the one I needed.

“Good girl.” I stroked my fingers along her slit, collecting her juices and spreading them around. “I promised

you a reward if you gave me the answers I wanted, and you've done very well."

Her eyes lit up as she struggled for a breath that seemed to be lodged in her throat, her hips rocking against my hand. I dipped my head, intent on helping her find that air, but my brain continued the game on its own, seeking out new lines of questioning and potential answers even if she'd stopped playing. And the results I foresaw didn't ease the pressure between my shoulder blades that felt like a sniper's sights were set dead center.

Her soft moan was achingly sweet as she sought the pressure I refused to give her.

I smiled, brushing my mouth over her lips, and considered my wording carefully. No loopholes for her to slither through. I slid a finger inside her, withdrawing in a slow, thoughtful rhythm designed to tease and torture, keep her on edge, but not let her come. "We're nearly done, pretty face. Tell me what you were supposed to report back from your trip here."

In, and out. In, her juices coated my hand to the point of deluge. Even if she hadn't thought she shared my kink, her body told me a very different story. My heart stupidly hoped for more while my brain bitch-slapped the shit out of it.

"I was supposed to find out what made the club special," she whispered in a shaky breath. Her thighs squeezed around my wrist, hips bucking, seeking the friction necessary to end her torment. Her breath came fast, but I still didn't have my answer.

"Open." The command dropped between us, stilling her movements.

She parted her legs a little wider than before and stared at me in confusion. Arousal slicked her thighs, and I wanted to dive back there and lap up every drop she offered. Huh. Well, at least she was a true submissive, even if she hadn't seemed to know that, either.

"Have you ever been to a sex club or tried BDSM

before, Josie?”

“No.” She flicked her head side to side in denial. Dark strands lashed around her throat, sticking in her sweat, resulting in a collar of her own making there. A tiny form of self-bondage, even if it was an unconscious one. I left her hair like that, the dark strands so pretty against her bare, pale skin.

“What did you think Fray was?” I narrowed my gaze and fingered her gently until her head dropped back and her eyes rolled. I tapped her cheek sharply—enough to sting—and she blinked bleary eyes at me. “Focus, pretty face. That’s it. Give me what I want.”

“I’ll give you anything,” she whispered, her voice raspy though I didn’t have my claws wrapped around it.

Fuck, but I needed to be inside her the next time I held her like that.

“Tell me why, Josie.” I leaned my forehead against hers, trying not to blow in my damn pants like a prepubescent teenager.

She blinked again, and her gaze slid into focus. Her tight-as-fuck little pussy squeezed my finger, pulsing, and I knew she was close.

“My boss had heard about Rafe and knew he owned the club. But they don’t know about shifters, or me. I had heard things and knew that no journo had been able to get in. I thought I might be a bridge. Give a little goss, lose some of the info that could get him—or Fray—investigated. Maybe some sexy shots that declared it a sex club. Notorious, raised image maybe, but no— No—” Her lips trembled, but no sound came out.

I slid a second finger inside her, working her tight little body hard, and pressed kisses to the corner of her breathless mouth. “Such a good girl. Come for me now.”

I leaned my body into her as she took the pleasure I offered, crying out, all soft curves and sweet scents enough to leave me spiraling with need for her. Hell, I’d have to rub one out after this before I told Rafe just how bad I’d fucked up. I’d

be lucky if he gave me a day off in forever post this shit-fight.

Hell, I'd be lucky if every day wasn't a day off, if he let me walk out of his office after the beating I'd just earned myself. Not that I'd heard he was a harsh boss, but he had a reputation for those who crossed him.

I'd managed to plant myself firmly on the other side of that line with both feet and a pretty girl in my arms.

Her head dropped against my chest within the circle of my arms, though I didn't remember taking her into me like that. The pleasure I'd given her was bittersweet at best. Funny the hand life dealt out. The one girl I'd found who seemed fucking perfect, and I couldn't have her.

Hell, I had to let her down and do some damn fine groveling before she sued my ass or exposed my nastier habits to the local cop shop.

"Okay, pretty face," I murmured against her hair, inhaling her scent again and committing her to memory. "Time to get you down."

All I wanted was to fuck her senseless, untie her and retie her on my lap, and lock the door for the night. Too much to ask, huh? Maybe I'd earn the right to keep a soul mate for more than a few scant hours in the next life if I managed to redeem myself in this one.

"What?" Josie stirred against my chest, raising dozy eyes and puffed, ruby-stained lips to meet mine in a light, gentle kiss that blew my fucking mind. "Knox?"

"I have to let you go. Can't keep you forever," I murmured, thumbing her soft lips, though I wanted to do just that. "Can I have this back?" I reached for the rope end I'd left in her hand as an emergency escape measure, though she hadn't seemed to want to use it. Probably didn't know how, in hindsight. Yet another error I'd made in my haste to have her.

"What? No!" Her fingers curled into a tight fist and she gripped the rope like a lifeline.

"You wanted down before," I coaxed, "and although I'd love to give you orgasms for the rest of the night and fuck

us both into oblivion afterward” —*why was I telling her that, why?*— “I think we’d better talk about what I can do to apologize to the girl who never asked for any of this. Fuck, I must have actually terrified you.” The knowledge sent my stomach plummeting on a five-story drop straight into purgatory.

Bad Doms went to hell. Shit ones got left in the void between, praying for their submissive’s forgiveness for eternity.

She wasn’t even *mine*.

I couldn’t believe how fucked up tonight had become so damn fast.

“Don’t untie me,” she croaked, her eyes blown wide in panic again.

“Josie,” I started, curving my hand around her cheek to caress her gently. Soft skin molded to my touch, and I let out a groan. “I’d really like not to get my ass sued for fucking around with a girl who didn’t give me permission, and I’d also really like to keep my boss out of hot water. Let me let you down, get you some blankets, and we can talk.”

