

FROM USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BECCA JAMESON



*Where Alphas
Dominate*
A Collection of Short Stories

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INTRODUCTION

Where Aphas Dominate is a collection of short stories. I've included six novellas from several of my genres—BDSM, paranormal, military, and ménage. Most of these novellas are connected to one of my series—Club Zodiac, Canyon Springs, and The Underground. The last story, a ménage, is a stand-alone novella. Most of these novellas were previously released in some form, but I've gathered them all together so they aren't sitting around in my computer collecting dust. They wanted out! They wanted to be enjoyed! So, please enjoy them.

LINCOLN'S DEBUT



A CLUB ZODIAC PREQUEL

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CHAPTER 1



The day of Lincoln's 18th birthday should have been as uneventful as every other day of his life. No one in the underground club he frequented would even know it was his birthday. After all, he'd been coming to this club in Miami for almost a year. And lying about his age.

Most likely not a single person cared how old he was. The club certainly wasn't on the up and up. He'd never shown anyone ID. He'd simply proclaimed to be eighteen and wormed his way into the world of BDSM.

In his mind, today was important, however, especially because he'd spent the morning at the army recruitment office. In a few months he would graduate from high school and go straight to boot camp.

Lincoln had dreams, and the only way to ensure he reached his goals was to serve his country first. When he got out, his ticket to a better life would begin with college tuition.

Yep. Tonight he was a man, even if not a soul would be aware and nothing out of the ordinary would happen.

As he scanned the dimly lit, crowded room, a hand landed on his shoulder. He turned his head to find his mentor, Master Christopher, smiling down at him. The man was only an inch shorter than Lincoln's six three. Though he was in his sixties,

he was fit and took good care of himself. The only sign he was growing older was his nearly white hair. “You look so serious. Everything okay?”

Lincoln rubbed a hand down his face as if he could wipe away whatever telltale expression Master Christopher was so astutely reading. “Everything’s fine.”

Christopher lifted an eyebrow and smirked. “Ready to go it alone tonight?”

Lincoln flinched. “Are you serious?” He’d been a sort of apprentice under Master Christopher for months. Master Christopher was a well-known sadist in the BDSM world. People from all over knew his reputation and came to him when they craved the darker side of BDSM. Masochists worshipped his skill. Even submissives who didn’t ordinarily crave the sting of a whip or the burn of a well-placed paddle booked scenes with Master Christopher for the experience alone.

And Lincoln was fortunate enough to have caught the older man’s eye. After several weeks of watching Master Christopher perform, mesmerized, Lincoln was approached by the well-known sadist who offered to give him some tips. The two of them fell into a comfortable friendship and worked together about once a week when Lincoln could find the time to make it to the club.

“Yep. I’m double booked,” Master Christopher stated. “I was thinking you could take Leslie. You’ve scened with her before.”

Yeah. Under your guidance. Was he ready for that?

Christopher slapped him on the shoulder. “You’re ready. I know you are. I already spoke to Leslie. She’s good with it.”

Lincoln stared at his mentor, doubt seeping in. He'd topped Leslie before several times, but not alone. He'd also been practicing with a flogger for months. He couldn't deny he was prepared, but he still hesitated. There definitely wasn't anyone around who had his level of experience on their eighteenth birthday.

He figured Leslie was about thirty. She was easy-going and friendly every time Lincoln worked with her. She was also an excellent submissive with masochistic tendencies, and Lincoln had never known her to have her own Dom. She usually came to the club alone, scened with Master Christopher or one of the other Doms, and left alone.

She was also stepping up behind Master Christopher at that very moment.

With a smile, she leaned around Master Christopher's arm and met Lincoln's gaze. "Oh good, you're here. I heard you might have time available for me tonight? Is that true?" Her eyes were bright with hope. Her long dark hair was braided down her back, and she wore a lacey black corset that pushed her ample breasts high on her chest.

Lincoln blinked at her, wondering what alternative universe he had stepped in where his mentor and this submissive both had the utmost faith in his abilities. Straightening his spine, he shook his doubts from his mind and rubbed his hands together. "Sure. Whatever time works for you is fine."

Her smile spread wider. "Great. I'm ready whenever you are."

Lincoln glanced around. "I'll see if there's an apparatus available and come find you."

“Looking forward to it.” Leslie patted Master Christopher’s arm and turned around to head deeper into the club. Located in the basement of a strip mall under a barber shop and a health-food store, the club wasn’t a registered business but rather a privately owned property that was rented by a group of people in the lifestyle who had been using the basement for this purpose for several years. It wasn’t illegal, but it was under the radar.

“I already booked the corner bench for you, and you can borrow a pair of my floggers. Your time slot is in half an hour.”

Lincoln smirked as he shook his head. “How confident of you.”

Master Christopher lifted his brows. “I suspected you would be here tonight, and *you* should be the confident one. I’ve trained you well. Time to put your knowledge to use.”

CHAPTER 2



When Leslie came to Lincoln a half an hour later, she did so with a completely different disposition. Her head was bowed, her expression serious. “Sir,” she greeted him.

Lincoln flinched before reminding himself she was speaking to him. He was in charge of this scene. She would speak to him with the level of authority he had earned from months of tutelage. The *Sir* was directed at him. He needed to own it and take charge.

Leslie’s braid fell over one shoulder as she dipped her head farther. She also pulled her shoulders back and clasped her hands behind her back.

Lincoln circled behind her, feigning an interest in examining her when the truth was he was still wrapping his head around what was about to occur. He danced his fingers across her shoulder as he returned to face her. “I thought you might be interested in a flogging tonight.”

“Yes, Sir. That would be wonderful, Sir.”

“Good. Let’s get you into position.” He stroked his fingers down her arm and then stepped toward the adjustable bench that he had moments ago arranged to suit his plans. “Kneel please, and then lean forward, setting your elbows on the upper pads.”

This particular bench was set up so Lincoln could easily flog his submissive's back, butt, and thighs. Instead of having her lying flat on her belly, she would be at an angle, tipped forward, but not fully prone.

"Yes, Sir." She did as instructed, taking a few breaths as she positioned herself. She turned her head to one side and rested her cheek on the soft chocolate leather.

Lincoln had flogged her several times in the past. There was no reason for him to be nervous. Leslie didn't appear to be concerned. Her long braid fell over one shoulder, exposing her shoulder blades completely. The skirt she wore was short, black, and stretchy. It barely covered her shapely butt. Her thighs and the rest of her legs were completely exposed below the hem, and she was barefoot.

He would be able to judge the force of his strikes easily by watching how pink the skin of her shoulder blades and thighs got.

His heart was racing, and he took several silent deep breaths to calm himself. *You've got this. You've done it plenty of times. Just because Master Christopher isn't standing two feet away doesn't mean you don't have the skills to flog a submissive.* Hell, Lincoln was better trained than most of the so-called Doms who came into the club.

Closing the space between him and Leslie, Lincoln once again stroked the smooth skin of her shoulder. "Safewords?"

"Red and yellow, Sir."

"Good." He removed his hand from her back and picked up the pair of black supple floggers Master Christopher had loaned him. They felt natural in Lincoln's palms, their weight familiar as he gripped them.

When he stepped behind Leslie, he began to swing the floggers through the air in a slow figure-eight motion, not yet touching her skin. He quickly centered himself with the universe as he watched her shoulders rise and fall gently with each breath.

This was his world. He was born to dominate. He'd known it from the first moment he'd stepped into this secret club, and the feeling had only grown over the months.

Lincoln was a sadist. Flogging Leslie would give him tremendous satisfaction. Watching her relax and melt into the bench as he took her stress away would empower him.

And so he began, light at first, the swish of the floggers landing rhythmically across her shoulder blades putting him in his zone. The noises of the busy club behind him disappeared as he focused on his submissive, gauging where she was mentally through every move she made—the way her mouth fell open, the soft sighs, her relaxed face, the fall of her shoulders. Even the flex of her bare feet relaxed as he increased the pressure and gradually worked his way down her back and onto her butt and thighs.

As her skin pinkened, he continued, glancing at her face every so often to make sure her expression was still blissful. If she were anyone else, he would stop and touch base with her, whisper in her ear to ensure she was okay. But he knew Leslie well enough to assess her expression alone.

Lincoln continued to swing the two floggers in a perfect figure eight, his arms moving from memory until the pink glow on her thighs and back was the exact shade he liked to see. And then he eased back gradually, the soft thud of the leather landing with less pressure for the last minute or two.

When he finally set the floggers aside and crouched next to Leslie to bring his face close to hers, she had an easy smile on her face. “That was amazing, Sir,” she whispered, her eyes opening to small slits. “Thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome. I’m glad you enjoyed it.” He stood, still speaking. “Let me help you to one of the couches and get you a bottle of water.” The proper use of a flogger wasn’t the only thing Master Christopher had taught him. Lincoln was well-educated on aftercare too.

He helped Leslie to her feet, clasping her biceps with both hands when she swayed, and then walked her over to a loveseat and settled her in the corner. As she drew her legs up under herself, he covered her with a blanket and then grabbed a bottle of water from the end table.

“Here. Drink this.” He kneeled in front of her, his hand on her thigh. He could feel the heat of her skin even through the blanket.

Leslie took the water with a shaky hand and sipped it before meeting his gaze. “You’re a very good Dom. Some woman is going to be lucky to snag you for her own one day.” She smiled, a blush forming on her cheeks.

Lincoln shrugged. “Not looking for a woman right now.”

“You’re young. Understandable. But some day...” She sighed as she leaned her head on the arm of the couch. “If I were about ten years younger, I would take you home and never let you go.”

He chuckled, knowing she was only making conversation. She was pretty, and he liked her, but he wasn’t interested in her sexually. Surely she realized that.

“Anyway,” she continued. “Thanks for topping me. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I heard Master Steven is going to be doing a demonstration with his own submissive later. If you’ve never seen them perform together, you don’t want to miss it.”

Lincoln glanced around. He hadn’t realized Master Steven was at the club that night. Leslie was right. He enjoyed watching the dark-skinned Dom scene with any woman, but it would be even more mesmerizing to watch him with Theresa, his own bottom. Lincoln had only met Theresa a few times. She occasionally accompanied her Dom, but she rarely scened in public with him.

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll be sure to catch their scene.”

Leslie reached out a hand and cupped Lincoln’s jaw gently, her expression becoming far more serious. “Stay true to yourself, Lincoln. You have a gift. When you combine raw talent with equal parts desire, you get a piece of art. It’s rare. Don’t take it for granted.”

Stunned by her words, he couldn’t respond. Instead he set his hand over hers and slid her palm around to his lips. He kissed her gently while finding his voice. “Thank you. That means the world to me.”

CHAPTER 3



An hour later, Lincoln found himself leaning against the wall, his gaze locked on the amazing couple preparing to perform in front of him. Lincoln knew from the whisperings of nearly every woman he'd ever seen in this club that Master Steven was a god in most of their eyes. Hell, there were several men who admired his physique and poise too.

Lincoln wasn't sure if Master Steven was fully African American or perhaps half Hispanic or something else, but the combination apparently served him well. The two women next to Lincoln were whispering about the sexy shade of his skin and what they would do for the opportunity to run their hands over his pecs.

Suddenly, Master Christopher appeared at Lincoln's side. "How'd it go with Leslie?"

"Great. I think she was pleased."

"I'm sure she was. You trained with the best." He winked and then turned his gaze toward the scene unfolding in front of them. "They're gorgeous together, aren't they?"

Lincoln nodded. In contrast to Steven's darker skin, Theresa had the palest white complexion and natural blond hair. Together, they did indeed make heads turn.

With a hand on the nape of Theresa's neck, Master Steven guided her toward a St. Andrew's cross. After angling her to face the giant wooden X, he reached for the hem of her sheer dress and drew it over her head.

Left completely naked, Theresa fisted her hands at her sides, giving the impression she wasn't completely comfortable with her nudity. She was, however, smoking hot. And the fact that she so obediently did as she was told, even if it wasn't her first choice, stirred something deep inside Lincoln.

As he watched Master Steven circle her several times, whispering in her ears and stroking her skin, Lincoln found himself aroused. The sensation was foreign to him in this setting. He knew many people in the lifestyle got sexual gratification from dominating and/or submitting, but he hadn't reacted this strongly to a scene himself.

At Master Steven's guidance, Theresa pulled her shoulders back and then lifted her hands to clasp them behind her head. Her chest rose, her amazing tits high, her pink nipples swollen.

It wasn't as though Lincoln had never seen a naked woman before. He saw lots of them in the club. It happened all the time. It was common for both men and woman to perform in the nude. But their lack of clothing didn't usually grab his attention so thoroughly.

Most people at the club were ordinary everyday people. Some were attractive enough, but Lincoln didn't often do a double take anymore. Maybe in the early days months ago when he'd first started coming, he'd been shocked and stared a few times, but then he found himself far more interested in the tricks of the trade than naked bodies and turned his attention to learning everything he could about sadism.

Theresa, however, was another story. It wasn't just that her body was attractive enough to make him lick his lips. It was more than that. It was the entire package. It was the way she submitted to her Dom. The way she moved as he instructed. The way she exposed herself for everyone to watch even if it might be out of her comfort zone.

She was gorgeous, and Lincoln wasn't going to miss a moment of their scene. He was half aware of Master Christopher still standing next to him, but he didn't care anymore. If his mentor spoke to him, he would be disappointed in the lack of response.

When Master Steven stepped behind Theresa, he slid his hands down her porcelain skin, stopping to cup her breasts, weigh them, and give them a brief squeeze.

Theresa rose onto her tiptoes, a gasp escaping her lips.

Whatever Master Steven said to her next made her right herself until she once again stood flat-footed, her gaze toward the floor, her elbows pulled back.

"Good girl," her Dom said loud enough for Lincoln to hear. And then he pinched her nipples.

This time Theresa held steady, though her body stiffened.

Master Steven's hands slid down to her hips next and he urged her forward until she stood right against the cross. When her Dom wrapped his fingers around her wrists and tugged, she let him pull her hands up and flattened them against the smooth wood as high as she could reach.

Moments later, Master Steven fastened a white Velcro cuff to her wrist and then secured her to the cross. He repeated the action on the other side.

Lincoln shuffled his weight from one foot to the other, trying not to be too obvious. His dick was hard. Half the room surely had a boner. While he continued to watch, Master Steven squatted down behind Theresa and tapped her ankles, encouraging her to separate them.

The moment she spread her feet wide enough for her Dom to secure her ankles to the cross in the same fashion as her wrists, Lincoln held his breath. He couldn't specifically see her pussy of course, but knowing it was spread open, leaving her so vulnerable, sent a chill down his spine.

Leslie's words from earlier came back to him. *Some woman is going to be lucky to snag you for her own one day.* If he ever found a woman who completed him like Theresa apparently did Master Steven, he would never let her go.

But Lincoln was a sharp guy. He knew the chances of ever finding the perfect match for him were slim. The months leading up to his eighteenth birthday had solidified several things in his mind. He was without a doubt a sadist. He enjoyed it so much that he disassociated his sexual needs when he performed.

Even if he did occasionally find the woman he was topping to be more attractive than usual, he tuned out that response in order to concentrate on his skill. If he let himself get lured down a different path than the controlled environment where he focused solely on inflicting just the right amount of pain to his submissive, he would run the risk of injuring her.

Shaking ridiculous thoughts of combining sex with sadism, he focused once again on Theresa's smooth skin and the way she swayed from side to side, squirming as Master Steven stroked up and down her spine with a feather.

Fuck, she was sexy.

Lincoln swallowed, reminding himself it didn't matter how he reacted to Theresa's performance. He wasn't the one who needed to concentrate right now. No matter how stiff Lincoln's cock got, his only concern would be hoping he didn't actually come watching. *That* would be embarrassing.

It was unnerving to find himself so aroused by this scene. So unlike him. Unprofessional in a way. And he was also jealous. Jealous of what these two had together. The chemistry. The magnetism. They clearly had a bond that superseded words because with a slight tap to any part of Theresa's body, she obediently followed directions.

Even though Lincoln couldn't imagine ever having this kind of bond with a woman, damn, it was fucking hot to watch.

A swat to Theresa's bottom made her yelp and lift onto her toes again. The pink print of Master Steven's palm was captivating. When a second spank landed on her thigh, she arched her back forward.

Master Steven didn't seem to care that his submissive was wiggly. He let her squirm all she wanted while he rained a series of swats to her ass and thighs. Her skin grew pinker and more attractive by the minute. The sway of her body was better than any pole dancer. She was indeed a work of art.

Suddenly, Master Steven stepped up to her side, flattened his palm on her belly, and thrust his other hand between her legs from behind. It wasn't hard to imagine that his fingers had entered her because she screamed out, her body convulsing in his grip as he pumped his hand between her legs.

Lincoln stood frozen in his spot, not even blinking.

Never in his life had he witnessed anything so raw and pure. The air was thick with sex. It hung in the room like fog as Theresa's orgasm made him need to adjust his dick.

"Damn," Master Christopher whispered from next to Lincoln. "I absolutely never get tired of watching those two perform."

Lincoln's eyes were dry from staring. A twinge of sadness seeped into him. His life would be perfect if he ever had that kind of magnetism with a woman. It would bring him to his knees to make a woman come like that and watch her completely fall apart at his hands.

He couldn't reconcile the desire with the depth of his sadistic tastes, but it would be so fucking awesome if it ever came to pass.

There were differences between Master Steven and Lincoln that couldn't be ignored. Master Steven was not a sadist. He sometimes spanked his submissives, but he was more skilled with ropes and other forms of bondage. It wasn't uncommon for his submissive to moan around the need for release, even women who were not Theresa.

That kind of arrangement didn't require as much concentration. Well, perhaps Master Steven did pay close attention to the details of his scenes, but he wasn't as likely to harm a submissive when his focus was on teasing her with a feather rather than aiming at her bottom with a whip.

Lincoln had known from the start that the best sadists who had honed their skills to perfection couldn't and wouldn't let anything—especially sex—get between them and their scene. To do so could harm the recipient. And safety was his number one priority.

With an audible sigh, Lincoln turned toward his mentor. “They are breathtaking. You’re not kidding.”

Master Christopher was eyeing Lincoln closely. “You’ll have that someday.”

“Have what? A submissive?” He shook his head. “I don’t think there’s a woman alive who would ever mesh with my needs.”

“There is. Have faith.” Master Christopher set a hand on Lincoln’s shoulder. “You’ll meet her when you least expect it, and she’ll bring you to your knees.”

Lincoln rolled his eyes and glanced at his watch. “I should get going. It’s late.”

Master Christopher walked him to the door, still talking. “You did great tonight. I’m proud of you. I know you’ll be leaving in a few months for boot camp, but I hope you intend to continue to come into the club when you’re on leave.”

Lincoln stopped walking when they reached the entrance and faced his mentor. “Of course. You know I’ll always be back.”

Master Christopher nodded. “I hope so. You’re a natural. So much talent.”

Lincoln’s throat clogged at the kind words. He glanced away and then took a breath. Finally, he reached for the door, filled with emotion and still fighting the stiffest hardon of his life.

As soon as he stepped outside into the balmy Miami evening, Master Christopher called out again, “Hey, kid.”

“Yeah?” He glanced back to face his mentor.

“Happy birthday.”

I hope you've enjoyed Lincoln's Debut. Many years will pass before he finally meets his perfect submissive. You can read his happily ever after in *Training Sasha*, book one of the Club Zodiac series.

ROSES AND THORNS



A CLUB ZODIAC NOVELLA

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CHAPTER 1



“Come on. We’re going out.”

Ella lifted her gaze from where she sat in the corner of her couch with her legs tucked under her. Her plan for the evening had been to drink wine with her best friend, Macy, and watch a chick flick.