“I don’t want to be let down,” she cried, arching up to press her mouth to mine. A flash of something sharp passed through her gaze. “If you let me down now, I’ll—I’ll—do all the things you don’t want. I’ll call you out on your behavior tonight and I’ll expose the club. Rafe. Just don’t let me down. Not yet. Please, Knox,” she begged, her eyes flaring as her panic returned in full.

I stilled, arcing my palm to match the smooth lines of her throat, tilting her head back until she couldn’t look away from me, but she didn’t fight. I hadn’t expected it, and that fledgling pit of hope burned a little hotter.

“You want—what? To have a good time with me tonight, walk away, and write your article, exposé? Thing. Whatever.” I flapped a hand, narrowing my gaze. “Don’t play games with me, pretty face. You aren’t in the best position to negotiate.”

“Aren’t I?” The little siren arched into me, rubbing her body against mine like a kitten. One calf, the one I’d massaged, slid along my thigh and hooked over my hip, leaving herself exposed and open.

I growled low in my throat. “*Pretty girl gets a good fucking at notorious nightclub.* Great headline. Career maker, huh? Got a camera on you too?”

She shook her head, straining against the ropes but pressing into me. “No.”

Truth. I’d learned to read her during our previous game, and I knew I wasn’t wrong.

“So, what would your headline be?” I taunted her, running my hands over her luscious curves, cupping the swell of her breasts with a slightly rougher touch.

She moaned, twisting in my grip, but I crowded her space. “Come on, Josie. Tell me.”

“I’ll drop it!” she blurted and snapped her mouth closed.

I toyed with a tight nipple, milking it with her arousal that still coated my fingers. “You will?”

“I—yes,” she whispered, staring up in mortification. “I wasn’t comfortable with the idea to start with, anyway. I don’t want to do anything to expose the community, not knowing what I’ve learned about what Rafe—and you and everyone here—does. Not even if the shifter community can never accept me.”

I dropped my hands, though I ached to cup her ass and draw her body along the length of my cock. “Who says you’re not accepted?”

She gave me a one-shouldered shrug. “Family. I don’t really have many friends. Okay, none. Just the people I work with.”

“People who ask you to dig into a shit-scary community to earn a day’s wage, if that? Great workplace. Must be filled with swell people,” I muttered.

She offered me a wan smile. “You’re not wrong.”

I considered everything she’d said to me tonight and couldn’t pick out a speck of mistruth in it, apart from that shitty lie she’d told me when we first started. Now I got why she’d resisted like she had.

Whether she was a hell of an actress and I deserved to get my ass roasted, or she genuinely was in a space she didn’t belong, it didn’t really matter. I wanted her, and I still wasn’t ready to let her down. That part about not fitting in though...

That part, I could fix.

Resolve settled on me. “Okay, pretty face. I’m going to let you down now. We’re still going to talk but”—I raised a finger to tap her nose when she opened her mouth, no doubt to blurt out the next thing that came into her furiously spinning mind—“you’re not getting thrown out on your ass, and I’ll defend you to Rafe. I’m trusting you not to hand me or anyone here to a human law agency, which is one hell of a risk. I trust you, and I believe what you’ve said. Don’t screw the freedom you’ve earned by fucking with me. Are we clear?”

She nodded slowly and licked her lips. “Don’t let me down.”

Her whisper was so faint I couldn’t be sure what I’d heard. I leaned forward into her space. “Are you going to make me regret this already?”

“No, I want—” She cleared her throat and looked straight through me. “I want you to finish. Your fantasy. The reason you came here tonight.” Her cheeks flamed, but she got the words out, loud and clear without a single damn stutter.

“You don’t get to make the requests tonight,” I muttered roughly, pushing away from her.

Her soft gasp nearly undid me. I ran my hands through my hair. Hell, I’d just gotten my need for her locked away, and here she was, essentially begging me to fuck her like I’d planned.

But things had changed. So many things.

I pursed my lips and spun back to her. “You want me to fuck you. One-time sort of thing, a bit of fun to close off a weird night, is that it?”

“Yes.” She crushed my heart in a single sound. “No. I don’t know!” she cried. “Knox, I’ve never done this before. You asked for a fantasy before, but I’ve never experienced anything remotely like this in my entire life. I blurted out what I’d read in a book because I thought you’d believe it. It turned me on, the idea of kissing one man and having se—being fucked by another,” she corrected herself carefully. “But the fantasy I want right now is for you to finish this the way you’d planned. I’ve never—your touch—” She choked on the hard truth jammed in her pretty little throat. Unchecked tears streamed down her cheeks.

I heard the frustration in her voice, read the plea on her face.

Swallowing hard, I dropped to my knees and ran my tongue up the inside of her thigh. “Are you a virgin?” I asked, my voice harsh and filled with lust. I saw the same reflected in her eyes.

She shook her head. “No. Not in the traditional sense. To what you like? Yes.”

“I won’t go easy on you because of that,” I warned her, sliding my hands up the backs of her legs to grip the globes of her ass in both hands. My claws slid out a little, and I drew her cheeks apart, leaving her exposed and trembling in my hold.

A whine built in her, but I ignored it as I dipped my head and sucked on her clit. Lengthening my claws, I scraped one lightly along the crack of her ass, all the way to her slippery pussy and back, toying with her asshole. The nerves bundled there loved surface play, and I made sure to leave her overwhelmed with sensations she’d never likely experienced in her life.

Smoothing the fingertips of my other hand, I slid knuckle-deep inside her, working her hard and fast as I sucked at her clit, yanking her orgasm forward and throwing her over the cliff in a sacrificial free fall to euphoria.