Macy rose from the other end of the couch and clapped her hands together. “Let’s go.”

“Go where? We’re about to watch a movie.” Ella pointed at the television.

Macy shook her head. “Nope. Change of plans. You’ve been moping around for two months since you broke up with Mark. It’s time to move on. We’re going to a club.” She stepped between Ella and the television, hands on her hips.

Ella winced. “I’m not ready yet.”

Macy leaned forward. “I’ll remind you that *you* broke up with Mark. Not the other way around. He should be the one moping. Not you.”

Ella sighed. “Just because I broke up with him doesn’t mean I’m not hurting. He was a good guy. He had a steady job. Made good money. Treated me like a queen. He was the whole package.” Ella untangled her legs and sat up straighter.

“Do you think I made a mistake?” She chewed on her bottom lip.

Macy shook her head rapidly. “Nope. Don’t go there. Let me also remind you there was no spark. He was boring and too vanilla for even a nun.”

Ella’s shoulders drooped. Macy was right. But this had become a pattern for Ella. Dating boring men and not feeling enough of a spark for them to warrant continuing the relationship. If she didn’t know better, she would believe that was how all relationships were. Tiresome. Ordinary. Dull.

But she *did* know better. Because she’d been involved with a man who made her body hum and her heart beat faster every time she was with him. Robert Suthers. She’d dated him for three months ten years ago. She’d been young, only twenty-three at the time, but she’d known.

Apparently Robert hadn’t known, however, because he broke up with her and walked away. She’d never seen him again. She also hadn’t forgotten him for even a day. And the worst part was that he’d ruined her for other men because no one ever measured up to him.

No matter how hard she tried to shake the memories, she found herself comparing every man she dated to Robert. Mark had been the first man she’d forced herself to work harder for. On paper, he was perfect. She’d known he was serious about her from the first date. He was five years older. Handsome. Hardworking. Owned his own home. Polite. Sexy.

And yet...

“Ella,” Macy snapped, reaching out with one hand. “Let’s go. I mean it.”

Ella let Macy pull her to standing. Maybe her friend was right. Maybe she needed to find yet another man. Surely someone out there would eventually make her hands sweat and her sex come to life. She just needed to meet him.

CHAPTER 2



“When you said, ‘let’s go to a club,’ I assumed you meant a bar. Dancing. Drinking. Laughing.” Ella’s eyes were wide, and she swallowed over the lump in her throat as Macy led her into the main room of Roses and Thorns.

Macy grabbed her hand and dragged her farther inside. “I knew if I told you where we were going, you would balk,” she whispered.

“You would have been right. This isn’t my scene.” Ella glanced around the dimly lit room. There were only about a dozen people milling around. “No one is even here,” she pointed out.

“That’s because it’s early. They’ll show up. Roses and Thorns doesn’t really get crowded until almost midnight.”

Ella jerked her gaze from the assortment of fetish equipment she knew nothing about and back to her friend. “It’s already ten. I’m usually in bed by now. No way am I staying here that late. And besides, you know I’m not into fetish play.”

Macy rounded to face Ella, blocking her view of the room they’d barely entered. “Look, you’ve dated a series of vanilla men for years. One after the other. None of them rocked your world. Give something different a chance. You might be surprised.”

Ella narrowed her gaze. “There is no way I’m going to participate in anything in this club, Macy.”

Macy smiled. “Not asking you to participate. Lots of people don’t. Just watch. Absorb. You can leave at any time, but will you give it a tiny chance first? You might feel titillated.”

Ella shuddered, wrapping her arms around her. Titillated? By bondage and whips? She glanced to the right as a woman began to remove her clothes as casually as if she were in her own bedroom. Granted, she hadn’t been wearing much to begin with.

Ella glanced down at her own modest black dress and pumps. She had thought they were going to a nice bar. Not a fetish club. She felt both overdressed and underdressed at the same time.

“Nobody cares what you’re wearing,” Macy said, reading her mind, or body language. Macy was also wearing black, but she’d chosen a short leather skirt and a tight-fitting halter top.

Ella had thought nothing of Macy’s outfit when they left the house. After all, her friend often wore more risqué clothing than Ella, and Ella was well aware that Macy belonged to more than one fetish club in Denver. She usually went to either Roses and Thorns or Club Zodiac a few nights each month, and she had begged Ella to join her a dozen times. This was the first time she’d tricked her into coming, however.

Ella rubbed her arms, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with the setting.

“Come on. Let’s wander around. I figured if we got here early, you wouldn’t be as overwhelmed.” Macy nodded over her shoulder.

Ella let her gaze roam back to the woman who was now naked and facing a cross of some sort.

Macy led her in that direction, leaning in to whisper in her ear. “That’s called a St. Andrew’s Cross. The woman’s name is Misty. She’s a submissive. The man who is going to do with scene with her is Master Jerry. He’s amazing with floggers.”

Ella flinched. *Floggers. Great.* “It seems strange to watch. Like we’re invading their privacy,” Ella whispered.

Macy smiled. “That’s the point. They enjoy being watched.”

“Why would anyone want to strip naked and get beaten in front of other people?” It was beyond Ella’s comprehension.

Macy giggled under the breath. “No one is going to get beaten. You’ll see. A flogging feels like a fantastic massage. I’ve submitted to Jerry several times. He’s amazing. Just watch.” Macy took Ella’s arm and hauled her closer.

Ella knew the rules. She’d filled out several forms as a guest before entering the main room with Macy. She could watch all she wanted as long as she didn’t interrupt the scene in any way. When they’d still been in the entryway going over the regulations, Ella had been nervous and leery, but secretly curious. Now that they were inside the club, she was even more anxious, but also more curious. Though she wouldn’t tell Macy that.

The tall, slender, dark-skinned man named Master Jerry stepped close to Misty’s back and set his hands on her hips. He whispered something in her ear that made her nod. Misty’s skin was pale and smooth. It was hard to imagine anyone striking her with anything. She had her dark blond hair pulled up in a messy bun on top of her head.

When Jerry ran his hands up her side and lifted her arms above her head, Ella found herself mesmerized. Misty whimpered as Jerry's fingers grazed the sides of her heavy breasts, and she shivered as he set her hands on two pegs above her head.

With her arms stretched wide and high like that, Misty's breasts lifted, leaving her more vulnerable, which Misty apparently felt as strongly as Ella because she squirmed.

Jerry's hands smoothed back down her body to her hips, steadying her while he continued to whisper in her ear.

Ella would give anything to know what he was saying. Instead, she was forced to imagine his words. Deep. Caressing. Soothing. Soft. Reassuring.

Where was she getting all this?

"Sexy, isn't it?" Macy asked quietly.

Ella didn't shift her gaze as she gave a subtle nod. It was indeed sexy. Nothing had happened yet, and already Ella felt more aware of her own sex. Her breasts felt heavy. Her nipples were tight. All from watching another woman undress and grab onto a giant wooden X. What the hell was wrong with her?

It had been so long since she'd felt this alive. Awake. Alert to her own body. No man had elicited this reaction from her in years. A decade. A lifetime.

No man since Robert.

CHAPTER 3



“Who’s the brunette in the main room with Macy?” Robert asked when he stopped by the front desk to check on his staff.

“Guest. Friend of hers. Don’t worry, she filled out all the required forms.” Lizette rolled her eyes even though she was smiling. “Have I ever let you down?”

Robert chuckled. “No. And I didn’t suggest you had this time either. I was simply asking.”

“I wouldn’t worry. She looked rather shell-shocked and skittish. I’m pretty sure Macy dragged her here. I doubt we’ll see her again.”

Robert nodded as he opened the folder in front of Lizette and glanced at the forms. For a moment, he froze, stunned speechless. His breathing halted. Ella Feldmann. No way. It wasn’t possible. He hadn’t seen her in ten years. Ten years and two months to be exact. And it was ridiculous that he knew that fact. But he did.

Ten years ago, he’d walked away from Ella, knowing she was probably the best thing that would ever happen to him. A ray of light. Hope. Inspiration. From the moment he’d met her, he’d known she was special. She’d been in law school with aspirations of saving the entire world.

He also knew she'd done well, graduating with honors and making a name for herself. She spent eight years working for one of Denver's most well-known firms, but she also donated a great deal of time to the community, doing pro bono work for the less fortunate.

He knew all of this because he followed her progress, obsessed with her accomplishments. It wasn't difficult. Her information was public on LinkedIn. Nevertheless, he felt like a bit of a stalker the way he secretly fist-pumped over her achievements.

He'd let her go, knowing he'd done the right thing. Knowing he'd saved her from a life she would never understand. Knowing she would be better off without him. Knowing he would forever mourn the loss.

And he had. He'd missed her often. No matter how many women he'd dated in her absence, no one had ever compared.

What the hell was she doing in his club?

Sweet. Innocent. Demure. Ella.

She hadn't been suited for BDSM. He'd known that from the moment he'd met her. He'd made every effort to stay away from her at first, failing over and over again. Drawn to her. Unable to stop himself from making one date after another.

She'd made him smile. She made everyone smile. She made people's lives seem fuller.

As the weeks turned into months, he'd even considered giving up BDSM for her. She'd known nothing about what he did for a living, and he refused to tell her more than necessary.

He hadn't lied. He'd simply left out a lot of the facts. Yes, he owned a club. That was a fact. He'd convinced himself that it wasn't really lying to let her believe it was more of a dance

club or a bar. Nor did he mention that he actually owned four clubs and one of them was in Denver.

He certainly hadn't told her they were fetish clubs.

When it became obvious that she was falling as hard for him as he was for her, he knew he had to break things off. He wasn't embarrassed about his chosen profession. Not even close. But he knew in his heart she would not understand. He didn't want to taint her with his preferences. And the last thing he wanted was to ever see a look of disdain in her eyes. Disdain he knew he would find if she ever found out he was a Dominant.

In the last few weeks of dating her, he'd considered over and over if he could walk away from the years of hard work he'd put into his clubs. But in the end, he'd known the sacrifice would be too much. BDSM was a part of him. An enormous part he couldn't deny. To do so would have changed who he was as a person.

So, he'd chosen the lifestyle and given up the woman.

Over the years, he'd questioned the logic of his decision many times. As he slowly made his way back onto the main floor of his Denver club, so many memories flooded his mind.

Even though he'd only spent three months with her ten years ago, she'd left an impression he would never forget. What were the chances he could have a second chance?

He knew her appearance in his club meant nothing. Even Lizette had said Ella was shocked and wide-eyed. She was simply a friend of Macy's. One who'd undoubtedly been dragged to his club for the experience.

Robert didn't know Macy well, but he found it interesting that she happened to be good enough friends with Ella to have

brought her to his club.

Hugging the darkest corner of the main room, Robert leaned against the wall and set his gaze on Ella's profile. Even if she happened to glance his direction, she would never see him in the shadows.

The area around the St. Andrew's Cross was well lit for the scene, which in turn cast a glow on the woman Robert hadn't seen in ten years.

She looked so damn good. The years had enhanced her beauty. At twenty-three, she'd still been in law school and not fully mature. The woman in front of him now was sophisticated. She wore a black dress that hugged her body perfectly and pumps he knew she could also wear in the courtroom. Her makeup was professional. Her thick dark hair was almost black and hung in long waves down her back. Longer than she'd worn it when he'd dated her.

Her stance made him smile. She looked like any number of people did on their first visit to a fetish club. He'd seen it a thousand times. Eyes wide. Legs pressed together. Arms crossed under her breasts. The corner of her bottom lip was tucked in between her teeth. A full pink lip he remembered well and would give anything to suck out from its current prison.

When Master Jerry slid his hands up and down Misty's body and then molded them to her taut bottom, Ella swallowed. Her face flushed, and she released that lip before more fully biting it again. Her fingers gripped her biceps tighter. Was she aroused? The signs were there.

For the first time since he'd learned of her arrival, Robert let his heart beat faster. His cock stiffened. *My God.* She was

so gorgeous. If there was any chance in the world she might be interested in BDSM...

For a moment, he wondered if he'd made a mistake all those years ago. What if he'd introduced her to his world? Would she have surprised him and found fetish life titillating? He would never know, and playing a game of *what-if* would do no good. No matter how she might react to what she was watching tonight, there was no guarantee she would have been interested or even remotely open to the possibilities ten years ago. People grew as they aged. Their minds opened. Twenty-three-year-old Ella would possibly hardly resemble this new older version.

When Ella released the grip she had on one arm and slid those dainty fingers up to cover her mouth, Robert inched along the wall to a spot where he could more fully see her face.

Macy leaned close to Ella's ear every few minutes, probably explaining what Jerry was doing. Ella nodded, but she never took her gaze off the scene. She didn't even flinch until Jerry picked up a pair of floggers and began to swing them in a wide arch through the air, making a figure eight of sorts as he approached Misty's back.

Robert only permitted himself the occasional glance at the scene itself, preferring to watch Ella's every reaction. She was still so pure in all the ways he remembered, wincing when the pair of floggers finally began to hit their mark—Misty's shoulders.

Macy said something. Ella nodded again, her own shoulders relaxing. Robert had little doubt Macy was explaining how amazing it felt to be struck with the soft

leather of the floggers, much like a massage and nothing like the pain Ella undoubtedly presumed.

When Misty moaned loud enough for everyone around to hear, her body swaying slightly forward, Ella's fingers spread over her lips. She stroked her chin with her thumb, making Robert wish he were the one stroking that chin and feeling those lips against his own.

"Sir?" the voice to his left interrupted.

He yanked his gaze from Ella to the woman approaching him. It was difficult to school his expression and not give off a vibe of annoyance. "Yes?"

"Do you mind if we use this equipment? I don't want to bother you. We can wait if you want." She pointed at the bench in front of him, the one he was standing behind as a slight barrier between himself and Ella.

He shoved off the wall and slid farther into the shadows, away from the object of his interest. "Of course. It's all yours. Sorry."

"You're sure?" the woman asked.

"Positive." Robert needed to extricate himself from this situation anyway, leave the room, regroup, consider his options.

Was he going to hide for the rest of the night and let Ella slip through his fingers after a decade of not seeing her, or was he going to approach her and test the waters?

It might kill him if he made contact and she turned him down.

On the other hand, he might never be able to forgive himself if he let her get away without at least making an effort.

CHAPTER 4



Ella couldn't deny that watching Misty get flogged was arousing. Her reaction to the scene shocked her. She had known Macy belonged to a few fetish clubs in the area, but every time Macy had encouraged Ella to join her, Ella had turned her friend down.

BDSM was not her thing. She didn't have a kinky bone in her body. Did she?

Now, she was confused. She still didn't fully understand why people were so intrigued by bondage and whips, but she could no longer ignore the fact that witnessing someone submit to another person had intrigued her. Maybe she was a voyeur.

"It's like a form of art," Macy stated. "Living art."

"Mmm." Macy's words made sense. Glancing around the room made Ella think of a gallery. An erotic gallery of living art on display. In the half hour she'd watched the flogging scene, several more people had arrived.

"What would you like to see next?" Macy asked. "How about Shibari?"

"What's Shibari?"

“Rope play. It’s even more artistic than flogging.” Macy tucked a hand in Ella’s elbow and gave a tug, hauling her farther into the main room where a woman was holding a long length of thick, deep purple rope. “That’s Mistress Kim. She’s very good with ropes,” Macy whispered.

Ella stared in amazement as another woman kneeled on a thick mat in front of Kim wearing a black thong and matching lace bra. Her brown hair was pulled up in a bun on top of her head, and her face was tipped to the floor. She had her hands clasped at the small of her back.

Mistress Kim was tall and slender. She had on black leggings and a black tank top, but bare feet. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her large breasts were high and full under the top. Ella couldn’t help but stare at her obvious nipples, knowing she would never have the courage to wear something like that.

Kim was dark-skinned with short-cropped hair in tight curls. Ella imagined she could easily be a partner in her law firm or a doctor or an accountant or something equally powerful and important by day. She carried herself with authority.

When Kim stepped into the other woman’s space and stroked her chin, encouraging her to tip her head back, Ella’s breath caught. Every move was suggestive and sensual.

With extreme practiced precision, the woman rose to her feet, keeping her hands behind her back and her heels spread apart on the mat.

Ella had no idea what to expect, but the slow sensuous dance surprised her as the woman stood perfectly still while Kim circled her, trailing her fingertips along the lighter skin of her submissive. Her belly, her arm, her shoulders. When Kim

crouched down in front of the woman and set her rope on the floor, Ella swallowed.

Kim set her palms on the other woman's calves and then smoothed them up and down her legs until she reached the woman's upper thighs. Suddenly, Kim lifted her gaze to face her submissive as she dragged her thumbs along the seam of the black thong.

The woman rose onto her toes and sucked in a breath. Kim chuckled, and then she grabbed her rope and rose to her feet once more.

"Sexy, isn't it?" Macy whispered.

"Yes." Ella's voice sounded far away. She never would have expected to be turned on by two women like this, let alone the possibility that one of them was about to be bound with that long length of rope. The anticipation was startling and intense.

"Hey, Macy." The voice to Ella's left made her shift her gaze to find Jerry smiling at the two of them. "Who's your guest?" He extended a hand. "I'm Jerry."

Ella took his hand in a firm shake. "Ella."

"I noticed you watching my flogging scene. You looked a little shell-shocked." He winked. "First time at the club?" His words were soothing. Gentle. Kind. He was simply being polite.

"Yes."

"It's hard to understand why anyone would enjoy being flogged until they've tried it themselves. I'd be happy to give you a demonstration if you'd like."

Macy squeezed Ella's hand. "You should do it. Master Jerry is the best. I promise you won't regret it."

Ella stiffened. "I don't think so. I'm still soaking this all in. I'm a bit too nervous to participate." She glanced back at the woman whose arms were now bound at her back with the thick rope. Her chest was pulled higher, her nipples visible under the thin black lace of her bra.

"You don't have to take your clothes off or anything," Macy encouraged. "No one would expect that. Nudity and exposure are personal choices. You can easily experience a flogging fully clothed."

Macy knew Ella well. She would have surmised where her mind was going. Ella felt a flush rush over her cheeks as she returned her gaze to her friend and then looked at Jerry. "Okay. Maybe just a short demo so I know how it feels."

"Of course." Jerry motioned with his hand for the two of them to follow him back toward the St. Andrew's Cross.

Ella's knees felt like jelly as she kept up with him. Nerves made her stomach twist. Could she really let a stranger strike her with a thick leather flogger?

CHAPTER 5



Robert had just returned to the room, still uncertain what his next move might be when he saw Ella and Macy following Jerry toward the cross. He knew Jerry well enough to realize the man's intentions would be to demonstrate his skills on the newbie.

For a few minutes, Robert stood perfectly still, torn between locking himself in his office for the rest of the night and interrupting Jerry to take over. Ordinarily it would be an extreme breach of etiquette to disturb another Dom's scene, but this wasn't an ordinary situation. For one thing, Jerry had done nothing so far other than hand Ella one of his floggers so she could familiarize herself with it.

Then there was the rapid beat of Robert's heart, telling him he had no option but to jump into the fray and let his presence be known.

Praying he wasn't making the biggest mistake of his life, Robert took a deep breath and sauntered directly into the mix, positioning himself behind Ella.

Jerry lifted his gaze and nodded. "Evening."

"Hey, Master Robert," Macy stated. "I didn't realize you were here tonight. I brought a guest. Jerry was just about to educate her on the finer points of flogging."

“I see that.” Robert didn’t remove his gaze from Ella’s back as he spoke. He watched, unable to keep from smiling as her shoulders stiffened and her spine straightened. For a moment, she didn’t turn around, but he knew with certainty she’d recognized his voice. There were millions of Roberts in the world, but Ella had reacted to his tone.

Finally, still grasping the flogger, she slowly spun around. Her gaze lifted and her mouth fell open. “Robert?” That one word was so soft he barely heard it.

“Do you two know each other?” Jerry asked.

Macy gasped. “Master Robert is *the* Robert? *Your* Robert?”

Robert kept his gaze on Ella, watching every nuance as she internalized who was standing in front of her. It intrigued him to know she’d spoken of him to Macy. No matter how close a friend she was, the fact that Macy was obviously informed enough about the details of their relationship that she would so instantaneously realize the connection from ten years ago gave Robert hope.

Though perhaps it should give him fear instead. It was entirely possible Ella had spent the better portion of the last ten years cussing him out to anyone who would listen.

Robert was peripherally aware that Macy clasped Jerry’s forearm and dragged him away. Unable to go another moment without touching Ella, Robert lifted his hand and cupped her upturned face, stroking the soft skin. Time had done her justice. He never would have guessed she was ten years older. She looked more mature in ways, but he also presumed that outside of this club, she usually projected a confidence that was missing here in the presence of so much unknown.

He stepped closer. “You’re so beautiful.” Her thick hair was still down in long waves he could easily remember running his fingers through. There was no way Jerry would have given her a flogging demo without securing the long locks out of the way, but he hadn’t gotten that far yet.

She licked her lips. “What are you doing here?”

“I own Roses and Thorns. Four locations actually.” There was no reason to lie about his job anymore. After all, she was standing in his club.

She nodded slightly. “You owned it when we were together too, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” He didn’t elaborate.

She glanced away, as if she couldn’t stare at him another moment. A second later, her gaze returned. “Jerry was about to demonstrate his skills.”

“I know, and it was extremely inappropriate for me to interrupt. I’ll need to apologize to him later, but I couldn’t quite stomach watching another man introduce you to my world.”

Her gaze returned. “How long have you been watching me?”

“Since soon after you arrived.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was weighing the pros and cons.” He offered a small grin. “It didn’t seem prudent to step back into your life and risk disrupting it.”

She frowned. “What makes you think you would disrupt my life just because you said hello? It’s been ten years.”

“Are you saying if I go back to my office right now and leave you to continue your scene with Jerry, you’ll forget we spoke?” He was taking a gamble. There was no guarantee she would give him the time of day. But it was a risk worth pursuing.

She narrowed her gaze further, ignoring his question. “*You* broke up with *me*.”

He nodded. “I did. It seemed...necessary.” Though for some reason he couldn’t fathom why at the moment.

“Was there another woman?” she asked, making him realize she had spent the past decade wondering why he’d dumped her while he’d spent those ten years missing her intensely.

He shook his head. “No. No one who mattered. Not then. And not since.”

She closed her eyes slowly, tipping her face into his palm. “Why, then?”

“You were so young. Innocent. Way too good for me. I didn’t want to introduce you to my world. It didn’t seem fair.”

Suddenly, she took a step back, jerking away from his hand and crossing her arms. “You broke up with me because you didn’t want to tell me you owned a chain of fetish clubs?”

He nodded. It seemed ludicrous now all of the sudden. But he rushed to explain. “I’m a Dom, Ella. I rarely date outside of the fetish world. You were the one and only woman I ever went out with that long, pretending to be vanilla.”

She narrowed her gaze. “Pretending...”

He inhaled slowly. “I don’t mean to imply our entire relationship was a farce. I wasn’t pretending to enjoy your

company. I simply didn't want you to know I was a Dom."

For long moments, she said nothing. He feared she might turn around and walk away from him. He wasn't willing to risk that, so he spoke again. "Would you permit me to take Jerry's place? Show you around? Demonstrate a few things if you're interested?"

"Why? Why now? You walked away from me a decade ago, and *now* you want to show me your world?"

"I tried to stay out of sight and let you explore on your own, but when I realized Master Jerry was going to do more than show you his implements, I couldn't..." He cleared his throat. "I couldn't watch. If you want to learn more, I'll be the one to show you."

"Awfully cocky of you." She tipped her head to one side, sliding more into the defensive. "Perhaps I'd rather have Jerry show me. It's been a long time, Robert. Maybe I don't want to spend time with you. Maybe I've moved on." Her face flushed a darker red as she spoke.

He took another gamble, one of many he imagined taking before the night was over, and stepped closer. He reached for her crossed arms and tugged them.

She easily released her grip and let him lower her hands to her sides. She was shaking. She also licked her lips. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. He could feel her pulse at her wrists. Nothing about her stance matched her words.

He lowered his voice. "Have you?"

"Of course." Her voice was too weak. Sharp. Her response too quick.

He smiled. "Well, I haven't. And I don't believe you have either."

She gasped.

“Do me a favor. Give me two hours. Let me introduce you to my world. I won’t ask you for anything else. Just two hours under my care. Afterward, you can walk right out the door without even giving me your phone number.”

CHAPTER 6



Ella swallowed hard. She could not believe this was happening. Ten minutes ago, her life had been right on track. Everything was right and perfect in her world. She had an amazing job with a terrific law firm. She had friends. A gym membership. A book club. She was happy.

Now, in less than a second, Robert had stepped into her personal space to disrupt everything. He could easily do so, and he had already. The first words he'd spoken from behind her had shifted her universe.

She had never forgotten him. She'd never let go of him. She'd never really moved on. She'd simply pretended. But could she take a risk like this? It was a horrible idea. Letting him demonstrate his abilities as a Dom could do permanent damage. Because she already knew she would fall for him all over again in less than half an hour, leaving her emptier inside than she had been before she'd stepped into his club.

On the one hand, she needed to guard her heart. On the other hand, there was no way she could turn him down. After all, he had been the one to put himself out there, leaving himself vulnerable. Even after all these years, she trusted him. Instinctively, she knew he would never hurt her. No matter what he introduced her to in the next two hours, she would not

be harmed. Could she definitively say the same of Jerry or any other man inside the club whom she'd never met?

"I know I have no right to ask, but take a chance," he continued. "You're here already. What's there to lose?"

My heart. My self-respect. "Macy lured me here. I don't know a thing about BDSM."

He nodded. "I understand. I won't ask anything of you I don't think you can handle. I've been involved in the lifestyle more than half my life. I'm very good at reading people and knowing what they can endure."

She shuddered, believing him without a doubt. He was still gripping her wrists, but now his hands slid down to clasp hers, threading their fingers together, pulling her closer, so close that only inches separated them. His skin was shades darker than hers. She'd always enjoyed watching his hands move across her skin.

He continued. "I've been watching you closely. You were titillated by the flogging and then more so by the rope play. You're curious. It's not unusual. Many people are curious about BDSM when confronted with it in a safe setting, like the inside of a club."

"That doesn't mean I want to jump in and become a doormat to someone." She lifted her gaze back to his face. His thick brown hair had thinned very little in ten years. He would be forty-three now.

He smiled again, somehow not appearing condescending. "BDSM doesn't work that way. No submissive is a doormat, or at least they shouldn't be. Submission is something a person may give freely to another. It takes a very strong personality to be submissive."

“That doesn’t make any sense.” She had no idea what he was talking about.

“Many submissives are actually strong personalities in their regular lives. Executives. Surgeons. Lawyers.” He winked at her. “People whose jobs demand that they be in control for long hours every day. It can be a relief to turn that power over to someone else for a while.”

His words made a little bit of sense.

“Try it. Give me two hours. I promise you won’t regret it.”

“You want me to submit to you?” How had they gone from a demonstration to submission?

“Yes.” His voice was deeper. It reached into her and made her body come alive in ways it had not in a decade. He had hurt her badly when he broke up with her. She had never fully recovered, mostly because she had never found anyone who made her feel the way she had with him.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

“Don’t overthink it.” He released one hand and slid his palm up her arm until he reached her neck. His fingers threaded into the back of her hair, his thumb landing on her jaw. “An introduction. Then you’ll know if it’s right for you.”

Somehow, she found herself nodding in agreement before she could stop herself. After all, how could she turn him down? It wasn’t really an option.

The way he smiled at her made her insides thaw even further. “Good girl.”

When he said those two words, she slid under his spell. A spell she knew he’d been weaving from the moment he approached her.

“Since we’re already here, and you were about to learn the finer points of flogging, I suggest we continue where Jerry left off.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

He stroked her chin with his thumb. “You’ll call me *Sir*.”

She gulped. This was already so intense. “Okay, Sir.” Her voice was even lower, unrecognizable to herself. She’d never done anything remotely like this in her life. And she wasn’t altogether certain she could tonight either.

“Good girl,” he repeated.

She shuddered as a few thoughts filtered into her mind. Things she had not considered when she consented to this madness. “Just so we’re clear, there is no way I’m going to take my clothes off, Robert.”

“*Master Robert* when we’re playing, and I would never ask you to strip. For one thing, I would never expect a newbie to expose herself on her first night in a club. And for another, somehow I can’t picture ever sharing your nudity with other people.” His eyes narrowed, his expression serious.

She glanced around. “Nearly every submissive in your club is naked or almost naked. You can’t expect me to believe you don’t ordinarily request the same thing.”

He shook his head. “You’re right. I’ve dominated dozens of naked women. It’s sensual and arousing. A work of art. But none of them were you. I’m afraid I feel conflicted when it comes to you.”

She pulled in a breath and held it. *Interesting*.

His hands slid to her shoulders, and he spun her slowly toward the cross where she’d expected Jerry to arrange her.

“Face the cross. Lift your arms.” He instructed her, but it wasn’t necessary because he was going through all the motions at the same time, situating her in front of the cross and then lifting her arms over her head to settle them wide.

He moved the pegs down a few notches to match the span of her arms and then wrapped her fingers around the wooden grips. “Don’t let go,” he whispered in her ear. He was standing so close, one of his feet between hers, as his palms slid down her arms and then her torso.

His fingers brushed over the sides of her breasts on his way to her waist, making her shiver. Her nipples pebbled, and her breasts swelled. The weight of them drew her attention.

“Spread your legs wider, Ella.”

At his command, she stepped out farther, which stretched her arms a bit. The position was somehow obscene in her mind. The skirt of her dress pulled tight at her thighs, lifted several inches so she was no longer certain it covered her butt entirely. She leaned her head forward to look.

Robert slid one hand from her waist to her butt, cupping one cheek tightly. His lips were still on her ear. “Don’t worry. You’re still completely covered. This dress is extremely sexy, by the way.”

She pursed her lips, unable to respond. He’d done almost nothing yet, and already she’d fallen under some sort of spell, one that left her aroused and wanting. If this was what BDSM was all about, she actually regretted not finding out before today.

Every time she’d turned down Macy’s appeal to join her at the club, she hadn’t even considered it might be something she would be interested in.

“Relax, Ella. Take a deep breath.”

She released the breath she'd been holding and inhaled again.

“Good girl.” His hand slid from her ass to her lower back and then higher until he cupped her neck again. “I won't do anything that will harm you, you have my word.”

“Okay, Sir.”

“The first thing you need is a safeword. Never play with anyone without a safeword. Red is universally understood. Yellow if you want me to slow down. Is that okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“If I go too fast or you need a moment to catch up, use the word yellow. If you want me to stop altogether, use the word red.”

She nodded. How the hell was she in a position to need a safeword? She'd never expected anything like this to happen in her life. She wasn't so ignorant that she didn't realize a certain percentage of the population participated in fetish play, but she had never imagined being one of them.

“Since you witnessed a flogging and seemed curious, I'm going to use a pair of very soft floggers on you much like you watched Master Jerry do. Let your body relax. I'll go very slow and easy at first until you get used to the feeling and realize you enjoy it.”

Even though she'd carefully observed Jerry flogging his submissive earlier, and even been aroused by the scene, she couldn't grasp how she herself would react. However, she suddenly wanted to know more than anything in the world. “Okay, Sir.”

Robert stepped away for a moment and then returned, dangling the soft leather strips of his floggers on her shoulders. They tickled her neck and made her scrunch her shoulders.

Robert chuckled and then the leather strands danced down her back. She couldn't feel them directly through the material of her dress, but she knew they were there.

Suddenly, she remembered she had not come to this club alone. She lifted her gaze and turned her head to the left and then the right, spotting Macy off to one side. She was leaning against the wall several yards away, smiling. She nodded her approval.

Ella was really doing this. Her world had just taken an unexpected right turn. If someone would have told her two hours ago that she would be inside a fetish club where she would find the man she'd never gotten over dominating her, she would have laughed.

But here she was.

CHAPTER 7



Robert could not believe this was happening. The woman he'd pined after for a decade was in his club, standing at his St. Andrew's Cross, waiting for him to dominate her.

His palms were sweating as if he were new to the scene and had never dominated a woman in his life. Nothing could be further from the truth, and yet, he knew the stakes were high.

He took a deep breath and adjusted his grip on his favorite set of floggers. Soft, supple leather. There was no reason to be concerned. Even though every single person who was new to BDSM looked at floggers with skepticism, rarely did one ever walk away dissatisfied. Sure, a Dom could cause pain with a flogger if that was what the submissive required, but it was never necessary. It could be the most sensual, relaxing massage in the world.

Before beginning, Robert stepped closer again, set a hand on her lower back, and put his lips against her ear. "Relax, Ella. Trust me." It wasn't necessary to soothe her again just yet, but he couldn't resist the urge to inhale her scent, touch her skin, feel her body heat.

When she nodded, he slid his hand up, separated her hair into two sections with the handle of his flogger, and flipped

the two sides over her shoulders. He didn't want to risk catching the long strands. "Tip your head forward a bit so your hair hangs in front of you. I don't want it to snag in my floggers."

She did as he told her while taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly.

He finally stepped directly behind her, lifted the floggers in the air, and began circling them in the perfect figure eight he'd used thousands of times over the years.

He let them swoosh through the air as he inched closer until the very tips slid across her shoulder blades.

She sucked in a breath, but otherwise didn't move.

He continued, barely grazing the tips of leather over her shoulders and upper back, letting her get used to the sensation before he finally reached marginally closer. The increased pressure would be subtle.

She sighed, her shoulders dropping from their tensed position.

Thank you, God.

He kept up the pattern, not wanting to risk startling her just yet by switching things up. Ordinarily, he would change the pace or the intensity or the location, but not yet. Not with Ella.

This was the most important scene of his life. In his mind it would make or break his future, because he knew from the moment her gaze widened on him that he wanted her back. He wanted to own her. He wanted her to love this so much that she begged him to show her more.

The truth was, he didn't need her to enjoy *every* aspect of BDSM. It wasn't a requirement. The response he'd gotten

already from her was enough to know she was titillated by submission.

Again, he wondered if he'd made a mistake all those years ago when he walked away from her.

He shook the past from his mind. The truth was, there was every chance she wouldn't have been ready at twenty-three. He might very well have not only alienated her from himself but the lifestyle too if he'd pushed her to face something she wasn't ready for.

Was she ready today?

God, he hoped so. Her reactions so far told him he was on the right path. There was a chance.

After increasing the pressure one more time, he lowered the floggers and stepped back into her space, one leg between hers. Still gripping the flogger, he pressed his fingers into her back. "You okay, Ella?"

"Yes, Sir." Her tone was perfect, precisely what he was looking for. No sign of fear or pain or regret. Nothing but intrigue and arousal.

"I'm going to strike you harder this time. It'll be a little more intense. I'll make my way up and down your back."

"Okay."

He stepped back, taking a moment to orient himself again, unable to believe his good fortune. *Ella Feldmann is in my club, submitting to me.*

Robert began again, applying slightly more pressure this time, watching closely as she relaxed into the scene. He picked up the pace, striking her shoulders and then moving up and

down her back, making his way lower each time. When he finally struck her bottom, she swayed slightly forward.

“Stay still, sweet girl,” he commanded in a tone that was both demanding and caring.

She stopped her movement, and he proceeded. Without taking another break, he increased the force, knowing she could handle more. She could handle a lot more. Anyone could. The only reason to start as slow and gentle as he had was because for a new submissive, the unknown could be unnerving. As soon as they realized there would be nothing but pleasure, they relaxed into the scene.

Robert knew the moment she stopped worrying by her audible sigh and the way her body relaxed. She gripped the pegs above her head tighter and let her head fall forward farther.

God, she was gorgeous. He would give anything to flog her naked body so that he could watch her skin pinken and feel the heat against his palms. He wouldn't do such a thing. Not today, and not on the public floor. But he prayed there would come a day in the near future when he would be granted permission to take her further.

Would she give him more than these two hours?

Please, God.

When he couldn't stand another moment without touching her, he dropped the floggers on the bench nearby and returned to her space. He swiped her hair back over her shoulder and then set his hands on her hips, his chin on her shoulder, his lips on her ear. “See what I mean?” he asked, his voice husky.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Sir,” she added. “That felt amazing.” She didn't release the pegs.

He needed to know one more thing, however. “Are you wet, sweet girl?”

She sucked in a breath.

He scraped his teeth against her earlobe, making her shudder. “Answer me. Are you wet?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I want to touch you.”

She stiffened.

“Not here. Will you come to a private room with me so I can make you come so hard you scream?”

She whimpered, biting into her lower lip while he held his breath and watched her face from the side.

His cock was so hard, there was no way to hide it from her. In fact, he was pressing it against her ass. There was no reason to pretend he didn't want her. He wouldn't pressure her, of course, but he needed her to know where his mind was before she consented to leave this room with him.

Seconds ticked by while he kissed her neck and then dragged his tongue around the edge of her earlobe.

Finally, she moaned. “Please, Sir.”

Musical words.

He closed his eyes and thanked God.

CHAPTER 8



Ella released the pegs when Robert slid his hands up her arms and pried her fingers from their grip.

His entire body pressed into hers, and she'd never been so aroused in her life. Did he mean to simply find a place to give her release, or would he have sex her? She was certain she needed more than an orgasm. She wanted him inside her. She wanted to be reminded of how damn good they were together.

She leaned her back against him as he lowered her arms, uncertain her feet would be able to carry her to another destination. She needed a moment, and he seemed to understand.

They'd only dated a few months, but the sex had been amazing. She remembered it as if it were yesterday. The way he would climb over her like a predator after his prey. The way he gripped her hands and pressed them against the mattress above her head when he thrust into her. The way he looked into her eyes and made the rest of the world disappear.

No man before or since had so thoroughly consumed her like that. Had he been dominating her even then? Of course he had. She simply hadn't realized it. She hadn't had the knowledge or the vocabulary to put words to his actions. Like he said, she'd been innocent and naïve.

Had he done her a favor? She wasn't sure. A part of her wanted to turn around and pound her fists against his chest for not giving her a chance, for dumping her instead of simply being truthful. Yes, part of her was pissed he had left her so easily. But she also realized he might have been right. Maybe she couldn't have handled more at the time. Maybe she would have been completely taken aback and walked away from him.

Finally, when she thought her legs would move, she opened her eyes and tipped her face toward his. "Show me more."

He smiled slowly. "Gladly." He slid his hands down her arms and then let go of her. "Don't move."

When he released her to stuff his floggers back into a large black bag and pick it up, she missed the contact. A chill brought goose bumps to her skin. She wanted more. She wanted it from him. She'd never wanted something so badly in her life.

He took her hand, calming her racing heart, and led her away from the cross.

She followed him across the room, only reminded of the existence of the rest of the world when he stopped, making her lift her gaze to find Macy right in front of her. She flushed, realizing she'd once again forgotten the existence of her friend.

Macy was grinning. "Guess I should have dragged you here sooner."

Ella almost giggled. She was giddy. "Maybe."

"If I'd realized the Robert of your dreams was the same Master Robert who owned this club..." Macy shifted her gaze to Robert. "You'll answer to me if you hurt her," she warned.

It was nearly comical since she was talking to the owner of the club and a man twice her size.