Her screams echoed in the small room, and I was hard again in an instant. Shucking off the costume, I grabbed a condom from where I'd positioned a few behind her and rolled it on. Her head lolled on her shoulder as I notched myself at her entrance. I kissed her hard, bringing her back, and kept teasing that tight little asshole with my claws.

“Fuck, I wish I had more time because I'd torture you here, too.” I pressed the tip of my claw inside, careful not to hurt her, keeping the tease going as long as possible.

“You can have as much time as you want. Whenever you want.” She gasped, arching to rub her pussy over the tip of my covered cock. “Please, Knox.”

Who was I to deny a pretty girl who begged like that? I gripped her hips and slammed home in a single stroke. She gushed hot and thick around me, her walls already pulsing in the rhythm of her next orgasm.

I ground my teeth and kept a fast pace, willing myself to hold out. Her screams lit me on fire. I surged forward as she wrapped both legs around my waist and gave herself over to what I needed.

Words and cries tumbled from her lips in a constant scream, but I heard none of them. A roaring filled my ears, and my throat tore as I shouted my climax into the void. I fell with her as she let go, and we found oblivion together.

Chapter Six

Knox

On shaking legs, I cleaned us both in silence. When was the last time I was the one who tottered around after a damn fine session? Unwinding her bonds took half a second. I pulled the rope that dangled from her wrist—she'd released it long ago. Her bonds loosened and began to unwind.

After drawing her wrists from the coils, careful not to damage her skin, I gathered her in my arms and sank to the cold floor. Swiping a hand into the darkest corner, I yanked at a pile of blankets I'd put there earlier, covering us both as she began to shiver.

“Take it easy. That was—” I broke off. She was too far gone to listen, and my brain was mush.

“Mind blowing. Life altering. Can we do that again please?”

“What, now?” I teased, running a fingertip beneath her chin to tilt her head back.

She giggled at me. *Giggled*. “Maybe ... tomorrow? Wait, that's Christmas. And family. Ew. Can I have Christmas with you?”

I froze midway through stroking her hair and untangling the damp strands from around her throat. Her bare throat, where a collar should go. My damn collar. “You're fuck-drunk. It wears off about the same time as everything starts to hurt.” Including my heart. When the happy dolphins—what my first sub used to call endorphins—and whatever else made you lovely-dovey wore off after a good, hard fuck.

“Nope. Not drunk. Just, can you chase me through a park, next time, maybe? Or a dark public parking lot. Is that too cliché?”

I uttered a hard, dark laugh. “You want me to fuck you up in a dark alley, too? Girl, you've only seen the tip of what I like. Tonight was soft.”

“There was nothing soft about how you just fucked

me.” Her head drooped, and she mumbled into my chest. “I mean it, Knox. Am I just a one-night thing for you?”

“Why, am I a series for your local rag? Weekly feature articles?”

“I said I wouldn’t do that to you.” She pushed back, her hands knotted into fists against my chest. The blankets slid from her shoulders, exposing her. Gone was the soft cuddly little piece of prey I’d picked out earlier in the night. Before me sat a defiant and naked woman who’d taken some of the worst I could throw at her and asked for more.

I cupped her cheeks and kissed her. Hard.

Punishingly, bruisingly hard.

We were both panting when I broke away, needing fresh air before I had her again on the floor. “You want what I like, huh? Decided that I’m your new kink? I’ll do worse than just rough you up. I’ll terrify you, and you won’t be sure it’s me until I’m ready for you to know. I’ll hurt you, push your limits, and tease the ever-loving fuck out of you until you break. And I’ll enjoy every damn second.” I rolled us to the floor, pressing her bare back to the filthy, hard surface.

Her pupils were so blown, her eyes were almost as dark as mine. “Yes, please.”

I laughed, slamming my hands to her hips where I was already hard. Cold cement bit into my shins, a contrast to the warm, soft curves she offered up beneath me. I kneed her thighs apart as she stared up at me and cried out when I slid straight into her.

“Knox! You’re not—” she squeaked, but the flush that appeared on her face stilled me again.

I moved slowly, rocking against her until I was sure, then leaned forward to whisper in her ear. “Your filthy fucking pussy is mine, pretty face, and I’ll have you bare whenever the fuck I like.”

She trembled, pulsing around me as my dirty words knocked her over the edge. Her moan set me off too, and I pulled out to come across her luscious, flushed tits.

Josie lay beneath me, whimpering as her body trembled and shook in a series of aftershocks. Her hands slid across her breasts, smearing the glistening white ropes over her skin.

I swallowed, unable to look away as her hand drifted between her legs. She stroked her clit as I reared over her, still working the last of the cum from my cock as she came again, my name on her lips.

“Fuck me.” I kissed her again and sank to the frigid floor alongside her. “How the fuck did this happen?”

“No idea, but can I keep you?”

“Just because I’m furry doesn’t mean I make a good pet,” I warned her. “Hell, I’m not suitable for a normal life.”

“My life is far from normal.” She bit her lip. “If I quit the paper, I have to find another job. I can’t afford university fees and accommodation without one.”

“Move in with me.” I cleaned her body again and wrapped the blankets around us in a cocoon with her trapped against me. The offer slid unfettered out of my mouth. I couldn’t believe the words were mine, but then, I didn’t try to take them back, either. I shoved my hand into the Santa sack and yanked out a slim red leather day collar. A delicate silver bell charm, shaped like the one from a bell tower, dangled from the center. “Do you know what this is?”

She eyed it with a small frown. “It means you have a cat?”

My lips twitched. “Not quite. It means I’m asking you to be mine. No one else’s, just mine. Unless you want to try out that little extra fantasy you mentioned before.” I drew her a little closer. “Usually I’d ask after a few weeks, months, maybe. But you’re sort of perfect.”