Robert didn't take her words as a joke, however. His expression was serious when he nodded. "You have my word."

"You'll make sure she gets home safely?"

"I will," he confirmed.

Ah. So, Macy was going to leave Ella here. Or maybe she was just assuming. Either way, Ella's heart rate increased. She was really doing this, leaving this space for a private room to spend time alone with the only man she'd ever truly cared for.

There was no way to stop this train, and she didn't want to. "I'll be fine," she assured her friend as she reached out with her free arm and hugged Macy close.

Robert never released her hand. He had their fingers threaded together and his grip was firm, as if he were giving her permission to say goodbye to Macy, but not yielding control. It was hot. Smoking hot.

Was she wet? Hell yes, she was wet. She was soaking wet.

When Robert tugged her away, she released Macy and shifted her gaze to his profile. He was so damn handsome. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been in his early thirties. The years made him even more handsome than before. Maybe his hair was slightly thinner, but he still had a full head of brown hair that begged her to run her fingers through it. Would he permit her to do so?

Without a word, Robert led her down a hallway until he came to a door at the end and opened it.

She followed him inside, nerves making her bite her lower lip. What was she getting into? Would he continue to dominate

her?

She knew the answer. Of course he would. The unknown made her shiver slightly as the door clicked shut behind her.

He locked it as she glanced around. The lighting in the room came from the ceiling, and the dimmer switch bathed the entire space in a dark red glow. Like the main room, the walls, floor, and ceiling were painted black. A deep red leather loveseat sat on one wall. A chest of drawers sat on another wall. In the center of the room was a bench like the one she'd seen on the main floor. It too had red leather padding to match the loveseat.

Robert rounded in front of her, cutting off her view. He dropped his bag and set his hands on her shoulders before sliding them up to her neck and tipping her chin back with his thumbs. "Relax. Nothing will happen that you don't want. A submissive is always in control. I promise you my only goal here is to make your body hum."

She nodded.

He tipped his head toward the door. "No one can get in here, and no one can see in."

"Okay." She bit into her lip again. It felt strange to verbally agree to whatever the hell they were going to do next. She didn't ordinarily discuss sex so thoroughly. It just happened.

Except with Robert she recalled. Nothing had ever *just* happened with Robert. He'd always met her gaze and gotten her consent. He'd always double-checked with her to make sure she was comfortable and satisfied. He'd been looking after her as a Dom without her being aware of it.

He might have even dominated her without realizing it himself.

“I trust you,” she said, wanting him to know she was all in.

He stepped into her space and then walked her backward until her ass hit the wall. Hands threaded in her hair, he angled her head where he wanted it and met her gaze. “I’m going to kiss you senseless. Until you melt into me. Until you want me so badly you’re willing to beg.”

She stopped breathing. “Please.” Any part of her that might have cooled between the St. Andrew’s Cross and this room returned to being fully on fire. Her nipples ached to be touched. Her pussy pulsed with need. She’d never been more aroused in her life. And he hadn’t even touched her yet. Not really.

Seconds later, his lips were on hers. His tongue stroked her mouth. She parted for him, letting him in, wanting him to consume her. Needing anything he would give her.

The kiss was hard and intense and just like she remembered. How many nights had she gasped awake in the middle of the night to the memory of Robert kissing her until her knees buckled? How many nights had she dropped back to her pillow, tears leaking from her eyes as she wiggled out of her panties, spread her legs, and masturbated to thoughts of Robert’s own hands on her? More than she could count.

And now he was here. Kissing her for real. Making the world disappear. Turning her inside out with want.

He pressed against her, his cock hard at her belly, the undeniable stiffness of his own desire ever-present.

She gripped his waist, wishing his black T-shirt would disappear so she could feel the heat of his chest against her. She remembered the way it felt. His muscles. The brush of his chest hair against her naked skin. She arched into him.

By the time he released her lips to stare into her eyes, she was melting. If he moved, her legs would not hold her up.

“I missed you.” His voice was hoarse.

“I missed you too.” There was no reason to place blame. Right now she wanted him inside her.

“I want to take this dress off you, strap you to that bench, and tease you until you come so hard you scream.”

She swallowed, unable to breathe.

He lifted a brow.

She found a way to open her mouth. “I’d like that, Sir.”

He rewarded her with a slow smile and then stepped back, spun her around, and grabbed the zipper on her dress. In seconds, the material fell away from her back and slid down her shoulders. He eased it down her body, crouching to tap her feet one at a time until she stepped out of the dress. Next, he removed her shoes, one at a time, slowly, his fingers teasing her ankles.

She should have felt exposed standing in front of him in nothing but a lace bra and thong, but instead, her skin heated. She didn’t need to turn around to know his gaze would be penetrating her with its intensity. He’d always looked at her as if seeing her for the first time, as if he’d just unwrapped the best present he’d ever received. Every time.

So many memories. So many reasons why he had been irreplaceable.

When he turned her back around in his arms, she lifted her gaze to his. “I think I like your world, Sir,” she stated. Part of her realized that although he had never once mentioned he was a Dom or that he wanted her to submit to him, he’d

nevertheless shown her who he was time and again with his actions and his words.

Every time they'd had sex, he'd taken control and rocked her world. Why had he thought she couldn't handle facing his reality?

Again, she reminded herself he might have been right. Holding her down and taking control of their lovemaking was not the same thing as labeling his preferences or moving on to ropes or floggers. There was a fine line, and he'd never crossed it.

“Safeword?”

“Red, Sir.” Calling him by that word of respect was growing on her. It had felt awkward at first, but she understood how it created a frame of mind, a sense of submission.

He led her across the room toward the bench and then released her to turn around and make some adjustments. “Often a submissive is required to lie on the bench on her belly, his or her wrists and ankles restrained so that a Dom can spank or otherwise torment him or her.” He shot her a grin and then continued making changes to the apparatus. “I want you facing me, however. I want to see your face. I want to see your fantastic breasts. I want to watch your expression as you fall apart for me.”

She gulped, every part of her aroused to the point of pain.

He patted the bench finally. “Sit here.”

She inched forward. When she was close enough, he took her hand and angled her so that her back was to the bench. He lifted her off the ground a few inches and settled her on the cool leather. His fingers went to the lace at her hips, and he tugged her thong off her body without a word.

His gaze landed on her totally exposed pussy as he absently dropped the black thong and kneeled in front of her.

She shivered, so exposed, so aroused.

His hands landed on her ankles and he spread them apart. It took her a moment to realize his intention, and then he set her heels on another section of padded leather. When he reached for a length of black Velcro and secured first one and then the other ankle to the bench, she sucked in a breath.

He pressed her knees wider, his hands smoothing up and down her thighs until he held them firmly apart. And then he lowered his face to her pussy and gently planted a kiss to her sensitive skin. He took a deep breath before slowly lifting his gaze. "I never forgot your scent. So damn sweet."

She didn't move an inch. Wetness leaked between her thighs.

He slid his hands up her body and cupped her breasts. They felt so heavy and full. He released them a moment later to ease his fingers around to her back and expertly pop her bra. As he removed the last piece of her clothing, his lips came to one of her nipples.

He sucked the peak in hard, making her gasp. While he flicked his tongue over the tip, he grabbed her wrists and drew her arms to her sides. It took her a moment to realize he intended to secure them in the same manner as her ankles.

Her chest rose and fell as he worked. No one had ever strapped her down before. She wouldn't have dreamed she would enjoy it if anyone had asked her just a few hours ago. And maybe she wouldn't if the domination were coming from anyone other than Robert.

She closed her eyes, her mind once again reviewing the past. No, Robert had never used bondage with her. He'd never even mentioned it. But he had held her down. With his hands. He'd made her squirm every time.

The Velcro straps were more intense, the result a deeper arousal than she'd ever felt.

She sucked in a sharp breath when his lips wrapped around her nipple and gently suckled. He did the same to the other breast as she opened her eyes to watch the top of his head. With his hands on her thighs, holding them wide, he kissed a line up to her lips and then nibbled a path across the bottom one before nipping it with his teeth.

He was smiling when he leaned back a few inches to meet her gaze. "You okay, sweet girl?"

"Yes, Sir." Her voice cracked. She needed more. She needed to come. She'd been on the edge for too long.

His fingers slid up her thighs until they reached her core. He drew her open with his thumbs.

"Robert..." she moaned.

He pinched the tender skin of her inner thigh.

When she gasped, meeting his gaze, she found one eyebrow lifted. "Sir..."

"That's better." He lowered his face then, his lips landing on her clit.

She cried out at the contact, knowing she would come in moments if he kept it up, and hoping he would do just that. Luckily, he didn't leave her hanging on the edge. In fact, he increased his attentions, flicking his tongue rapidly over the little bundle of swollen nerves.

She stiffened, her entire body feeling the effects. It had been so long since anyone had made her feel like this. Needy. Cherished. Probably the last time she'd been with Robert.

Suddenly he thrust two fingers into her tight channel and flicked them across her G-spot. "Come for me, Ella," he murmured against her clit.

There was no stopping the orgasm. As soon as he issued the command, she shattered around his fingers and his lips. A long moan escaped her lips as the waves of pleasure washed through her.

Robert could read her well. He always had. He knew exactly how much pressure to apply and how long to continue tormenting as the euphoria eased.

She blinked down at him as her vision cleared. He was staring up at her, his hands still holding her thighs. "You always were the most beautiful creature alive when you came. Nothing has changed. Thank you for allowing me to witness that again. I never thought in my lifetime I would be so fortunate."

CHAPTER 9



Ella swallowed around the emotion welling up in her chest. Her gaze held his until the intensity grew to be too much, and then she shifted her attention to his shoulders and downward. He was still fully clothed, while she was naked. She licked her lips, and fought for language skills. “Are you just going to stare at me, or are you going to remind me how damn good it feels to have you inside me?”

A slow smile, the one she remembered well. Filled with promise. “Depends.” His eyes were dancing with excitement, though she wasn’t sure what he was plotting.

“On what?” She smiled back, knowing whatever he said next would do nothing to alter her desire to have him immediately.

He stroked his thumbs across the sensitive skin of her inner thighs again, drawing her arousal back to the forefront. A sense of vulnerability filled her as she glanced at her wrists and then back at him.

“Will I see you again after tonight?” he asked. His own vulnerability reflected in his eyes.

“Depends,” she tossed back at him, mimicking his own word.

“On what?” he responded in kind, grinning.

She nodded toward the black bag he’d dropped inside the door when they secured themselves in this room. “Are you going to introduce me to more of the items from that bag?”

He leaned forward and kissed her lips gently before trailing his mouth along her jaw toward her ear. After nipping the lobe, he whispered. “Every single item. One at a time. Until you don’t remember what vanilla was like.”

She shuddered, biting into her lower lip. Renewed wetness leaked from her channel. Was it possible they could resume their relationship? Pick up where they’d left off ten years ago?

He kissed her neck while reaching for both wrists and releasing them simultaneously. As she settled her hands on his shoulders, he did the same to her ankles. Next, he tucked his palms under her butt cheeks and rose to standing, hauling her with him.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and held him tight as he made his way toward the leather loveseat. She could feel his length, hard and ready inside his black jeans. Her pussy pulsed at the thought of finally having him inside her.

The moment he sat on the soft leather cushion, an urgency filled her. She grabbed for his T-shirt and tugged it over his head, and then she scooted back on his thighs and unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans with shaky fingers.

His cock sprang free, making her wish she could scramble off his lap, kneel before him, and suck him into her mouth. She wanted to remind herself of his flavor and the power behind his cock. Later. Right now, she needed him inside her.

Robert lifted his hips and tugged his jeans down several inches. He also extracted a condom from his back pocket

while she held on to his shoulders and kept her gaze on his thick length.

Seconds later, latex in place, she rose onto her heels, positioned herself over his erection, and thrust down without warning.

“Jesus, Ella.” He gripped her hips, holding her steady, keeping her from lifting up to do it again.

“Please...” The walls of her channel came alive, needing the friction only he could properly provide.

Still holding her down, he kissed her again, his mouth urgent, demanding, greedy.

She moaned into his mouth, squirming on his cock, her clit rubbing against the base. She’d never felt this level of urgency before.

Finally, he released her lips and lifted her hips with his hands, controlling the speed and height he allowed her to lift.

“Sir...” she remembered to say instead of crying out his name.

“Slow down, sweet girl. I want to remember this moment.”

She whimpered. “I remember every time we had sex. Your touch is imbedded in my memory for life. I’ve carried it with me always. Please don’t make me wait to experience it again.”

He smiled, his eyes glassy. Finally, he nodded, releasing his grip, sliding his palms around to her lower back. “Ride me, Ella.”

She didn’t need more encouragement than that. Digging her heels into the leather, she rose off him until just the tip of his cock was lodged inside her. She hovered there for a

moment, feeling the power she knew instinctively he would rarely grant her in the future.

As she slammed back down to fully engulf him, she moaned. God, he felt good. Better than she remembered, if that were possible. Something was different between them this time. Without the burden of the secret he'd carried, he wasn't holding back. He had always held her gaze when he made love to her, but this time she could see deeper into his soul. She was more connected to him.

Unable to continue to concentrate on his eyes, she tipped her head back and closed hers, focusing on the feel of him, every inch of him that was touching her. The way he gripped her hips with his fingertips. The way his breath hit her nipples. The thickness of his cock.

His hands slid away from her waist, one to her lower back, the other to her clit. She arched her chest toward him, her mouth falling open. His lips landed on her neck and slid to her ear. "Come for me, sweet girl."

She had no idea how he managed to control her so thoroughly, but she came on his command. Her body stiffened and then pulsed around his erection.

"That's it. My God, you're gorgeous when you come," he breathed into her ear.

Before the waves of her orgasm ended, he thrust deeper into her and groaned out his own release. There was no greater sound in the world than that of Robert moaning into her ear. She did that to him. It was consuming and powerful.

When the last pulses of his orgasm subsided, he smoothed his hands up her back and pulled her chest against his.

She settled her cheek on his shoulder, breathing heavily in tandem with him. Reality began to slide back into her consciousness. She was in a fetish club, and she'd just had sex with the only man she'd ever loved. Now what?

Robert must have read her mind because he slid one hand up into her hair and brushed it away from her cheek as he spoke. "Come home with me."

She swallowed. What did he mean by that? Already she was in deep here. She wouldn't recover from this event. He had set the groundwork, ruining her for other men a decade ago. Tonight, he had solidified that. For every moment she permitted this to continue, she would pay for a lifetime.

Could she possibly hope he might intend to pick up where they left off and bring her back into his life? What if he broke things off again? She would not survive.

CHAPTER 10



Her hesitation was killing him. Robert hadn't expected her to balk at his suggestion. They'd just had the best sex of his life, and hers if he read her correctly. Maybe he'd made a mistake in letting her go all those years ago. Maybe he hadn't. But he wouldn't make the same error again.

He nudged her shoulder until she leaned back, needing to see her eyes. Gripping her biceps, he met her gaze. "Ella?"

She swallowed. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to go home with you."

His chest squeezed. He had to convince her to give him another chance. There was no other option. He couldn't let her go. Not this time. Not ever again.

What if there was someone else in her life? Surely not. Even though he hadn't seen her in years, he couldn't imagine she had changed so much that she would have sex with him if she was in a relationship with another man.

Still, he had to ask. "Are you seeing anyone?"

Her eyes flashed wide. "Of course not."

He exhaled. *Thank God.*

She sighed. "I was in a relationship for a while with a very nice man. I broke up with him two months ago. In fact, Macy

was tired of watching me sit at home. That's why she dragged me out here tonight."

"Was it serious?" He couldn't breathe. Was she pining over another man?

"Yes," she answered bluntly. "I suspect he was about to propose."

Wait. So... "You broke up with *him*?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Why?"

Her voice was very soft when she responded. "He wasn't you."

Thank. You. God.

"No one ever was." She held his gaze intently, her breasts rising and falling with every breath. After ten years, she was still carrying a torch for Robert that burned bright enough that she'd dumped another man because he didn't measure up? *Jesus*. He was so damn lucky.

Robert licked his lips. "So... Why can't you come home with me?"

"Robert, I wouldn't be able to live through another breakup with you. It would be too painful. Maybe we should ease into this thing if you want to. Take it slow. We should step back. Take a few days to think. Call me."

His chest seized. There wasn't a chance in hell he was letting her go for even a few days. He didn't want to be without her for even a minute. He shook his head slightly. "There's nothing to think about. I will probably kick myself every day for the rest of my life for walking away from you all those years ago. Obviously, it was a horrible mistake.

“I was a coward, afraid to tell you about my personal kinks out of fear you would look at me like I had the plague. I couldn’t face the revulsion I thought I would see in your eyes.” He shook his head more vehemently. “I won’t let you go again, not even for one night.”

She blinked several times. “You can’t beat yourself up over the past. I was only twenty-three at the time. I probably would have responded poorly to your admission. I don’t think you read me wrong. I was too young. But I’m not a girl anymore.” She smoothed her hands over his shoulders and cupped his neck.

Some of the tightness in his chest eased.

Her voice dipped. “Robert, this scene was hot. I loved every second. I know I’m new to your world, but I’m intrigued. I’d be willing to try it out.”

He started to speak.

She stopped him. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but you always were dominant with me. You didn’t use ropes or floggers back then, but when I look back, I realize I loved the way you took control of me during sex. No one before or since has ever rocked my world the way you did. I think that’s because I enjoy submitting to you. There’s not much difference between you holding my wrists above my head or binding them with something.”

She was right.

She sighed. “It’s really a matter of semantics. Just because you add a safeword and a title and some toys doesn’t mean I ever saw you as less dominant with me before today.”

His heart began to race now. “So, I’m confused. You never got over me. You enjoyed what we just did. And you don’t

want to come home with me?”

She searched his face, biting into her lower lip. “I’m scared.”

He slid a hand into her hair. “Of what, sweet girl?”

“Of waking up tomorrow in love with you all over again. Of taking that kind of risk with my heart again.”

My God. She was so perfect. And she was his. He just needed to ease her fears. “Ella, you’re the only woman I’ve ever loved. I’ve pined for you for ten years. I’m sure we’ve both changed in those ten years, but not where it really matters. When I saw you tonight... When I heard your voice... When I watched you tremble in reaction to my world...”

He squeezed her tighter. “Sweet girl, I’m still trying so hard to believe it’s true. That you’re here. In my club. In my arms. Naked. Sated. Beautiful. I never want to let you go again. Not even for the night. Not for a second. I wouldn’t be able to sleep if I dropped you off at your own place and went home alone. My bed would feel empty and lonely. Please make me the happiest man alive and tell me I get to hold you in my arms all night and wake up to you next to me tomorrow.”

She smiled at him, her face flushing.

“I know it’s a risk,” he continued. “One that I won’t take for granted.” He knew he felt something so powerful for her that sleeping apart from her would not change a thing. He also suspected she felt the same. “Tell me this—if I dropped you off at your place and you went to bed alone, would you hurt any less tomorrow if you never saw me again than if you woke up in my arms?”

Her shoulders dropped. “No.”

“Would you even be able to sleep?”

She sighed. “No.”

He smiled. “Then we aren’t wasting another night apart. Ever again.”

Her smile grew. She gripped his neck tighter.

His cock was still lodged inside her and hard. He wanted to take her home and make love to her all night. He wanted to do so for the rest of his life.

He waited.

Finally, her lips parted. “Okay.”

He blew out a long breath and kissed her fiercely, not coming up for air until she moaned into his mouth. When he broke the kiss, he met her gaze again. “I promise I will never let you down. You’ll never regret taking a second chance on me for a moment.”

Her eyes twinkled as she glanced toward the door to the room. “How long is it going to take for you to show me everything in that bag?”