Her mouth made that pretty little shape again, and I instantly wanted to make good use of it. Pushing the urge back, I focused on the aftercare aspect of our session, though I was doing a fine job of botching that, too. Who offered a collar after one night’s play, for fuck’s sake? She could still

stab us all in the back with me at the head of the line, but that was beside the point.

Josie said she wanted more, and if that matched what I did, then she'd be mine, leaving me no doubt about who she wanted to play with and wake up next to every night.

“Like exclusive dating but with kink?” She frowned, running her finger around the edge of the collar.

Deep burgundy velvet lined the inside, and it had never been worn. I kept waiting on the right submissive to fall in my lap, but I hadn't found her until now.

“Soft of,” I hedged while my stomach turned somersaults that would have made a gymnast envious. “More like—”

“Like super-exclusive. Like keep-me-forever sort of exclusive?” She bit her lip.

“Yeah.” I swallowed on a dry throat.

“Okay.”

“You're mad. I could be a psycho who kidnaps pretty girls and does terrible things to them,” I told her with a straight face.

Josie tilted her head back and wiggled closer into my arms. “I like your brand of terrible things.”

“How did I find you? Hell, how have I not found you before? Damn, girl. The things I want to do to you.” My cock hardened at the myriad of images scrolling across my vision. “Before I put this on you, I need you to understand me perfectly. You stay with me, as often as possible. I'll look after you in every way I can. But that's a two-way door. There are certain things I want from you, no questions asked.”

“Like what?” Josie shivered against me.

“Wake up with me every morning. Breakfast, too. Let me work out the aches in that leg of yours, especially after something like this. If I ask you anything, anything at all, you answer me truthfully. Zero secrets between us. Remember, good girls get rewards.” I kissed her before she had a chance

to say no. Unfair, and I was asking a lot of a kid who hadn't graduated with her degree yet.

"Agreed," she gasped, breaking the kiss first, then she dived right back in.

I let her play for a bit, indulging in tangling my hands in her hair, tilting her head back, and kissing her until she moaned in my arms. My heart thumped a steady rhythm, and I knew I'd gotten it right. Her. With me. My heart ached, swelling in my chest.

I swallowed and tried to focus. "What are you studying? Journalism?"

"Communications and Media. I can still work on my major."

"Make it whatever you want. I'll support you. Emotionally, financially if you need, but on the dollars front, I might know someone who can help with that. Let's clean up, shower properly, then we need to have a chat with someone."

A million questions lit her eyes, and the short, sharp, panicked breaths returned until I kissed the fears away and held her until she dozed on my chest.

Then I led her into the staff bathrooms and worked every knot from her body, making sure I worshiped her with my tongue as much as I could before the hot water ran out.

Chapter Seven

Josie

A few weeks later, I sat opposite Rafe's desk in his meticulously clean office. A flurry of fluffy balls rolled across the carpeted area, bouncing into one another. Each bounded up and turned out to be the club owner's pseudo-kids he'd inherited when he married Willow. The mixed families the club generated still amazed me, but as Knox had promised, I'd finally found a place where I was accepted. I didn't see pity in any eyes, and I wasn't shunned because I was broken.

I discovered more shifter peeps just like me who had never felt they had fit in anywhere but had found a family in Fray's unique blend of brave and broken but supportive community.

"Ready for your first day?" Rafe slid into his desk chair with the grace of a billionaire-cross-mafia boss, though his fortune had one less zero after the dollar sign.

I winced, still experiencing sparks of guilt every time I looked in his direction. "Yes," I whispered, working through what could have happened if I'd followed through on the intent I'd never been happy with when my previous boss sent me on assignment into Fray's darkest shadows.

I'd come out changed though not unscathed. Knox had a whole lot to do with my healing process and the fact I had a new job. One where I didn't have to hide who I was or be afraid anymore.

"You're not happy to start today? Would tomorrow be better? Is it ... a bad time of the month for you?" Rafe's face offered only sympathy while mine blazed.

"No! No, today is a good day to start. It's fine." I swallowed nervously and folded my hands into a knot on my lap.

Rafe's dominance blared at me from across the smallish space without the help of anything to enhance it. "You're fine?"

“Not in that sense.” More wincing. *Floor, please open and send me back where I came from.* “I was just thinking of what might have happened to you and Knox and to Fray if I’d... You know. If I’d done the job I was hired to do and brought the building crumbling down on party night. Or in the afterglow of it.” I bit my lip and stared at my knotted hands.

“I’m glad you have thought about it.” Rafe leaned back in his seat and rapped the desktop with the back of his knuckles. “I must admit that I had no hesitations in scaring the life out of you and throwing you out on your ass, alongside Knox for suggesting I take you on. But he fought for you, and you’ve both proved me right.”

So far.

The unspoken comment hung between us.

I knew Rafe didn’t give trust easily, but I was grateful for the chance he’d provided me in his community. “Knox thought you were likely to come in, claws and beak blazing, and roast us for dinner.” I offered a stilted laugh at the image that was all too easy to bring to the front of my mind.

Rafe’s shifted figure as a wedge-tailed eagle blew my mind, though I still hadn’t seen him change in person. I’d heard stories, though, and in the post-Christmas run, he’d put up a notice for the next monthly Sunday picnic that was held on a Monday, though I still had no real idea why.

“I prefer my meat raw.” Rafe’s smile dripped with sin for a long, quiet moment before he switched gears. “Lux will be your tour guide for the next few weeks. She knows the club, the patrons, and who I’d like to target in terms of advertising and promotions. Plus, there are a few side pieces I’d like on the website if you’re not above a little copywriting. In return, get your grades up. They’re good, but you can be better. I stalked you in my spare time.” He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

I kept my silence, and his grin grew wider.