He chuckled. “Sweet girl, you’ll never see the bottom of that bag because I intend to add to it constantly for the rest of our lives.”

Her flush darkened again. “I’m up for that challenge.”

“Thank you. You’ll never be sorry.”

“Take me home.”

He lifted a brow. “Bossy.”

She giggled. “Sir.”

Yeah, she was going to challenge him all right. And he was going to love every minute of it.

Forever.

Roses and Thorns is a novella that spins off from my Club Zodiac series. If you want to learn more about Club Zodiac, the first book in the series is *Training Sasha*.

JOSIAH'S MATE



A CANYON SPRINGS PREQUEL

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CHAPTER 1



May 15, 1964

It was unseasonably warm that day for May in Canyon Springs, Colorado. The sun was bright. Snow caps remained on the mountains. The trees were lush and green. Gorgeous puffy cumulus clouds dotted the sky. The air smelled of fresh pine and spring. It was postcard perfect.

In Josiah's world, everything came into sharp focus, so far beyond perfect, there were no words. One moment he was shuffling across the pavement to service the car that had pulled up to the gas pump; the next moment he stopped dead in his tracks.

The world stood still. Everything around him came into sharp recognition. He wasn't sure all shifters experienced this phenomenon the same way. Perhaps most of them weren't capable of describing where they were or what the scenery looked like when this moment hit them. But Josiah missed nothing.

He inhaled long and slow, not moving an inch, absorbing everything around him, not even bothering to see who was in the pale blue Plymouth Valiant yet. It didn't matter. Nothing in

his life would ever matter as much as her from this moment forward. He prolonged the moment intentionally, basking in the knowledge that everything was about to change.

Fate had chosen this day, this time, this place, and this woman. Fate was never wrong.

Perhaps only a few seconds had gone by in actuality, but time froze, giving him a chance to process. When he finally lowered his gaze to that of the woman in the car, he was smiling like a fool. He couldn't help it.

His heart stopped. Damn she was pretty. Her window was rolled down, and she was leaning her chin on her palm, her elbow on the windowsill. She was smiling at him. Big brown eyes he would lose himself in forever. He already had. Wavy brown hair hung loose around her face and disappeared over her shoulders, making it impossible for him to tell how long it was.

Even though Josiah had stopped walking and probably looked ridiculous, she didn't appear to be in any way perturbed. Her gaze held his and then casually roamed up and down his body.

When he finally convinced his legs to move forward, he glanced down at himself, wondering what she saw. Work boots. Worn jeans covered in grease. An olive-green T-shirt that had seen better days. His hair was a mess, in need of a cut. Probably sticking up in several places. Even his hands were filthy from pumping gas and checking oil.

For the last ten minutes he'd been watching the clock, waiting for quitting time. This was his last customer. Thank God.

This woman was also his mate.

And she was human.

He took a deep breath, knowing this was not going to be easy. Chances were this gorgeous brunette was passing through town. Half their customers were out-of-towners who pulled off the highway in search of gas.

Josiah had a problem on his hands. Somehow he needed to convince this mate of his not to leave. He had approximately five minutes to make his case. He could only stall for so long. Fill her tank, check her oil, clean her windows. How in the hell was he going to also explain to her that she was his?

As if Fate had her hands on more than just arranging this meeting, steam started coming around the edges of the hood of her car. Blessed angels.

Josiah approached slowly, setting his palm on the roof of her car when he arrived. He needed to steady himself. He reminded himself to breathe, but that only drew in more of her essence.

The woman's warm expression fell as she glanced out her windshield and groaned. "Not again," she murmured. Her voice. Damn. The tone wrapped itself around him.

Josiah glanced at her hood also. "Has this happened before, ma'am?"

"Yeah. A few times. I was hoping to make it home tonight before it overheated on me again."

Josiah glanced at his watch, even though he knew perfectly well it was six o'clock. "Where's home?"

"Hyde Park."

He cringed outwardly. Inside, he was doing a happy dance. "That's three hours from here. Not many places to stop either."

He shoved off the side of her car, rounded to the front, and popped the hood.

He had never been so glad to see steam coming out of an engine in his life. He didn't care if he had to make something up to keep her in town. This was his lucky break.

As he propped up the hood and watched steam coming from around the radiator, he heard the car door open and close. His mate had gotten out of the car. Hot damn.

She leaned her hip on the edge of the frame, standing so close to him he could have reached out and pulled her into his embrace. It took every ounce of strength to avoid doing just that.

Josiah paid almost no attention to her engine. His face was aimed that direction, but his eyes were off to the side, taking in her yellow sundress, the thick brown waves of hair that hung nearly to her waist, her tiny frame, her tanned arms, her dainty fingers, and the pink polish.

She sighed. "I'm not going to make it to Hyde Park tonight, am I?"

He lifted his gaze to meet hers and shook his head. "No ma'am. I'm pretty sure it's just a leak in your radiator, but I'll need to tinker around with it a bit to make sure. You could be leaking water. If you try to drive to Hyde Park tonight, you're liable to end up on the side of the road somewhere. There isn't much between here and there." He was laying it on thick. If she were any other person in the world, his boss would slap him upside the head and fire him.

Lucky for Josiah, Roger Pinkler was a shifter also. The man would immediately recognize that this woman was Josiah's mate and do his part to help stall her.

Josiah's mate looked around, chewing on her bottom lip. When she glanced back at Josiah and lifted a hand to block the setting sun from her eyes, they were watery. "I'm not even sure where I am, and I don't have much money to afford a hotel."

"You're in Canyon Springs, ma'am, and we don't have a hotel here. Don't you worry, we'll find you someplace to stay. I'll get under this hood in the morning and see what the problem is."

She worried that lip further, staring at him. "How..." She cleared her throat. "How are you going to find me someplace to stay?"

He shrugged as nonchalantly as possible. "Won't be a problem. People around here are very nice. I'm sure you could stay with my neighbor, Esther. She's about your age. She's a teacher here in town. She won't mind at all."

He wasn't making that up. Esther was one of the nicest people Josiah knew. The two of them were the same age—twenty-four. They'd gone to school together. Known each other their entire lives. Many people in town wondered why the two of them weren't perfectly suited for each other.

Perhaps in a human world, they would have dated and fallen in love. But neither of them was human. They were both wolf shifters, and they knew well that they were not intended mates.

Josiah wiped his palm as well as he could on his thigh and held out his hand. "Josiah Keller."

The sexy brunette lifted her small hand and set it in his. "Marge Steeple."

The moment their hands touched, a zing of electricity shot through Josiah's body. Judging by the way her breath caught, she felt it too. He held her hand in his a few seconds too long, stroking his thumb over her soft skin.

Unfortunately, he couldn't hold on to her forever. Not now. Not yet. He slowly let her fingers slide from his grip.

"I'm a teacher too," she announced, standing taller. "Or I will be. I just graduated. I'm on my way home from college."

Josiah was slightly shocked, only because he hadn't judged her to be quite that old. If she had just graduated, that would make her about twenty-two. Older than he'd guessed. *Good*. Even better.

"Wait. Did you say I'm in Canyon Springs?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She licked her lips and glanced down. "Mabel's gonna kill me," she murmured.

"Who's Mabel? And why would she kill you?" He tried to sound light, hoping she was kidding.

Marge blew out a breath. "My sister. She's... Well, she has some, uh..." Marge sighed. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

Josiah couldn't decide if he should push her to continue or not, but he opted against it. He would pull more out of her later.

The sound of footsteps approaching behind Josiah warned him that Roger was approaching. "Hey there. Looks like you've got car trouble."

Josiah spun around and gave Roger a wide-eyed look, hoping his boss would pick up on Marge's scent and realize the depth of his problem.

Roger's eyes widened too, just as he drew in a long breath. He gave an imperceptible nod and couldn't contain his smile. He aimed for the open hood.

Josiah explained the problem. "This is Marge Steeple. Looks like her radiator is leaking. She was passing through. I told her I'd take a look at it in the morning. I'll see if she can stay with Esther tonight."

Roger lifted his face and nodded. "Sounds like a plan." He shifted his gaze toward Marge. "Sorry, ma'am. Looks like you're stuck in Canyon Springs. Can't think of a nicer town to break down in though."

Marge looked slightly calmer. "Guess so."

Roger turned his attention to Josiah. "Why don't you clean up and see about getting this little lady some dinner. You can shower at my place behind the station."

The man was a genius. Josiah couldn't stop the stupid grin. "Good idea." He turned his attention back to his nervous mate. "Give me ten minutes. I'll be right back." He started backing away, unable to take his gaze off the woman he prayed would fall as hard for him as he'd already fallen for her.

CHAPTER 2



Marge had never been this nervous in her life. While Josiah jogged into the filling station and disappeared, Roger was beyond kind and welcoming to her. He ushered her inside and offered her a cold drink. A fan was oscillating back and forth in the corner, keeping the room at a cooler temperature.

“You’re in good hands with Josiah. Don’t you worry. He’ll see to it that you get fed and have a place to sleep. He’s one of the good ones. Been working for me since he was tall enough to hold the pump.” Roger chuckled in his deep booming voice.

Marge wandered slowly around in the small waiting area, mostly trying to keep from fidgeting.

Roger did most of the talking. “I’m going to miss him. He’ll be hard to replace.”

“Where’s he going?”

“Got himself a grownup job. He’ll be working for the logging company just outside of town. He’s strong. He’ll do well there. I’ll be looking for a new kid to fill his shoes around here.”

Marge smiled at Roger, who obviously thought the world of Josiah. When he didn’t continue speaking for a few moments, she turned and looked out the window.

There was something about Josiah. She hadn't been able to put her finger on it, but from the moment she'd set eyes on him, her stomach had been doing flip flops. He was handsome with dark hair that was a few weeks past needing a cut. The way it curled on the ends only made him more attractive. Cute. Endearing. Even though he clearly took his job seriously, his brown eyes danced with an underlying playfulness.

True to his word, he returned to collect her in less than fifteen minutes, and he took her breath away. For a moment, she stood rooted to her spot staring at him. His hair was damp, curling even more on the ends. He'd shaved. He wore a clean T-shirt and jeans, though for the life of her she couldn't imagine where he'd gotten clean clothes since the home behind the station was Roger's.

After a nod toward Roger, Josiah led her outside. "Do you have a suitcase you need from your car?"

"Oh, right. Yes."

Josiah jogged over to her car and grabbed her suitcase from the back seat before setting it in the back of his black Chevy pickup. It was an older model, but well maintained. He opened her door to help her into the passenger seat, rounded the hood, and climbed inside. He patted the dashboard as soon as he was seated. "She's a beauty, isn't she? I've been working on fixing her up for four years now."

Marge smiled at the pride in his voice, though she didn't care much about cars. "She's nice."

He started the engine, which purred to life. "There's a diner in town. Is that okay? My neighbor, Esther, she works there in the summer. You can meet her. I'm sure she won't mind if you stay at her duplex tonight."

“Thank you. This is all very kind of you.” She smoothed her dress over her knees and folded her hands in her lap. It was a constant struggle not to squirm.

For one thing, she didn't know this man from Adam. It felt weird getting in his truck and letting him take her into town. For another thing, she had an undeniable attraction to him, and that wasn't like her at all.

She also had a pile of concerns. From the moment he'd told her she was in Canyon Springs, she'd gone on alert. Mabel had specifically warned her not to stop here. She'd heard rumors that shifters lived in this town, and they were not to be trusted.

Marge didn't put much stock in Mabel's opinion about shifters in general since neither of them had ever met one, at least as far as Marge knew. Nevertheless, Marge needed to be aware of the possibility.

She turned her gaze toward Josiah several times as he drove, wondering if he was a shifter. He didn't look any different than any other human she knew, so it seemed unlikely. It was also possible there were no shifters in town and the rumor was false.

Josiah took her breath away. His aftershave filled the inside of the truck. Every time she inhaled, she drew in more of his scent. It shocked her to be so instantly attracted to a man. After all, she'd just spent four years in college, and never once had she fallen for a man. She'd gone on a few dates, but no one had captured her attention.

Now that she'd graduated, she imagined herself finding a teaching job—hopefully in the same school as Mabel. Her prospects were going to dwindle real soon, making it more likely that she would remain a spinster.

Mabel hadn't met a man in college either. The twins had roomed together all four years and though they'd had other friends, they had often ended the evenings back in their room, not needing outsiders to fill a void.

Josiah Keller had Marge's attention like no one ever had before. He was also just as nervous as she was, as if this were a date rather than a guy helping her out while her car got repaired. He'd clearly gone to great lengths to clean up and shave, so she didn't think she was mistaken.

While she boldly watched his profile, he gripped the steering wheel over and over. He also bounced his left knee several times. It took him a few minutes before he spoke. "So you're a teacher, huh?"

"Yes. I mean I don't have a job yet, but yes. Roger told me you just got a job with a logging company."

He smiled and sat up straighter. "I did. Looking forward to starting soon. It's good money."

"Sounds kind of dangerous." She had no idea why she should care. No matter how handsome Josiah was, she was only here for one night. Tomorrow morning, she would be on her way to Hyde Park.

He glanced at her. "Nah. I'll be fine. I'm strong. My daddy's a logger. Following in his footsteps."

She admired his tenacity. She wished she had as much confidence as him. She had applied for several teaching positions in Hyde park and a few surrounding towns, but so far no one had requested an interview.

Roger pulled into a spot at the diner and shut off the engine. Instead of opening the car door and climbing down from the truck, he turned to face her, his forearm resting on the

steering wheel. “You’ve never been to a town like Canyon Springs before, have you?”

She shook her head. It felt strange and intrusive to ask him flat out what he meant, so she pursed her lips.

“You realize this is a shifter town, right?”

She nodded, feeling heat suffuse her cheeks.

He gave her a half grin. “Have you ever met a shifter before?”

She swallowed. “Not that I’m aware of.”

Suddenly, he reached out and took her hand in his, lightly holding her fingers and stroking her knuckles. She didn’t mind. Not at all. In fact, she was relieved. She’d wanted to touch him again ever since they’d shaken hands in introduction.

It wasn’t rational, but she liked the contact. Her nerves settled immediately. She cleared her throat. “Are you... I mean, uh, are you a shifter?”

He held her gaze for a moment before nodding. “Yes. Lupine.”

She shivered, not so much out of fear. She wasn’t afraid of Josiah, just curious. “That’s...um... Okay.”

He smiled. “I know it’s unnerving when people meet their first shifter. I’m sure you have a thousand questions. I’ll answer every one of them. But for now, I just wanted to make sure you understood before we go inside.”

She nodded slowly, uncertain what she was supposed to understand.

He must have sensed her confusion because he ran his other hand through his hair and chewed on the corner of his bottom lip for a moment before continuing. “The first thing you need to know about shifters is that we have a keen sense of smell.”

“Okay.” For the last ten minutes, she’d felt like it was her who had a strong sense of smell trapped in this truck with Josiah. He’d made her squirm.

Josiah glanced out the window and then back at her. “About half this town is shifter. The other half is regular human. The humans who live in Canyon Springs are extremely familiar with our abilities though.”

“Okay,” she repeated, not at all sure she was following this conversation.

Josiah took a deep breath. “Everyone in the diner is going to know you’re new in town, that your human, and that you’re, uh, well, with me. Just wanted to warn you because people are going to stare.”

She glanced down at where he held her hand. He was making no sense to her at all. Obviously she was new in town. She didn’t think it would take a rocket scientist to realize she was human. And since she didn’t know another soul, clearly she was with Josiah.

Josiah lifted her hand, holding it firmer before releasing it. “Let’s just go eat. I’ll try to explain better later.”

She nodded.

He opened his door, climbed down from the truck with graceful ease, and then rounded the hood to help her out. The moment his fingers had a hold of hers once more, she felt relieved. He didn’t seem inclined to release her as they headed

toward the entrance, but that felt too forward, so she eased her hand out of his grip and clasped hers together in front of her.

Josiah opened the front door and held it for her to pass under his arm. He set a hand at the small of her back next, guiding her through the diner to an open booth.

If she wasn't mistaken, most of the patrons stopped talking and turned their attention toward her. She wasn't sure what to make of that. It almost seemed rude. Josiah had warned her not two minutes ago that people would stare though, so she shouldn't have been surprised when they did.

He waited for her to slide into a booth and then instead of taking the seat across from her, he slid in beside her. His thigh bumped hers as she scooted across.

Her heart was racing as he reached across her front to grab a menu and handed it to her. He twisted his body slightly her direction, set his forearm on the back of the bench behind her, and smiled. "I know this menu forward and backward, but you take a minute to look."

She glanced down, but her mind was on his every move. Her vision was blurry. She couldn't focus on anything but the muscles in his thigh, his protective stance, the way he smiled at her, and holy moly, she was pretty sure he was playing with a lock of her hair. "Why don't you just order for me. I trust you."

A woman showed up at their booth. "Hey, Josiah. Who's this?"

Josiah turned to face the waitress. "This is Marge. She stopped for gas and had a little car trouble. She actually needs a place to stay tonight. I was hoping she could stay with you?"

He lifted a brow. “Oh. Sorry.” He glanced back at Marge. “Marge, this is Esther. Esther, Marge.”

Esther’s face lit up. “So nice to meet you. Of course. You’re welcome to stay as long as you’d like. I have to close up tonight, so I’ll be late, but Josiah has a key to my place. If you get tired of him entertaining you, you can let yourself into my duplex.” Her eyes danced with mirth. Her tone was teasing.

Marge wasn’t sure how to read this woman, but she liked her. “Thank you so much. I hate to put you out like this. I’m sure I’ll be out of your hair and on my way tomorrow morning.”

Esther glanced at Josiah, eyebrows lifted. “It’s no problem at all.”

Josiah cleared his throat. “Can you bring us two burger and fries, Esther? And two pops?”

Esther hesitated a moment and then pasted on a grin. “Sure thing.” She spun around and left them.

“I feel strange asking her to put me up for the night. Are you sure she doesn’t mind?”

“Trust me, she doesn’t mind at all. We’ve known each other our entire lives. She’s a good friend.” He leaned closer. “If it really makes you uncomfortable, though, you’re welcome to stay with me.”

Marge flushed again, her entire body heating at his insinuation. Or was he just being polite? Or...was he kidding? She didn’t comment.

Josiah resumed twirling her hair, which was oddly comforting instead of weird. This was way more like a date than a friendly gesture, and she found she didn’t care. She felt

special for the first time in her life. Someone had every ounce of their attention on her.

Usually, when she was with Mabel, people stared for a different reason. They were shocked by how identical the two of them were. Marge always felt more like a circus display than an individual person. She could never be sure if anyone was interested in her in particular or just the anomaly that was the two of them together.

No one in Canyon Springs knew Mabel or even that Marge was a twin though. Tonight, she was just Marge. It was a rare treat. And the unbelievably handsome man at her side was giving her his undivided attention.

It felt good. She didn't want it to end.

CHAPTER 3



Dinner was a rare treat. It had been a while since Marge had scraped together money for a diner. She'd spent most of the last four years pinching pennies to keep her expenses to a minimum. And she was proud of the fact that she'd graduated from college without loans. She had worked several hours a week tutoring and every summer. Burgers had been a luxury.

After dinner, Josiah drove them to his duplex, which turned out to be part of a row of attached homes. Josiah's was on the end. Esther's was next door.

Josiah seemed a bit nervous as he grabbed Marge's suitcase from the back of his truck and led her into his place. He spun around in the doorway. "I wasn't expecting you today, so the place is messy. I promise I'm not a slob though."

She smiled. "I don't mind." It was cute that he cared at all. She hadn't met many men who gave a hoot what anyone thought about their living space. She followed him inside, surprised to find that he'd exaggerated. The place was quite nice and not nearly as messy as he'd suggested.