“Get yourself on the Dean’s list, a few commendations, and I’ll pay your university fees off.”

Mini mafia man, indeed. “And what will I owe you if you do?”

“Forty hours of work a week including some editing, press releases, and marketing. Not anyone’s favorite job, but I’m sure you have the talent I need.”

“Actually, I kind of like marketing,” I admitted in a soft voice.

“Good, then you can take an extra class and lift your range on that, too. Turn up on time or not. I don’t really care, but I do care about the work being completed by week’s end. Knox isn’t to be a distraction for you, nor you to him. Nookie on the premises is fine, but not on my time. Do it on your own. Is that clear, Miss Stranger?”

My cheeks blazed again as I nodded frantically. “Yes, sir.”

I left Rafe’s office in something of a daze and headed back to the main floor. Cade stood in his habitual spot by the VIP lounge, his back to the black velvet curtain, his sharp gaze sweeping the mostly empty floor at the early hour. That same gaze that matched another, darker one that pierced me from across the room.

Knox hadn’t left me alone for a minute since our odd Christmas meeting. I’d stayed with him each night, heading back to my own accommodation only to collect what I needed before he hightailed me back to his more established townhouse. It might seem high-handed, but my head was okay with it, and that left me with no doubt that we had a future ahead of us. An unknown one perhaps, but I hadn’t taken my collar off except to wash, and he hadn’t asked me to, either.

His black gaze pierced me from where he stood in the reception foyer, rubbing his shoulders across the support beam there. His hands slung in the pockets of his charcoal slacks, he looked the epitome of relaxed and easygoing, but the bulge at the back of his branded club jacket said otherwise. Security had ramped up in the last days with all of their team carrying.

Even Knox’s face lost a little of his easygoing smile as

the silly season passed and the new year fell into its usual place. Still, something seemed out of place, and even as a newbie, I recognized the change in energy surrounding the club and its close-knit team.

Knox eyed me like I was something he wanted to eat. He stepped forward, and my vision shrank the wide, open space to a tunnel with him at the end of it.

“Josie.” Lux sent me an apologetic glance, wrapping her pink and black glossy nails around my arm. She towed me across the room to the back of the bar where it was quieter, and more importantly, out of Knox’s line of sight.

“Thanks.” I managed to get a breath into my oxygen-starved lungs. “I’m still getting used to him.”

Lux smirked. “That never really happens, sweetie. Don’t stress about it. Rafe told you his policy on disturbing the boys?”

“Yes, he made his position ... clear.” I swallowed at the thought of the predator versus me and was glad we were alone.

“He does that. Don’t worry. He’s as much a consummate protector as any of these guys are. Actually, he’s probably the worst of the bunch now. You’ve risen to family status,” she explained at my sideways glance. “I’ve got a list of things to show you about the club, bios, and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera that you need to go through.” She flicked invisible items off an imaginary list as she talked. “And I need to get your passwords all set up on the drive. Oh, and there’s another girl starting today too. She’s a wallaby. I think you’ll like her.” Lux smiled, though her lips whitened.

I might not have known her for long, but I knew when a smile was forced, and Lux’s may as well have been painted on.

“Okay.” I had no idea who the new girl was or what she’d have to do with me. I wasn’t the sort who socialized in a job. Head down and metaphorical tail up. “What’s her name?” I asked, flapping about for something to say.

“Lila Allure.” Lux pulled a wad of paperwork out of her—nowhere. “Sign these. Liability.”

“Sounds like a stripper’s name,” I said, flicking through the contracts.

“It’s not.” A soft voice that could have been a singer’s brought my focus back to the room.

Lux’s lips pursed as her gaze slid to a point behind me.

Shit.

“I’m sorry,” I began, wheeling around, and stopped.

For all that I’d done to hide my semi-shifter nature, Lila Allure wore hers on the outside, quite literally. Stripes of black and gray fur covered her brow and lined the length of her straight nose. Paired with pretty pink lips and deep, brown-liquid eyes framed by a double row of lashes, she was stunning.

I gaped at her, goldfish style.

“Lila. Report to Killian, please.” Lux’s voice took on a cold note as she directed the wallaby shifter to the opposite side of the floor where Killian stood in conversation with Knox, though their combined attention was fixed on the three of us.

Or maybe only one of us.

Lila pouted, sticking her chin out in Lux’s direction, and flounced back across the room of wherever she’d come from. Even at a distance, I could hear her berating Killian, demanding to see Rafe. I gripped my paper and watched the scene play out, unable to drag my attention away from the drama until Lux cleared her throat.

“Come on. Let’s do this with alcohol. I’m sure it helps,” she muttered, shoving a pink glitter pen into my hand.

“Who is she?” I asked and nudged Lux when she didn’t answer. “It’s really obvious that she’s got a history here.” A history I had to sell to the remainder of the shifter community, dependent on Rafe’s mood.

Lux sighed, then dropped her head to bang her forehead against the bar. “She’s Rafe’s ex.”

“She’s who?” I asked way too loudly.

Lux shoved a shot glass into my hand with a warning glint in her eye. I had no doubt she’d shove it into my mouth if that was what she thought it took to shut me up, so I slugged the tequila back in acquiescence.

“Before Willow, Rafe dated this little sub, a cute little wallaby. Killian warned him about her, but he wouldn’t listen, in typical Rafe fashion. They were close, super-close, and we all thought they’d be together forever. Then one day she asked him to shift. None of us realized he hadn’t for her before. Anyway, he scared the hell out of her, and she ran, taking a part of his heart with her. Lila— He was an insufferable asshole, more than ever, until he found Willow. Then he was normal Rafe again.”

“Good to hear I pulled my head out of my ass.” Rafe appeared by the bar in a flurry of shadows and feathers, and I got the impression he’d flown from his office. “Time to face the hangman.” His jaw set in a hard line, he crossed the room on two feet and approached the girl who had been so scared of him.

“Maybe he should have changed,” I murmured, watching his progress, how the girl bounced on her toes and turned all giggle-happy as he drew closer. “Why is she back if he doesn’t want her here?”

“What we all want to know,” Lux whispered back, never taking her eyes off the wallaby shifter. “Rafe is tight-lipped when he wants to be, and this is one of those times he’s pulling rank.”

“Not the smartest thing to do around friends, maybe?”

Lux hummed her agreement while I signed my paperwork, reading each clause with care, but there was nothing in there worth freaking out over. Rafe’s offers were generous in both pay, hours, and superannuation, and his expectations were high. But they were standards I could work

with and adhere to, and that made my heart happy.

Between Rafe, Knox, Lux, and the rest of the Fray team, I might have finally found a home that accepted me as I arrived.

Chapter Eight

Knox

I waited in the darkest shadows for Josie outside Fray's rear entrance. The little alleyway that blocked out most of the light on its way to the street was getting quite a reputation.

A reputation that would be worse after tonight.

I lit a cigarette I didn't smoke to let the air fill with a scent that wasn't mine and leaned on the opposite side of the doorway. The short flight of steps that led from Fray's back area where Josie and I had our first tryst had no railing, leaving the area open for me, just the way I liked it.

Black gloves covered my hands, but apart from those, I had no other toys organized for tonight's excursion, bar one—the van that sat running at the end of the alleyway. Cade manned the driver's seat, singing terrible and out-of-season Christmas carols at the top of his lungs.

I'd promised Josie dark, and I'd promised her she wouldn't know who had taken her until I was ready to tell her. For our first month, I'd gone easy on her, building up to a moment I hoped would cement what we had, until I couldn't hold out any longer.

I needed to play with her and know that was what she still wanted too.

Either that, or I'd break her and she'd run screaming for the proverbial hills. I wouldn't chase her, which would break my heart because I'd fallen in love with my beautiful little submissive.

The door creaked open, and Josie emerged from Fray's backdoor. Her head was down as she dug her hand around in her purse, and she never saw me coming.

There's a little matter of personal security we need to discuss after tonight, pretty face.

But that could wait.

My gloved hand closed around her throat in a threat to

her existence. I pressed her body face-first to the graffitied brick wall, letting her flesh dig into the hard, uneven edges as I dangled her a good foot and a half off the ground, and slammed my hips against her ass, letting her feel the pent-up energy that had doused me in arousal for too long.

“Knox?” She wheezed in my grip, failing at my forearms, but I’d left those covered with a soft cotton tee I’d just bought, leaving her with little to go with except for my height. Her hands contacted the gloves. I waited for a long moment while she felt around, her touch becoming frantic as she searched for some familiar aspect or key to my identity. “Knox?” she whispered, her voice a whole lot less certain this time.

I grinned and nipped the crook of her neck, earning a high-pitched squeal that shot blood straight to my cock and lit my system with adrenaline.

At the end of the alley, Cade turned the music up and sang louder.

She wriggled, then kicked, fighting for her life as I pulled her back into my body and wrapped an arm around her waist. Muffled sounds slipped from her throat with the little air I allowed her as she struggled, wasting energy and oxygen in her escape attempt.

Counting the steps and breaths in my head so she’d run to empty but not out of what she needed, I angled her body away from any part of me that she could damage and hefted her into the waiting van.

Josie tumbled into the space, banging her elbows on the spongy second-hand mattress I’d left for her to land on. Cade pulled away from the curb as I slammed the door shut, leaving us in a filtered haze until he pulled up a custom divider that blocked all sound and light from the driver’s area.

“Stop, please. Knox?” she whispered, backing up to the wall and searching the area with her hands at the same time.

I’d intended to finish the scene at this point, but fuck, she was too damn cute and so much damn fun. I caught an

ankle and yanked her toward me, letting my body weight settle on hers.

She stilled, then reached for my face, her trembling fingertips seeking out familiar features. “Knox?”

I kissed her hard, rough, and demanding. Her body went rigid until I slid my tongue into her mouth. Then she sighed a welcome, kissing me back, her hands twining behind my neck.

“None of that,” I snapped, not ready to let go of the little morsel I’d put too much effort into capturing, if only for a moment. Her exams started next week, but I’d steal an hour of her time if necessary. “You don’t get to touch me.” In the darkness, I pinned her wrists above her head with my gloved hand and tore at her clothing with my other.

My mouth descended on her tight, budded nipple, sucking and nipping until she writhed beneath me, her legs open and her tight little body grinding against my engorged cock. “You really are a little slut for this, aren’t you?” I growled against her mouth, kissing her everywhere but where she wanted me.

I wrenched her skirt up, tearing the form-fitting material, and slid my fingers into her molten pussy. Her legs tried to close around my hand, but I shoved her knees wide with mine and teased her for a long minute until her fighting ceased.

“Definitely a sweet little slut,” I murmured against her mouth, sliding my fingers across her lips and kissing her so she had to taste herself.

She moaned, keeping her hands above her head without being asked, and licked my lips clean of her scent. “Just for you,” she whimpered.

I groaned and tore at my pants, desperate to be inside her. Lifting one slim leg over my shoulder, I thrust straight into her, arching over her body in a primal claim.

Her cries ripped at my heart, and I fell deeper for the girl who loved me for my kink but proved she wanted to be

part of my life in every way in such a short time. I moved faster with her, waiting until she clenched tight around me to lose myself in her, pressing my mouth to hers, then the collar I'd given her.