The way he'd spoken, she'd expected plates and glasses to be stacked up in the living room. Dirty clothes on the floor. None of that was the case. "It's not much, but it's mine, and

now that I'll be starting with the logging company, I'll make enough money to afford something larger soon."

She wasn't sure why he was bothering to explain his living situation to her, as if it were important to impress her. Granted this entire surreal evening so far had been like a date. Not just any date, but the best date ever with the first man she'd been this attracted to in her life.

It made her nervous. She didn't live here. After tonight, she would mostly likely never see Josiah again. She would be heading home in the morning. Which reminded her, "Do you have a phone I could use? My parents and sister will be worried when I don't show up soon."

"Of course." He led her through his small living room and through a door that led to a galley kitchen. He pointed at the phone on the wall. "Take your time. I'll give you some privacy." He stepped back through the door to the living room.

She lifted the phone off the cradle and dialed her parents' number, intending to keep this call short. She didn't want to stick Josiah with a large bill.

After three rings, Mabel answered. "Hello?"

"Hi. It's me. Listen, I had car trouble."

"Oh no," Mabel responded before Marge could continue. "Are you okay? Where are you?"

This was the part she was dreading. Ignoring the last question, Marge responded to the first. "I'm fine. Hopefully it's just a leaky radiator. The engine was steaming when I stopped for gas. The attendant says he can fix it in the morning and I'll be on my way."

"That's good. How far away are you?"

“Only about three hours.”

There was a brief pause. “Please tell me you aren’t in Canyon Springs.”

Marge cringed. Why on earth Mabel was so hung up on this town was beyond her. She sighed. “It’s fine, Mabel. I’m fine. The people here are lovely. Everyone has been kind. Someone in town even offered me a place to stay for the night.”

“*Marge*,” her sister shouted into the receiver. “That place is not safe. You’ll get lured in and never leave.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“That’s a shifter town, Marge. You can’t stay there.”

Marge blew out another breath. She didn’t want to have this conversation with her sister right now, nor did she want to explain Mabel’s absurd fear of shifters to the man who could probably hear every word from the other room. She was also racking up his phone bill. “I’ll be fine. I’ve got to go. I’m being rude. Tell Mom and Dad. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She hung up without saying another word.

Taking a deep breath, she turned and headed back into the living room. Josiah was sitting on the edge of his beige couch, elbows on his knees. He jumped back to his feet when she entered. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. It will be. Sorry about that.”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but you sounded upset.”

She nodded. “It’s silly. My sister has some ludicrous beliefs about shifters, so she’s worried about me.”

Josiah pursed his lips, nodded, and ran a hand over his hair. “I see. What kind of beliefs?”

Marge padded farther into the room. “It’s not important. Doesn’t matter.”

He reached out a hand as she approached.

It was impossible to ignore the pull, so she accepted his touch and lowered onto the couch alongside him. Something about their proximity scrambled her brain. She prayed there wasn’t an ounce of truth to Mabel’s notions. If so, she was in serious trouble.

“Sounds like shifters make your sister nervous.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“What about *you*? Do I make you nervous?” He held her hand in his again, stroking her knuckles.

She swallowed. “Yes. But not because I’m prejudiced. I don’t care if you’re a shifter.”

“Why do I make you nervous then? I’ll do my best to fix it if you tell me.”

She glanced down at their combined hands, deciding to be bold. “I feel like we just went on a date. Did we?”

He hesitated. “*I* think so. Does that bother you?” He pulled her hand closer, gripping it now on his thigh.

She took several shallow breaths. His presence was overwhelming. “Not exactly. But I don’t know you or anyone else in town. And I’m alone in your home with you. It feels kind of forward I guess.”

He grinned. She was starting to love his smile. It was playful, and his eyes danced at the same time. “I certainly don’t think you’re too forward, Marge. But I will tell you that shifters often don’t operate by the same social standards as regular humans.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means when we meet someone we feel, uh, connected to, we don’t waste time. It’s not in our nature.”

She held his gaze for several seconds. “And you feel connected to me?” She wasn’t sure what answer she was most hoping for. If he said no, she would feel foolish and disappointed. If he said yes, her nerves would double.

“Yes. Very.”

Heat raced up her cheeks.

“I think you feel the same thing. There’s an energy between us.”

She nodded, unable to stop herself. “I agree, but it doesn’t really matter because I’m only here one night, and then I have to return to Hyde Park.”

He turned to face her better, setting his elbow on the back of the couch. “What if you stayed here for a few days? I’d like to get to know you. Surely it won’t upset your plans too much. You said you haven’t found a job yet, and even when you do, it won’t start until fall, right?”

She blinked at him. “Stay here? In Canyon Springs?”

“Yes.” He lowered his fingers from where they rested on the back of the couch to reach for her hair. He played with a heavy lock absentmindedly. She wasn’t sure he was even aware he was touching her so intimately.

“I couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be proper. Plus, my family is expecting me. They’d worry. Mabel would lose her mind.”

“You could call them tomorrow afternoon and tell them your car isn’t ready yet. Yeah?”

She bit into her lower lip and then released it. "I've never lied to them. I would feel awful doing so."

"Then I'll just make sure your car truly isn't ready. I bet it needs a part we don't have in town. We'll probably have to order it." His eyes were dancing again in that way they did when he was enjoying himself.

She couldn't help feeling drawn in by his personality. She giggled. "That's so mischievous."

He wiggled his brows. "I can be mischievous when I put my mind to it. When it really matters."

She sobered a bit. "Why does it matter? Me staying I mean. What if we went on another date tomorrow and liked each other even more? That would just make it harder for me to leave. I can't stay here. I have a home."

"Do your plans not include meeting a man, falling in love, and getting married some day?"

She giggled again, nervously. "Yes. Of course they do."

"Well, what if that day is today? What if you considered getting a teaching job here in Canyon Springs? I think they're even looking for a new teacher for the fall. The incoming kindergarten class is larger than usual."

She shook her head. "Do you have an answer for everything?"

"Yes."

"We just met a few hours ago. We don't know anything about each other. You seem to be planning our lives. Your idea is preposterous."

"We would know more about each other if you stayed in town." He lifted a brow.

Her body was warming up to his idea. Totally irrationally. Suddenly, Mabel's words haunted her, and she drew her hand back out of Josiah's grasp. Something about the way he touched her made her think thoughts she'd never even considered with a man before. Naughty thoughts about what it would feel like if he kissed her.

No. She was lying to herself. Men had kissed her before. A few. Well, two. But that's as far as she'd ever gotten with a man. Josiah made her visualize him leaning over her, pressing her into the couch cushions. She imagined his hand coming up to cup her breast, and that thought sent a tingling down her spine.

It didn't stop there either. She wanted his hands all over her body. She wanted to be naked with him. Feel his hardness against her. She wanted to see his penis. Touch it. Maybe even lower her mouth over it.

She shook the wicked thoughts from her head and jumped up to take a step away from him, needing space to clear her head of naughty thoughts of sex.

"You okay, Marge?" He rose also, rubbing his palms on his thighs.

"Yes. I'm just... I don't usually act this forward is all. It's not like me."

"It's not your fault, you know."

She stared at him. "What isn't?"

"The way you're feeling. The attraction. It's totally normal. It happens when shifters meet the right person."

She chuckled, dizzy with humor now. "But I'm not a shifter, and you can't begin to imagine what I was thinking." If he did, he'd be appalled. Wouldn't he?

“I’m pretty sure I can.” His voice was calm. He also didn’t approach her.

She took several steps back and crossed her arms, protecting herself from herself. The urge to step into his embrace was strong. “You make me take leave of my senses.”

“It’s not me, Marge. It’s natural. We call it Fate.”

“Fate? What are you talking about?”

“She’s a force of nature. She decides when and how and where shifters meet their intended mates. Apparently, she chose today. And she chose us. It doesn’t matter that you’re not a shifter too. You feel the same pull.”

Marge sucked in a breath. “That makes no sense. I don’t believe Fate chooses my destiny.”

He inhaled slowly. “I know it sounds foreign to you, but not to me. It’s a way of life here.”

She stared at him. “And you think your destiny was chosen today when I pulled up to the gas pump?” It sounded even more ridiculous when she stated it out loud.

“Yes.”

Marge backed up another step, bumping into the wall. Suddenly, every warning Mabel had ever issued concerning shifters rushed to the front of her mind. She trembled at the realization. “This is what my sister tried to tell me,” she murmured.

“What did she tell you?” Josiah asked.

“That when people stop in Canyon Springs, they get lured under the spell of the locals and never leave. It was her greatest fear. She told me not to stop in this town. And here

you are proving her right. You obviously have some sort of power to control my mind and make me think I should stay.”

He shook his head. “I don’t have that kind of power, Marge. I promise. I’m not controlling you in any way. It’s out of my hands.”

She shook her head also. “You have to be doing something. I’m not myself at all. My thoughts are not my own. I feel like I’m out of my body. Floating or something. I’ve left my senses.”

“Marge, I swear to you, I have no more control over the way you feel than I do over my own reactions.”

Her breasts felt tight, and she pressed against them with her forearms. She suddenly wished she had a sweater over her sundress covering her shoulders. Giving her more protection. Simultaneously, she wished she weren’t wearing clothes at all. She shuddered.

Josiah took a few steps toward her and stopped. He looked nervous. “Listen, Marge, I know this is hard to understand. Honestly, I’m struggling to grasp the depth of it myself, and I’ve known this day would come my entire life. My family and friends tried to explain it to me, but until I experienced it myself, I didn’t realize...” His voice trailed off.

“Realize what?” She shouldn’t have asked, but she couldn’t resist. It was interesting, considering how flustered she felt.

“How powerful it would be. No one could have prepared me.” He twisted his fingers together in front of him. “I’m floundering here. It’s overwhelming. The moment I scented you as I approached your car, my world flipped upside down. I know it’s hard for you to grasp, and I’m trying so hard to help

you understand.” He ran a hand over his head and turned around for a moment, obviously taking a deep breath.

She could sense his nerves, palpable in the room. He was stressed. For some reason, she didn't like being the cause of his tension. She wanted to ease his mind. She wanted to wrap her arms around him and bury herself against his back or his chest. Either way.

She shook thoughts of touching him from her mind and focused on one word he'd spoken. “What do you mean you scented me?” she murmured.

He turned back around, inhaling deeply while meeting her gaze. “Wolf shifters have an incredible sense of smell. We know things regular humans don't. We can scent people's essence and their pheromones. We can scent that two people are related or that they're mated. We can scent fear, but also arousal.”

She stared at him. Every time he spoke it took her a few moments to process his words. She grabbed onto the latest mystery word. “Mated?”

He nodded, his breathing growing more erratic. “It's what happens when two people who belong together find each other. Sort of like a marriage, but more powerful.”

She couldn't grasp that one, so she backtracked. “You say you can scent people. So, you decided we were meant to be together when I rolled down my car window?”

“Yes. I mean I'm not the one who decided. Fate did. But yes. And now I'm faced with the difficult task of helping you understand, while praying you don't get scared off in the meantime.”

She flinched. “I’m scared to death, Josiah. Out of my mind. Can you scent that?”

“Yes.” He took several shallow breaths. “And it frightens the hell out of me. Half of me wants to see if someone can come over and help me out here. The other half wants to handle this on my own. Do you want me to call someone? My mom or dad or Roger. At least you’ve met him. Or Esther will be here later tonight.”

She shook her head. The last thing she wanted was to add more people to this room to confuse her more. “No. Please don’t. Not right now.”

He nodded. “Okay.” He took another step closer. “Marge, please let me touch you. It will calm both of us.” He reached out a hand. “I promise not to maul you. Just give me your hand.”

She felt like her heart was beating out of her chest as she stared at his outstretched hand. She wanted to run to him. She craved the contact. Not just with his fingers, but his entire body. Like a magnet.

Finally, she shuffled forward, dropping her arms from her chest. When she reached him, he grabbed her fingers. The moment he touched her, she calmed, just as he’d told her she would. Though she’d already known that from every previous time they’d touched.

In a strange way, it seemed like they became one being each time they made contact. If she wasn’t mistaken, her heartbeat fell into sync with his.

She stared at their connection, letting him tangle their fingers together. His hand was so much larger than hers.

Rough skin against her smoother palm. It was heady, and she took another step closer.

Josiah slid his hand up her arm to her shoulder and then gently guided her into his embrace.

She went willingly, flattening her chest against his, wrapping her arms around his middle, settling her cheek against his chest. It felt so good. So right. So nice.

His chin landed on top of her head, and she could hear him breathing deeply. Comforting her as if she'd just suffered a loss. In a way she had. Deep inside she knew her life was forever altered even if she wasn't willing to admit it out loud yet.

They stood like that in the middle of his living room for a long time as the sun dipped lower in the sky and the room darkened. All was right with the world while she held on to him. "I don't understand this, Josiah," she finally murmured.

He slid his hands up and down her back, burying one in her hair. "I know, baby. I'm going to help you." His voice was soothing.

She needed more. She needed to see his eyes. She tipped her head back and looked up at him. His expression was intense, and he cupped her face, his fingers moving over her skin constantly in motion, his gaze dipping to her mouth while his thumb grazed over her lips.

She licked her lips, a whimper escaping. She'd never wanted a man to kiss her as badly as she did Josiah, and she was fairly certain he knew that because he slowly dipped his head until their lips touched.

The moment they made contact, she moaned. He did too. The intensity was mindboggling. He started off slowly,

nibbling around her mouth, but then deepened the kiss, angling his head to the side and parting his lips.

She followed his lead, letting his tongue slide along hers as she held on to him tighter. It was so powerful. Emotion filled the room.

Josiah's hands wandered up and down her back, holding her close but never straying anywhere inappropriate. She practically willed him to be less of a gentleman. So out of character for her. No man had ever gotten this far with her, certainly not one she'd met just a few hours earlier.

Marge was lost in the kiss, having no idea how long it lasted before Josiah pulled back and set his forehead against hers. He slid both hands into her hair and cupped her face. "You're mine."

CHAPTER 4



Josiah watched his mate's face closely, needing her to understand, needing her to be able to accept this phenomenon. He held her gaze as she did the same, neither of them saying a word for long seconds, both of them breathing heavily as they tried to catch their breath.

Finally, she licked those precious swollen lips. "I believe you."

His heart felt like it would leap out of his chest as he smiled slowly and let his eyelids close for a few moments. *Thank you, God.* He didn't release her. He wasn't sure he ever would. "Please tell me you won't leave here in the morning."

"Okay." That one word as wobbly and filled with uncertainty, but it was enough. It was what he needed.

He blew out a breath and met her gaze again. "Thank you. I know this is a lot to absorb. I know it feels like it's on warp speed to you. I'll do everything I can to help you adjust. I'll answer any questions you have. I'll take things at whatever pace you're comfortable with. I just have one request."

"What's that?"

"Stay with me. I mean stay here. With me. I can't stand the thought of you sleeping next door. I need you with me."

She shivered in his arms and chewed on that bottom lip again. “That’s so inappropriate. People would talk.”

“Not people in Canyon Springs. Everyone who lives here understands the way a mating works. They would raise eyebrows if you left me; not if you stayed.”

Her breath hitched. “You said people can scent things. Does that mean everyone we’ve seen knows you’ve laid some sort of claim on me?”

He offered a wry smile. “Everyone in town knows you’re my mate, Marge. Word travels fast in Canyon Springs. They will give us a wide berth. It’s customary. Even Esther doesn’t really expect you to stay with her.”

Marge winced. “That’s so weird. They’ll think we’re, uh, having sex.”

He forced himself not to chuckle. *They’ll know we’re having sex.* She wasn’t ready to acknowledge that part yet. “No one will judge us, Marge.”

She tipped her face into one of his palms, her eyes closing as she inhaled deeply, drawing his scent in the same way he did hers. She probably didn’t realize what she was doing and what it meant, but he loved the way she nuzzled his palm.

When she lifted her face again, she sighed. “My sister is going to be furious when I call her tomorrow.”

“I’m so sorry about your sister. Hopefully she will come around. Maybe when she understands better. What about your parents? Will they be mad?”

She shrugged. “I don’t think so. They’ll probably be concerned, but they want me to be happy. They already think Mabel and I are old maids.”

He chuckled. “What are you? Twenty-two?”

“Yes.”

“Hardly old.”

“Tell my mom that.”

“I will.” He was so elated that nothing could get him down. Not even the thought of facing her family.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

She nodded. “It’s weird that there are so many things I don’t know about you while at the same time it seems like I’ve known you for years. I’m oddly comfortable in your arms.” Her gaze slid down to his lips. “Kiss me again?”

He didn’t bother to respond as he lowered his face, still cupping her cheeks, and married his lips with hers once more. She tasted sweet from the pop she’d had at the diner. She was so damn precious. Every inch of her. He couldn’t wait to peel off her clothes and see the rest of her. His cock was straining for release.

Josiah had slept with women in the past. He wasn’t a hermit. But nothing compared to the way he felt holding Marge. The other women had simply scratched an itch. This new feeling was out of this world, solidifying everything he’d heard about the call to mate.

Marge’s sweet hands slid up and down his back and then around to his chest. Eventually, she let the tips of her fingers reach under his shirt to land on his skin. When she broke free of the kiss, her eyes were wide. “I’ve never felt anything like this before. It’s frightening. It’s like I’m not controlling my body.”

“I know. It’s normal.” He slid one hand around to cup the back of her head again. He couldn’t seem to get close enough to her. If she were a shifter, he would have already had sex with her several times by now. But she wasn’t, and he needed to tread carefully.

“Nothing about this is normal, Josiah.”

He nodded. “I get that. Not for you. I’m just trying to ease your mind.”

“Do the men in your community always end up with human women?”

He shook his head. “No. Not often. Sometimes. Many relationships are between two shifters.”

“So sometimes a shifter meets another shifter and they both realize they belong together?”

“Yes. It’s a hell of a lot easier. No explanations needed.”

She nodded slowly. “And they both just readily accept things and live happily ever after?”

“Basically.” He liked that she was asking questions and gradually grasping his world. “In addition, sometimes it’s female shifters who find themselves mated to male humans.”

She nodded slowly. “Right. Of course. Are there other types of shifters besides wolves?”

“Yes. In Canyon Springs there are also bears.”

“Wow. And do they mix? The bears and the wolves?”

He shook his head. “No. Species don’t mix. Fate seems to choose, and though she sometimes matches a shifter with a human, she doesn’t put bears with wolves. They’re not compatible. Or more importantly, they can’t reproduce

together I guess I should say. I suppose they could enjoy each other's company, but they can't have kids."

Her eyes went wide. "I hadn't thought of that. Can humans and wolves have kids?"

"Yep. And they have a fifty-fifty chance of being able to shift. A child's first shift happens at puberty."

Marge drew in a long slow breath. "This is overwhelming, Josiah."

He slid his hand down to her lower back. "I know. Keep asking questions. I'll tell you anything."

She took his advice and rattled off several questions in a row. "When do you shift? How often? Is it painful? How long does it take?"

He smiled. "I can shift anytime I want. We often drive to the mountains and shift so that we can run free in our natural state. I usually do that about once a week or whenever I'm feeling cooped up and need some time to think. It only takes about fifteen seconds, and no it doesn't hurt."

She planted her hands on his chest and shoved back a few steps. "Show me."

He held her gaze, uncertain if she was ready for that step.

"Or can you even do so in the house?"

"I can. Yes. And I'll shift for you if you want, but here's the thing." He narrowed his gaze. "I have to remove my clothes. If not, they will get shredded during the shift. I can do that in another room if you want, but that would defeat the purpose. I'm sure you're wanting to watch."

She wrapped her arms around her middle again as if she were cold and took a few steps back to sit on his couch again.

“I guess I’m just going to have to get over myself then because you’re right. I want to watch.”