"I love you, Knox," she whimpered, her voice muffled against my chest as I rolled her on top of me, not caring about the fluids coating us both.

"You'd better. Cause I'm not letting you go any time soon, pretty face."

"You mean it?" She snuggled deeper.

I grinned into the darkness, catching her wrists in one gloved hand and tweaking her nipple with the other. "Oh, yes. I've got you for a good hour, then I'm taking your sweet little ass to a deserted warehouse and fucking you wide open there. Brought along a friend who I thought might help fulfill the fantasy of two men using you at once, huh?" Her little gasp and the rush of heat against my thigh told me I'd planned well. My cock agreed, hardening impossibly beneath her. "I love you too, Josie. Ride me," I grated, using her nipple as leverage.

My mind ran through the hour I had planned, spearing out into impossible options that I'd spend the next months obsessing over before I played out every fantasy she didn't know she had. Then I'd take her home, clean and wash her, and work the knots from her body until she passed out, languid and boneless on me. Maybe sort out something for breakfast.

What could I say? I was a hopeless romantic, and Josie was the type of sub worth spoiling every day for the rest of my life, providing she put up with endless orgasms and a few dark moments.

A few very dark moments, and maybe a Christmas treat at the end of the year if she stayed on my naughty list. Which reminded me...

"Happy one-month anniversary, Josie."

She answered me with a shuddering rock of her hips and a cry as she tumbled into delirium again.

The End

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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

DARKEST DESIRES

Club Fray, 1

Raven Hush

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Sample Chapter

Enota

Eagle. Frankenstein. Jason. Another Jason. Fuck, had there been a sale on ski masks? *Hi, Freddie.* I waved as the shifter scraped costume claws delicately across my skin in a façade of delight and torment.

His anonymous touch offered everything I wanted and couldn't take.

“Come play with me, fruit bat,” he mouthed behind his makeup.

I shook my head, smiling flirtatiously, harmlessly, though my mini-beast squawked on the inside, all too ready to come out and play. Zooming around the high ceiling of the club or hanging upside down at the reception desk were my daytime activities.

At night, Rafe required my human form where I could help support club management. It also protected me. A fruit bat the length of a man's forearm had stuff-all self-defense tactics against some of our apex predator shifters who scented fear and arousal for their personal brand of fun.

The regulars knew not to push me, no matter how often one of them hit me up to play for a night session, knowing my preferences. I just ... couldn't. Covering the mood slip, I smiled and waved, brandishing my front desk stamp collection and channeling my favorite cartoon penguins.

My snake tattoo, a full sleeve that ran the length of my arm with the fangs curving over my pointer and thumb, got a lot of attention from the endless stream of costumed party-goers. Fray at peak hour on any given night was busy. Fray on Halloween on a Trick-or-Freak-themed night that brought a swag of brand-new patrons into the regular community was a madhouse.

The BDSM shifter club had rarely been so full. Apparently Killian's theme was a hit. The floor manager circulated among guests, dealing with Dommies and masters, and ensuring the odd bratty sub acting out stayed safe.

I'd do anything to find a good Dom, and Fray's owner, Rafe Astor, knew it.

A year ago, I entered his club and offered him my free hours—all of them—and a scrap of twisted lace. After listening to my story and ensuring I fit into the community he'd built to protect the local shifter community and provide an outlet for their specific needs, he gave me a job and took the collar.

The job, I enjoyed. The collar got locked away.

Waving to a few more regulars in party attire, I studiously ignored the cursed *Room 3* key that dangled on the master board above my head and kept an eye out for Killian or Rafe, should the owner and manager need anything.

A Dom himself, I trusted Rafe from his reputation and a friendly introduction to find a suitable match for me when I'd been so broken I couldn't recognize a decent Dom if I tripped over one in the middle of the street.

So, I sat at the reception desk on Halloween, stamping wrists and rating costumes in an increasingly harsh scale that existed solely inside my head.

"Next," called one of the Roo bouncers. A Red winked at me around the door and tossed his next victim inside.

A tall, white boy with a swath of sandy blond hair dressed as The Man In Black smiled at me beneath his mask and held out his arm.

I didn't smile back.

The moment he walked into the club, I knew something was wrong.

Human.

He wasn't a shifter, which meant he had no business being inside Fray, party night or not.

I caught his wrist out of a long-born habit, but my stamp hovered over his skin. Dark eyes burned twin pinpoints into my soul as I cleared my throat.

"You know what sort of a club this is?"

"A friend directed me here. I'm always up for a bit of kink."

"Mmm. Of course, you are." I closed my eyes and offered a non-committal hum, searching for the best way to tell the poor sucker that the Roo shifter on the door had let him in for a night of horrors when he figured out we weren't all human.

Even Rafe made a rare show tonight, circling the tall ceiling over the bar, his wedge-tailed eagle wings spread wide. His cry echoed over the music in a haunting tone.

"Cool place." The guy tried again, offering a disarming grin, but his eyes were watchful, waiting for me to let him in.

Not gonna happen, tall punk.

Even if he was a bit of a cute punk, rocking a boyish-come-business vibe.

"Okay, look. You probably don't fit in here." I had no time for the security shifter's bullshittery.

"Tonight?" He looked down at himself, running his hands self-consciously over the black material.

Never.

"No, that outfit is all right. Kinda cool, actually, for the retro geeks who loved *Princess Bride*. It's just—"

"Oh. You think I'm too straight."

“Ah—” I was fast running out of options and ways to get rid of the dude. Glancing up at the single key for room three, the room I fucking hated with every fiber of my being, I grabbed the glinting metal, steeled myself, and threw him a tight smile. “Right. You’re coming with me.”

“Whoa, honey. I like to choose my partners.”