Josiah judged her to be serious and ready for this step. He also wondered how much experience she had with men. How many men had she had sex with? Would she be shocked when she saw his erection? Because there was no way he would be able to keep it down. He’d been hard from the moment he’d met her, and he would stay hard for the foreseeable future.

Josiah bent down to take his shoes and socks off first. When he stood, he pulled his T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the coffee table. That left only his jeans. He watched her face as he popped the button.

Marge’s face turned red and she glanced away, embarrassed at the very least.

He hesitated, dropping his hands before lowering the zipper. “Marge, how many men have you seen naked?” He really wanted to know. It would affect his decisions going forward.

She glanced down, wringing her hands in her lap. After a moment, she said, “None.”

He released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He wanted to fist pump into the air, but he managed to control himself. “I don’t have to do this right now, if it’s making you uncomfortable. We could wait.”

She shook her head as she lifted her gaze. “No. Please. I want to see.” Her face grew redder. “You shift I mean. I want to watch you shift.”

He fought the smile that threatened to spread. He wouldn’t have cared what experience she had with men either way, but the thought that no other man had touched her made his chest

swell. “Okay, but I don’t want you to freak out on me. I can’t control my physical reaction to you. You should know that I’m, uh, fully erect.” He wanted her to realize this was his full size.

She pursed her lips and nodded.

Finally, relatively certain she could handle this entire process, he lowered the zipper on his jeans, shrugged them over his hips, and stepped out of them. He watched her face the entire time, but she mostly kept her attention averted, her gaze somewhere to the left of him.

Perhaps standing naked before her should have unnerved him. He was vulnerable. She was fully clothed. But it wasn’t in his nature to be modest. His only concern was for her feelings. “I’m going to shift now. It will look like a shimmer to you, and then I’ll drop onto all fours. I will be large, but you never need to fear me. I’ll still be me inside. Fully aware. I would protect you with my life. I would never hurt you in any way.”

She met his gaze and held it bravely. “Okay.”

Josiah closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and focused on the transformation, letting it wash through him. He was more acutely aware than usual about the stages from the lengthening of his hair, to the elongation of his jaw, to the popping of bones as they reconfigured. In seconds, he was on all fours in front of her.

Marge’s eyes were wider than ever. She leaned back, one hand on her chest. “My God. That’s amazing. And you’re so... gorgeous.”

He smiled inwardly.

“Do all of you mostly look alike with a mixture of gray fur?”

He nodded his snout.

“Can I touch you? Or pet you I guess?” She smiled.

He padded closer, dipping his head in a non-threatening way when he reached her.

She set a hand tentatively on the top of his head and then ran her fingers through his fur. “Soft,” she murmured. “Amazing.” Growing bolder, she set her other hand on him too and smoothed her palms down his back several inches. It felt so damn good having her touch him like this. Not in a sexual way, but because of her acceptance. She was handling this entire revelation far better than some stories he’d heard about other human mates.

Finally, she released him and sat. “Thank you. I think I’d rather have Josiah the man back.”

He laughed in his mind and backed up several feet before letting the transformation wash over him again. Seconds later he stood before her in his human form again. Naked. He grabbed his jeans and started to put them back on.

“Don’t.”

He froze, jerking his gaze to her. “You don’t want me to put my pants on?”

She shook her head. “I’ve clearly lost my mind and no longer have a firm grip on reality, but may I look at you?” She lifted her gaze in question.

He dropped his jeans and faced her, standing tall, hands at his sides. No matter how much confidence he normally had, right now he was nervous. Vulnerable. Exposed. To the most

important person in his life. He wasn't worried about her finding him attractive. Fate made sure that happened. But at the same time, he didn't want her to panic over his nudity.

The fact that he hadn't seen any important parts of her was not lost on him. He would do this for her though. Whatever she needed. She would reveal herself to him on her time. He would not pressure her.

He sure prayed that would be soon though. Sometime tonight would be wonderful.

Her gaze slid up and down his body several times. "Am I asking too much of you?"

"No, baby. Never. Whatever you need."

"I've never been this bold."

He believed her. Her naivete was written on her face. Eyes wide. Cheeks flushed. And she kept licking her lips, which made his erection stiffer.

"It's like a force has taken over my ability to reason. I'm so drawn to you. I'm not even scared."

"Scared of what, baby?" He forced his voice to be calm.

"Of anything. Not of you or of your ability to shift or of the thought of having sex." Her voice trailed off at the end.

His erection jerked at her words, and he couldn't keep from reaching around and circling the hard shaft with his palm. "I never want you to be scared, nor will I ask more of you than you're ready for." He stepped forward slowly, gauging her reaction to make sure she didn't stiffen. When he reached her, he held out a hand.

She set her smaller one in his and let him help her stand. She calmed at his touch, as he knew she would, and he pulled

her against his chest, flattening his shaft against her belly.

He tipped her chin back with his fingers, meeting her gaze again. "I've never wanted anything so badly in my life, Marge. I want to own every inch of you. Mind, body, and soul. It's important for you to know, however, that the pull we feel toward each other right now, the force that's been guiding us all day from the moment we met, it will multiply exponentially when we have sex."

She sucked in a sharp breath, flattening her palms on his bare chest. "That's not imaginable."

He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, still holding her chin with his other fingers. "I agree. And this is new to me also. Obviously. I'm going by what I've heard. Shifters only mate once, and it's for life. The bond you and I feel will be stronger after I claim you fully."

"Claim me..."

"Make you entirely mine. Sex will solidify it. Not the act itself exactly, but the emotions that will entail. The commitment. It's powerful, Marge. I'd happily peel this dress off you and make you mine in every way, but I need you to be certain. It will kill me to lose you after we take this any further."

She licked her lips again, her deep brown eyes staring into his. "An external force is sucking me in. Telling me to go for it. Not wanting me to let this opportunity get by me."

"You want me to make love to you, Marge?" He needed to be certain he understood her perfectly.

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

“I figure one of two things will happen, and I can’t stop either of them.”

“What two things are those?” he asked, letting his lips lift in a grin.

“Either you’re wrong, and I’ll have given my virginity to you in exchange for what I know will be amazing sex I’m not willing to pass up. Or you’re right, and I’ll have committed myself for life to the first person I’ve ever felt this strongly about. In which case I will never look back or regret it for a second.”

His breath hitched. She was amazing. Strong and sure. Confident and willing to take this risk. “Is it too soon to tell you I’m falling in love with you?”

She smiled, her face lighting up. “Not if you intend to have sex with me. I wouldn’t do this if I weren’t falling in love with you too.”

No sweeter words had ever been spoken to him.

CHAPTER 5



Marge's entire world had been tipped on its axis and was spinning out of control. Like a rollercoaster. Only she hadn't buckled herself inside the car, so she was now holding on to the bar in front of her while the ride continued faster and faster around twists and bends and rises and falls. She prayed she would survive the ride and not get thrown from the car.

Somehow she was certain she would not only survive but thrive. Thoughts of what her family, especially her sister, would say assaulted her momentarily, but she shook free of what tomorrow would bring and focused all her energy on what was about to happen tonight.

Suddenly, Josiah dipped down and lifted her into his arms, cradling her against his chest as he carried her through the room and up a set of stairs. She had realized this duplex was two stories when she first arrived, and assumed his bedroom was above the kitchen and living room. If that was where he was headed, she wasn't disappointed.

The truth was she was so aroused that she didn't care if they had sex in the living room, but a bed would be more comfortable. She squirmed in his arms when his hand landed on her bare thighs. Her dress was modest enough, but the skirt fell away from her legs when he lifted her.

His gaze remained on hers the entire time, serious, determined. After nudging a door open with his hip, he continued into his bedroom and then deposited her on her feet next to his bed. He only took his attention away from her long enough to turn on a small lamp on the nightstand.

His hands cupped her face again, and he kissed her with more urgency than before. Devoured her. She'd never imagined kissing could be like this or that it could affect her so powerfully. Every time their lips met, she fell under his spell. He'd insisted it wasn't his doing. At this point, she didn't care.

Her body tingled, goosebumps rising on her arms as she slid her hands up his chest again. She loved the feel of his skin, smooth, hard, muscular. She wanted to ease her palms lower and wrap her fingers around his erection, but she didn't feel bold enough yet.

Josiah's hands slid to her shoulders and then around to her back. He found the zipper on her dress and slowly lowered it, his lips never leaving hers. He stroked her tongue with his, driving her mad with lust. When he eased the straps of her dress over her shoulders and down her arms, she shivered.

This was a big deal for her. No man had ever undressed her. No man had seen her naked or touched her like this. She wasn't a prude; she just hadn't met the right person.

How could she be sure *Josiah* was the right man? She couldn't. Not really. But her heart screamed that she should trust her feelings. Everything was moving too fast and not fast enough. It didn't matter that she'd met him only this afternoon. What mattered was how he made her feel, so she went with that and let her dress fall to the floor.

Josiah released her lips and leaned back far enough to look down at her. She was wearing a plain white bra and panties.

Obviously when she'd gotten in her car this morning, intent on driving home to her family, meeting a man and getting ravaged by him hadn't been on her short list, so her undergarments weren't special by any stretch of the imagination.

Josiah swallowed audibly. "You're so beautiful." His fingers trailed over her shoulders and down her arms before coming back up her belly and along the edge of her bra. When he reached behind to undo the clasp, letting the material fall away, she shivered.

There was no stopping her reaction to him. Her nipples were hard points, and she bit into her lip to keep from begging him to touch them.

Suddenly, the frenzied rush to get upstairs, the devouring kisses, and the sense of urgency faded away. Josiah slowed things down to a snail's pace as if he wanted to savor every moment. She could see the reverence in his expression.

He stared at her breasts for several seconds, his hands gripping her waist, and then instead of touching them with his hands as she silently willed, he dipped his head lower and took one into his mouth.

She moaned, the sound embarrassing her when she realized it came from her. She grabbed his shoulders to hold on as he cupped her breast and swirled his tongue around the tip.

Nothing had ever felt so good in her life. A tight ball formed in her belly, and wetness gathered between her legs. Her sex came alive in a way she'd never experienced.

This was what all the hype was about. This was exactly what she'd dreamed of experiencing one day. This arousal.

This frenzied need to be closer to someone. Have them inside her.

She was oddly not scared, not of the act of sex itself. She was nervous about doing it right or disappointing Josiah, but not concerned about the twinge of pain she'd heard about or even the repercussions of her actions. Not now.

When he switched his attention to her other breast, the cool air in the room hit her wet nipple, making her arch toward him and tip her head back. So much sensation assaulted her at once, and there was no denying the fact that her sex was swollen and needy. She squeezed her legs together.

A sense of urgency swept through her, and she smoothed her hands down his back and boldly cupped his butt cheeks.

He groaned against her breast and then released her nipple with a pop. His hands went to the edge of her panties to slide them over her hips and down her thighs until they fell to the floor.

She stepped out of them on wobbly legs, gripping his hips now. Her gaze lowered to his erection, and she couldn't resist touching him. Tentatively at first, she trailed her finger up and down the shaft, marveling at the smooth texture. His penis was larger than she imagined, though she had nothing to compare him to.

She had no idea how large the inside of her vagina was. Exploring her sexuality had never occurred to her. Now, she wished she'd touched herself more. Too late.

Semen leaked from the tip of his erection, and she felt compelled to swipe it with her finger and bring it to her lips. The salty taste assaulted her senses. Heady. Invigorating.

Josiah grabbed her hand as she popped her finger from her mouth. He drew that finger to his own mouth and sucked it deep, his gaze holding hers.

She trembled with anticipation.

He grabbed her waist and lifted her off the floor to deposit her on the bed, scooting her back as he climbed over her body. He hovered above her, his gaze wandering up and down her frame. His erection bobbed, seeming to grow larger.

Josiah reached for her hands and threaded their fingers together, planting them above her head. He met her gaze again. “Keep your hands here, okay? Let me make you feel good.”

She swallowed. “Why? I want to touch you too.” She squirmed.

He gave her a half smile, one side of his mouth lifting. “Because I won’t last two seconds if you touch me.”

“Oh.” Another shiver.

“You can explore all you want. Later. After. Any time you want. But not now.”

“Okay,” she murmured. It was powerful knowing he was this turned on by her.

He released her hands after reinforcing his words. And then he trailed the tips of his fingers down her arms and over her breasts. When he tapped her nipples, she arched off the bed. “Josiah...”

“Oh, Marge. You have no idea how much I enjoy the sound of my name on your lips.”

She bit into her lower lip, blinking at him. Her vision was blurring as he dragged his fingertips over her belly and then

the tops of her thighs. When he lifted one knee and then the other, nudging her legs to part and situating himself between them, she closed her eyes.

The exposure was unnerving. She'd always envisioned sex being far more demure. In the dark. Under the covers. Maybe a little kissing before the man thrust into her.

This was nothing like what she'd imagined. Josiah was worshiping her body. His hands came to her thighs and pressed them wider, causing her folds to part.

She gasped, fisting her hands against the covers to keep from reaching for him. Josiah's attention was on her sex when she glanced down, his fingers parting her labia farther and then gliding gently over her sensitive skin.

"Your arousal is like a drug, baby. It's going to drive me mad for days on end."

She squirmed, trying to escape his intent gaze on her private parts.

He grabbed her hips to steady her. "Stay still."

She whimpered at his command.

He lifted his gaze to hers as his fingers stroked her folds. "I know you haven't had a man before, but have you touched yourself, Marge? Have you made yourself come?"

She flushed, her face heating. It felt like she was going to self-combust from the burn of her cheeks. "No," she whispered. Did that make her strange?

He smiled. "Don't let that embarrass you. It's hot. I'm humbled. I'm going to make you come first before I enter you."

Her body was shaking. It was impossible to imagine what it might feel like to orgasm, but she had no doubt he was about to give her that. Her body was on fire. Every inch of her skin was sensitive. She wanted to experience whatever he was offering.

Suddenly, he drew his finger up higher and found the little nub above her sex.

She cried out when he flicked over it and then circled the swollen bundle of nerves. Sensation assaulted her. Pressure. Something she couldn't put her finger on. The tight ball of need in her belly grew stronger.

Josiah continued, his finger dragging between her folds, gathering her arousal and then circling her little nub again. She had no idea so much sensation could be experienced from that tiny spot. Her clitoris. This hadn't occurred to her. She'd thought sex was all about a man's penis sliding into her vagina. She should have paid attention when girls talked about sex. She was wholly unprepared for this experience.

When Josiah eased a finger inside her, she whimpered, bombarded now at the dual assault against her clitoris and her channel. Throwing all semblance of modesty to the wind, she let her legs fall open farther.

"You're so damn sexy, Marge. I'm the luckiest man alive."

She couldn't respond to that. For one thing, she couldn't speak if she wanted to. All her brain cells were focused on her sex as he added a second finger and then scissored them inside her. Slowly. Carefully.

"You okay, baby?"

She moaned. She was so much more than okay.

He pressed against that amazing little nub of nerves again, and her breath caught in her throat. Something changed. Too much sensation. Or not enough. She jerked her gaze to his, questioning him.

He smiled. “Just relax. Let it go. Come for me.” He thrust his fingers in deeper as he spoke and then flicked his thumb over the swollen bundle of nerves.

Her mouth fell open. Her vision blurred. The world stopped spinning. There was a moment when she hovered at the precipice of the unknown, even her hearing muffled. And then she crashed over the top, her body shaking in tandem with the pulses inside her channel and the throbbing of her clitoris.

It was like heaven on earth. The best feeling in the world. She’d never known anything like this, nor would she have believed anyone if they tried to explain it.

Before she could fully focus and catch her breath, Josiah scooted down her body, flattened himself on the bed between her legs, and lowered his mouth to her sex.

She gasped, her hands flying forward to land on his head.

He was relentless though, ignoring her pushing against him. He sucked her little nub into his mouth and flicked his tongue over the tip. Before she could wrap her mind around his intentions, he pushed his tongue inside her.

“Oh God. Josiah. Oh...” She threaded her fingers in his hair, not sure if she should push him away or hold him against her. She had never thought about having a man’s mouth on her sex. Her embarrassment slowly disappeared as she succumbed to the sensations though. Her first orgasm had been out of this

world. The pressure that was building anew though was even more mindboggling.

Again, he suckled her clitoris, flicking his tongue rapidly until she shot into the stratosphere, a second orgasm taking over her body, even more powerful than the first.

She was gasping for air when he finally lifted off her, his expression smug and pleased as he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and then climbed up her body.

She sighed. “That was... I didn’t know you were going to...”

He smiled. “Delicious. You take my breath away.” He leaned over the edge of the bed and returned holding a foil packet. He held her gaze as he tore it open with his teeth and then slid the rubber down his erection. Thank God one of them had the forethought to grab protection. It hadn’t occurred to her even once.

Dropping onto his elbow to hold his weight off her, he lined his shaft up with her entrance. “You okay?” he asked, his voice gravelly.

“Better than.” She smoothed her hands up his back.

“You’re very tight. It’s going to hurt for a few moments when you stretch around me.” He stroked her cheek with his thumb. “I’ll go as slowly as possible. I promise you’ll adjust and then it will feel amazing.”

She nodded, wanting him inside her with a desperation she’d never felt before. She didn’t care that it would hurt. She needed to be filled by him.

He swallowed, still talking. “This intensity we feel... It will increase. After I claim you. You’ll be mine. I know you

have concerns about your family and how fast this happened, but you won't want to leave after we've had sex."

She stared at him. Already this was more intense than she ever could have imagined. It was impossible to grasp that it could be more. A tiny corner of her mind warned her she was treading into dangerous territory. She already understood what he meant about their bond. It would be stronger.

Her family would have to get over themselves. This was her life. She would not turn down this amazing, gorgeous man hovering over her for anyone. He was her life. He was her everything. "I need you," she declared.

His eyes slid closed for a moment as relief passed over his features, and then he lodged himself at her entrance, settled on both elbows, and pressed into her.

It was tight. Too tight. But she was a smart woman. All creatures had sex, and they did so often enough that they surely enjoyed it. She wanted to get past this moment and move on. "Do it, Josiah," she begged. "I don't need or want slow. Do it."

He hesitated only a moment and then thrust all the way to the hilt.

She gasped at the stretch as her channel adjusted to his thickness and length. It didn't hurt nearly as badly as she'd anticipated, and after a few seconds all she felt was the driving desire to add more friction.

She dug her nails into his skin and gripped him closer. "Please. Josiah. Move."

His expression was strained, his teeth gritted. For a moment, she thought he was the one in pain, but then she

understood. He was holding back. The look on his face matched the way she'd felt right before she came.

She didn't care that it would be fast this time. They had their entire lives to do this over and over.

At that thought, a shiver raced down her spine. Time stood still while he held himself deep inside her. She'd committed to this amazing man. In less than a full day, she'd changed the course of her life. She would stay in Canyon Springs. Marry this man hovering above her. Get a job here. Move into his home. Love him as thoroughly as he was loving her. With her entire soul.

Finally, he let out a breath, pulled almost out of her, and then thrust back in deep. It felt so damn good. Better than what he'd done with his fingers or his mouth. The fullness took her breath away.

She held him close as he thrust in and out several more times, finally moaning as his mouth fell open and his body shuddered. He dropped his forehead to her shoulder, gasping for breath for long seconds while she stroked her fingers up and down his back.

When he lifted his face, his gaze was intent. "You're mine, Marge Steeple."

She nodded, smiling at him. "It would seem so."

CHAPTER 6



One week later...

Marge set the phone back on the hook and wiped the tears from her eyes. The moment Josiah's hands landed on her shoulders from behind, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I guess that didn't go well," he whispered.