His use of the plural gave me pause. Maybe he fit better than I thought. Still, the sexy side of Fray was only one half of who and what the shifter club represented, and *that* bit was the part I worried about.

“I’m trying to keep you safe,” I grumbled, scooting off my stool. My boots hit the floor with a heavy thud, but I didn’t miss his gaze track over my fishnets or the short lace and green leather miniskirt that matched my tats.

“Safe from what?” He laughed. Actually laughed.

Fucking numpty.

“From all the monsters in the club.” I flashed him my teeth in a bared grin.

His smile disappeared as he sobered and assessed me with new eyes. “All right.”

“That’s it?” I rolled my eyes and grabbed his hand, charging through the already crowded space. “This way.”

“As you wish.” His hand curled around mine in a firm, comfortable grip, but he didn’t slow me down or try to pull me up.

Fighting the urge to roll my eyes or fangirl at his quote—I wasn’t sure which came first—I wound my way around patrons already well into the swing of a Halloween party almost guaranteed to become a general fuckfest in the next hour or less.

Maybe getting him off the main floor should be a rush job, instead.

Catching Killian, the floor manager’s eye, I waved the key in the air with the number clearly visible in his direction and jerked my head backward.

Killian nodded and half-froze when he saw the non-furry that followed me. His brow dipped in a deep *V* that suited his mix of gray and dark hair. The club manager often paired his waistcoats and three-piece suits to his mood, and tonight, black covered him head-to-toe, highlighted with a hint of silver.

He mouthed, “What the actual fuck is he doing in here?” as I passed.

I shook my head, conscious of the tall man at my back, letting my befuddled expression speak for itself.

Killian’s eyes were thoughtful as he watched me. Trying not to think too hard, I shook off a seed of doubt as I hit the stairs at a run, trotting down them and bringing my baggage along with me. Had I been wrong to drag him downstairs?

My stray human said he had a penchant for kink, so nothing in a bare dungeon room with some sex furniture should scare him, right?

No more than it does me.

I hated room three for the things done to me there a long time ago, before I started working for Rafe, when the shifter community didn’t have a champion. Back then I’d been the little freak bat girl, all goth and hiding.

Now, I still had no idea about myself or what I wanted. Stability, maybe. Boring domesticity and a happy home, seeing as I’d never had one before.

Okay, so a happy home with me on a leash and a master I wanted to crawl for. How fucked up my head had become was a testament to the fact the lacy collar I’d given Rafe for safe keeping hadn’t been seen in over a year.

“This one’s us.” I slipped the key in the lock, fighting back the urge to puke.

It turned easily under my hand. I’d be inside for less than five minutes before I could lock him in—*who is he? I don’t even know his name*—my Man in Black, for now, and head back upstairs.

One of the boys could come and unlock the door when we'd identified a safe escape route to get our pet human back to the street level unaccosted by all things with puppy dog tails that went bump in the night.

I pushed the door open. "What's your name?" I asked over my shoulder without looking.

"Mason. Mace."

I imagined him holding out a hand to my back but didn't look to check as I shoed him into the dungeon room, ignoring the timer lightbox bolted to the wall inside the entry. We wouldn't need that tonight. "All right, Mace. Here's what's going to happen—"

"Nice," he commented from somewhere behind me, interrupting my train of thought.

My concentration scattered, and I returned to the reason I'd brought him downstairs. "What is?" I peered into the hallway, checking both sides, but no one hung around, fortunately. Feeling around, I left the key on a custom bench all the rooms shared. Mostly so guests couldn't lock themselves in, unless that was a part of their game.

"The setup. It's very clean. Lots of options." His disembodied voice continued from the far side of the room.

"Yeah, I suppose." Could I run for it? Lock him—*Mace*—in, throw the key at Killian, and be done? Go back to my safe job for the evening and away from the fixed whipping post that made its presence known by boring a solid hole in my back?

"You been in here before with someone?" His voice stayed soft and casual.

Too casual.

"Look, I didn't bring you down here for a quickie session—" I spun to face him, the door closing behind me as my hand rose to cover my mouth.

Mace rubbed his shoulder blades across the tall, fixed column of torture as though it were a scratching post.

Beneath the bright lights the dungeon afforded, I could study his boyish flop of brown hair that hung over his mask, the arrogant smile his archer's bow lips offered as I watched him. But his eyes—that was where I got lost, let myself be distracted from my pinnacle of fear.

They were assessing, a deep brown, almost black. Not cold, but filled with a degree of passion that roiled beneath the surface. Matched to the hard set of his strong jaw in an otherwise friendly face, I knew he'd be a tough lover, demanding and unforgiving, if the mood struck him.

His body filled the black pajama-like suit with ease, but no excess bumps made an appearance. The cloth that strained across his shoulders spoke of muscle tone and acquired strength.

My inner fruit bat screamed in abject horror and tried to bust through my skin. I agreed with the concept, but there was nowhere to go. While creating an atmosphere of fear was a regular Halloween tactic, it wasn't what I had in mind in an enclosed space, even for a few minutes.

That, paired with Mace rubbing his itch out on the whipping post, doused me in twin buckets of ice and fire all at once, and I couldn't take my eyes off him. Part of me wanted to see how hard he could be, or if the softer, boyish side was included in the playful part of his nature.

The other half needed to run for the hills because of that damn thing in the middle of the room. Blessedly, he stood between me and it, but my hand hit the handle to the dungeon door nonetheless, pressing down way too hard in my desperation to escape.

The handle never gave.

I twisted, blinking at it, and checked the light box next to the key. Its little red light proved it useless. I must have bumped the timer on the outside earlier, and now I was locked in with him ... and that thing.

Fear seeped into my bones, filling them with heavy shards of ice. This wasn't how I intended my Halloween to go

at all.

End of sample chapter

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