She shook her head, her gaze on the floor. "I knew Mabel had strong feelings about shifters, but I didn't really expect her to dig her heels in and cut me off from her life."

"I'm so sorry, baby." His arms came all the way around her, pulling her back against his front. "Maybe she'll come around in time."

Marge sighed. "I don't think so. She's stubborn. She told me never to call again."

He winced. "What about your parents?"

"They're fine. My mom talks to me when Mabel isn't home. I've spoken to my dad too."

He rocked her back and forth. "Call them as often as you'd like, Marge. I don't care about the damn phone bill. They're

your family.”

She nodded. He was such a good man. The best. Even though she'd only spent a week with him, she knew to the bottom of her soul that she belonged with him. Their bond was more important than anything. Even if her sister never accepted this relationship. Even if she dug her stubborn heels in all the way to the grave.

Marge would never give up. She would stop calling, but there was no reason she couldn't write letters. If Mabel wanted to ignore them or throw them away, that was her prerogative. Marge knew in her heart that turning her back on Josiah was out of the question and too much to ask.

Yes, her bond with Mabel had been fierce for twenty-two years. They'd done everything together, including attending the same college. But it was time to move to the next stage of life, and if Mabel wouldn't even entertain the possibility that this was where Marge belonged, then Marge could do nothing to force her.

Josiah spun her around and held her close, chest to chest. He tipped her face back with his fingers on her chin. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” The words came easily. She meant them, and she knew he did too. They were partners in life. Nothing would tear them apart.

Though they'd spent the majority of the past week alone in his duplex, she had met his extended family and friends. Every one of them was warm and inviting. In fact, the entire town had welcomed her with open arms. In particular, Esther. The two of them were the same age, and Marge already knew Esther would be a lifelong friend.

This was her family now. This community of shifters and humans. They were her people. She felt the bond not just with Josiah but with the entire town. She had already changed her focus in life. Josiah would always come first. She had applied for the teaching position in town, and was hopeful.

Josiah had resigned from his position at the gas station—which apparently wasn't shocking to anyone—and was devoting all of his time to making sure Marge adjusted to life in Canyon Springs before he started his new job at the logging company.

It was all falling into place. Everything was exactly as Fate had planned. It wasn't Her fault that Mabel was stubborn. All Fate did was ensure that Josiah met his intended mate at the precise moment he was destined to do so.

Marge would forever be grateful that she'd run out of gas in Canyon Springs. She would also laugh every time she thought about how many seconds it took Josiah to "fix" her radiator.

She closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against Josiah's chest, breathing him in, listening to his heartbeat, shoving thoughts of her sister to the back of her mind. She would never in a million years give up this man who'd stolen her heart. He was hers. For life.

Josiah's Mate is a prequel to my Canyon Springs series. If you want to learn more about Canyon Springs, the first book in the series is [Caleb's Mate](#).

ANDERS' MATE



A CANYON SPRINGS NOVELLA

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CHAPTER 1



“Dad, just ask her out already. You talk about her all the time. Obviously she’s important to you.”

Anders flinched, and then spun around to face his adult twin daughters where they sat at his kitchen island waiting for him to finish flipping grilled cheese sandwiches.

It was Layla who had spoken. Even though he’d only found out three months ago that he had any children at all, let alone two twenty-four-year-olds, he already knew their voices apart. Besides, Layla was the more outspoken of the two.

He narrowed his gaze at her, deciding to feign ignorance. It was shocking how perceptive his girls were. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She rolled her eyes.

Elena chuckled. “She’s right, Dad. We both think Annabelle is perfect for you. You’ve spent a quarter of a century alone. Time to move on.”

He spun back to face the stove and lifted the sandwiches out of the pan to slide them onto plates. He wasn’t much of a cook, but he enjoyed having his daughters over for lunch as often as they were available. After all, they had their own mates. Their own lives.

“She can’t possibly be oblivious to your affections, Dad,” Layla added. “After all, you’ve found an excuse to go to the grocery store nearly every day this week, and you always get in her checkout lane.”

Anders groaned as he set a plate in front of both women. How did Layla know so much? The gossip in Canyon Springs was out of control.

Elena took a bite and then pointed at the empty plastic package on the counter. “You’re out of cheese,” she teased.

He nailed her with a glare, knowing it didn’t reach his eyes because he couldn’t keep from smiling at the same time. “I’m an old man. I have no business courting women at my age.”

Layla laughed. “You’re fifty. That’s not old. She’s about the same age. Has she always been alone? Or did she lose a mate at some point too?”

Anders took a bite of his sandwich, not bothering to sit on the stool across from them. After he swallowed, he answered her. “She never mated. I don’t know her story. It’s none of my business. And, let me remind you, I never mated either. Not really. I had a wonderful week with your mother, she left, and I never saw her again. That’s not a mating.”

“And you’ve punished yourself for her decision ever since,” Elena said in a soft voice. “I know you think you should have gone after her, but the truth is it wouldn’t have changed anything. She died giving birth to us. You still would have been without a mate.”

“Just ask her, Dad. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

She might turn me down and I’d feel like an idiot every time I saw her from now on...

CHAPTER 2



Annabelle's heart rate picked up the moment she scented Anders entering Morton's Grocery. She struggled to keep from grinning. The next customer in line would think she'd lost a marble.

Anna didn't need to look to know approximately where Anders was in the store. She never had. Not in all the years she'd known him. Fifty, to be precise. They were the same age. They'd grown up in Canyon Springs, knowing each other at school and through their parents.

Anna had set her sights on him from a young age, but he'd never returned her affection. He'd been funny and handsome and smart, everything she'd dreamed of in a man. Granted, she realized she'd never felt that intense pull that would have indicated he was her mate, but she'd wanted him all the same.

Twenty-five years ago, he'd changed. He'd withdrawn from society. From life itself. She'd never known why until recently. Now, the entire town knew the story of how he'd spent a week with Sara Pierce, a human whose mother had been prejudiced against shifters.

Now that Layla and Elena had moved to Canyon Springs, Anders had changed. Finding out he had two daughters had softened him. He wasn't such a hermit anymore. He actually

smiled. Anna had seen glimpses of the man she'd known when they were young.

A deep inhale informed her that Anders was in line at her checkout, just like yesterday and the day before that. Was it a coincidence?

Anna handed her current customer two grocery bags and turned to Anders. "You're awfully forgetful this week, Anders. You've been in here for two or three items every day."

He glanced down at the conveyer belt and then back at her. "Oh, right. Well, the girls keep me hopping. I made them sandwiches for lunch today. Ran out of cheese."

Anna laughed. He shuffled his weight back and forth as if he were nervous. About her? Could she be so lucky? After hardly giving her, or anyone else for that matter, the time of day for over two decades, she'd seen him nearly every day either at the store or somewhere else in town.

It was time to put herself out there. If he was trying to get her attention by repeatedly shopping in Morton's and always choosing her lane, the ball was in her court. "You cook?"

He flinched. "No. Not really. I make sandwiches. But I'm learning." His smile was slightly forced.

"Trying to impress Layla and Elena?" she teased as she slowly dragged his cheese over the scanner.

"Whatever it takes. I have a lot of lost time to make up for."

Don't we all. "Maybe you need to host a dinner party. Invite them and their mates."

His face scrunched up. "I'd never be able to pull that off. I'm not kidding. Sandwiches are my limit." He met and held

her gaze, his mouth opening and closing a few times as if he was thinking about saying something more.

Her next words would be the riskiest words she'd ever spoken, but she braced herself and went for it. "I could help if you'd like. With cooking lessons or whatever." *Lord, could you sound any more pathetic, Anna?*

He swallowed, shifting his weight again. "You would do that for me?"

"Of course." She held out his grocery bag. "Any time. You could come to my place. That way I would have all the supplies. I'll teach you how to make the perfect meal."

"That would be amazing. When?"

"Whenever you'd like. I get off at six on Friday. How about then?"

He grinned wider. "Perfect." His fingers brushed hers as he took his bag, and he lingered a few moments longer than necessary, holding her gaze, his lips still lifted in a quirky smile that made her stomach do flip flops. She felt like a teenager. Except she'd never felt like this even when she was a teenager.

"See you Friday," she managed to say.

"I'll be there."

She watched as he walked away, thinking he stood taller and moved with more assurance than he had in years. It wasn't until the next customer cleared his throat that she remembered where she was and jerked her attention back to her job.

CHAPTER 3



Anders couldn't remember a time when he'd been more nervous than he was as he stood on Annabelle's front porch wiping sweaty palms one at a time on his jeans as if he were eighteen instead of fifty. He shifted the bouquet of flowers he held from one hand to the other two times.

He had concerns. For one thing, he wasn't sure if this was a date or not. Maybe he had fabricated it. Maybe Annabelle was simply being nice to him and didn't have a single thought of being more than friends.

For another thing, Anders hadn't dated anyone in years. Twenty-five of them to be precise. He'd occasionally hooked up with women when he was traveling out of town, but he had never given any woman in Canyon Springs the time of day since Sara left him. He was rusty.

And what if this *was* a date? What if Annabelle saw him as a possible suitor? Sure, that was exactly what he wanted, but he wasn't sure how to process that either.

Suddenly, the door opened while he was still staring at it.

Annabelle smiled at him and took his breath away. She was wearing a sundress that drew his attention to every one of her amazing assets. Her breasts were full and high. Her legs were long and tanned. Her narrow waist was accentuated by

the fitted bodice of yellow material, and the skirt flared out to reach mid-thigh.

What caught his attention next was her hair. It was down. Long waves of it hanging down her back. He couldn't remember when he'd last seen her hair loose. It was usually in a braid or a bun or at least a ponytail at the base of her head. It had been blond when she was young, but now it was almost white. Gorgeous. Sexy. He found himself staring at it and wondering how he hadn't seen her as someone he should pursue for the last several decades.

"You brought flowers," she pointed out, a twinkle in her eye. "That's so sweet. I love daisies."

Anders jerked his gaze away from her hair to the bundle in his hand. "Yes. I wasn't sure what to bring. I thought I should bring something though, as a gift for helping me learn to cook."

She swallowed, her expression falling slightly as she took the daisies from him. "Come on in." She turned and headed across the living room.

Anders stepped inside and closed the door, his gaze nailed to the sway of her hips and the fact that she wasn't wearing shoes. His cock stiffened. Something about a barefoot woman...

He followed her, wondering if his lackadaisical comment had disappointed her. He'd been uncertain and feeling her out. Judging by her reaction, he had to assume she'd been hoping this was a date. Not two friends cooking.

What he needed to do was grow a pair of balls and fast. There was no sense in spending the evening tiptoeing around the unspoken. He was a grown man. He could handle the truth.

If Annabelle preferred to remain friends, he could accept that. If she was interested in more, why not show their cards?

Annabelle filled a vase with water and settled the daisies in it. She didn't say a word as she worked, but when she turned toward him, she was smiling. "I hope you don't mind I did a lot of the prep work for you. I didn't figure you would want to waste time chopping vegetables and browning meat. We'll skip that part and go right to the cooking." She glanced around, wringing her hands together in front of her.

Anders took a deep breath and stepped closer. What did he have to lose? Even though he'd been thinking about Annabelle more and more lately, tonight was the first time he let down his guard completely and found himself seeing her as a possible mate. Someone he could spend time with. Someone he was suddenly extremely attracted to.

Fate was a fickle being. That was for sure. He'd heard tales of people who'd known each other for years finding themselves mated. He'd always listened to such stories with a skeptical ear. Why would Fate leave people completely oblivious for their entire lives and then suddenly lift Her head and wave a magic wand, making the two of them see each other in a new light?

Anders could only speak for himself, of course. He couldn't be sure what Annabelle was thinking or feeling. His own body had detoured one-hundred-eighty degrees since she'd opened the front door. He'd switched from wondering if maybe the two of them might be able to create some sparks to knowing definitively he wanted her.

He had to have her.

His wolf rose up beneath his skin, growling inside him.

She stared at him, licking her lips. When she rubbed her palms together and took a step back, he took a step forward. His heart raced. He inhaled again, and this time his breath hitched. The air was filled with her pheromones, and she was just as aroused as he was. It was possible she was equally blindsided, but there was not a doubt she was wet and horny.

Anders breathed in her scent several more times. He would have known her anywhere of course. Even blindfolded he would have been able to pick her out in a crowded room. Wolf shifters were like that. They had a keen sense of smell. Not only could they recognize different people with ease, but they could smell arousal too.

He closed the distance so that only a few inches separated them, holding her gaze, watching her expression as she took shallow breaths and her lips parted. An urgency consumed him.

Fuck cooking. He wanted to lift her onto the counter, run his hands up her thighs, and touch her wetness. He wanted to nuzzle his nose in her neck, kiss her until he would never forget the taste of her, learn her curves with his hands.

Her chest rose and fell. She probably had no idea she continued to back up until her butt hit the cabinets.

In a shocking twist of events, without speaking a word, Anders switched from worrying about confirming if this was a date to worrying about whether or not his feelings were reciprocated to worrying about how he was going to restrain himself from pouncing on her and scaring her.

He no longer needed confirmation that she was interested. The question was moot. She was as interested as he was. Her body gave her away, just as he knew his did.

What he needed to do now was slow the fuck down because he didn't want to rush her. He had no idea how many men she'd dated or how many people she'd slept with, but he'd never once heard rumors about anyone she'd been with. In any case, he could also scent her hesitance and a slight twinge of nerves.

Finally, he lifted his hands to hers and squeezed them.

She blew out a breath and let her fingers part. Her body relaxed marginally at the contact. Her arousal shot higher. That was a good sign.

Following his instinct, Anders set her hands on his hips, cupped her shoulders, and pulled her into his embrace. He threaded one hand in the silky hair at the base of her head and flattened the other on her back.

Annabelle let out a long breath and then drew in another slowly. She whimpered as she pressed her cheek against his chest and wrapped her arms around his back.

Anders closed his eyes and tipped his head down to nuzzle her neck and inhale her scent fully. Now that he held her, he could better inhale the combination of her pheromones and her shampoo and soap and everything else that she used on her skin.

She shivered.

He held her tighter and whispered in her ear. "It's okay."

Her soft voice responded, "I wasn't sure if this was a date or not."

He smiled against her hair. "I wasn't either. I was about to ask, but then the question became moot."

“Yeah. I noticed that. Why...” She tipped her head back and met his gaze, swallowing. “I mean why *now*?”

He shrugged. “Probably because I’ve been a recluse for twenty-five years. Maybe Fate was waiting for me to pull my head out of my ass before she would grant me a second chance at life.”

Annabelle slowly smiled. “Meeting your daughters did this.”

“I think so.” He slid his hand around to rub his thumb across her bottom lip.

She parted for him. “I waited for you.”

His breath hitched. “What?”

She flushed, her cheek turning a lovely shade of pink. “I think I always knew on some level. It’s why no one else ever appealed to me. I waited.”

He blinked. How had he not realized this? “My God, Anna...” He spread his fingers on her lower back and pressed her closer. He felt awful hearing that. “For how long?” *Since we were young?*

She licked her plump lips. “I don’t mean to imply I was moping, but I was attracted to you even in high school. I’ve watched you from afar forever. I didn’t feel the connection that has slammed into me in the last few minutes, but I thought about you.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Because you had a mate. Even though she left you, I knew you missed her and never got over her.”

He winced, his eyes widening. “No one ever knew about Sara. No one except Hunter when I confided in him as my

lawyer.”

She lifted her shoulders. “I’m not saying anyone told me. I was simply observant. You kept her to yourself when you met her, so I didn’t realize until after she left. You pulled away from society. You stopped coming into town. Sometimes I went long stretches of time without seeing you. And your demeanor changed from the fun-loving guy I’d known to someone so sad it was hard to look at you.”

He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek to hers. “I’m so sorry, Anna.”

“You’re here now.”

“I wasted so much time...” Anders suddenly felt incredibly privileged and lucky. This amazing woman was his mate. They weren’t the first shifters in the community to realize they were mates after years of knowing each other, but he’d never heard of anyone spending fifty years knowing and not recognizing their mate.

He was truly blessed.

CHAPTER 4



Anna slid her hands under Anders shirt and smoothed them up his muscular back. He was in good shape still. They had both aged. Hell, they both had gray hair. But they were also youthful and fit.

She was trembling and nervous. She had a crazy secret she'd never told anyone. How was she going to tell him?

Anders was still stroking her bottom lip with his thumb, seemingly soaking in every detail about her face. "I want to kiss you so badly, but if I do, I don't think I'll be able to stop with just a kiss. I'm out of my mind with lust."

She shivered, feeling the heat that crept up her cheeks. "Who's asking you to stop?"

He groaned, a rumbling noise erupting from somewhere deep. "You were going to teach me to cook something spectacular. What will I tell the girls when they find out we never got to that part?"

She giggled. "You'll tell them you had more important things to do." She wasn't sure who she was at the moment. This bold woman flirting with the man she'd dreamed about all her life. "I'm pretty sure they'll understand."

His smile was infectious. She'd seen him smile so infrequently over the years. It lit up his face and made her fall even harder for him.

“You could add me to the guest list for your dinner party, and I could help with the cooking,” she suggested unnecessarily while she waited for him to realize that as of now the two of them would be attached at the hip every waking moment for the foreseeable future. That's the way it worked with shifters when they met their mate. Or, in this case, when they were finally in a place in life where they could see each other through a new lens.

He chuckled. “Woman, you won't be cooking or eating or any other thing without me for a good while. We've got lost time to make up for.”

She flushed again, imagining how this was going to go down. When she'd invited him over, she'd hoped there might be a spark. She'd hoped he might enjoy her company and kiss her goodnight. She'd hoped she might get a second date that would eventually lead to sex. But she never dreamed this would happen.

“Is there anything on the counter that might spoil?” He asked, nodding toward the island.

“No.” She was breathless. This was really happening. “It's all in the fridge.”

“You hungry?” He lifted a brow. His tone as teasing.

“Not at all,” she whispered as she dug her fingers into his back.

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly as if he'd inhaled her essence and didn't want it to escape too quickly. “In two seconds, I'm going to kiss you, and I'm not going to

stop until I've tasted every inch of your body. If you want that to happen in the kitchen, I'm good with that. If you'd rather move to the bedroom, you better lead the way."

She pursed her lips to hold back her nervous tension. Without a word, she slid her hands out from under his shirt, flattened her palm over the back of his hand against her cheek, and threaded their fingers together. "Bedroom." She reluctantly wiggled free of him and tugged him behind her as she led him to her bedroom.

As soon as they crossed the threshold, he grabbed her by the waist, spun her around, and lowered his lips to her.

She sighed into his mouth as he grabbed her face with both hands and angled her head to one side. His mouth was soft and warm and demanding. His tongue slid along the crease of her lips as if requesting entrance. She would give this man anything. All of her.

In the back of her mind, she knew she needed to say something, but she didn't want to stop long enough to speak. She was thoroughly enjoying the way he stroked her tongue with his and nibbled along her mouth. She loved the low moan that came from inside him. Or maybe it was her.

His hands smoothed down to her shoulders and then to her back. He expertly found and lowered the zipper of her dress.

She shivered, pressing herself closer to him, keeping the material from falling to the floor. She'd never been so consumed and so nervous at the same time. She wanted to let him call the shots and take her anyway he pleased, but she knew that wouldn't be fair to either of them.

His hands were on the bare skin of her back now, and he unclasped her bra next.

She broke the kiss, needing to catch her breath. As she tipped her head back, her eyes slid closed. She moaned when his lips moved to her neck and then around to her ear. “I can smell your nerves, Anna. Relax. It’s just me.”

She blew out a breath, trying to calm her racing heart. Things were happening to her body that she’d never experienced before. Didn’t he realize that? He’d had a mate before. He knew what the frenzy felt like, but for her this was all new. More new than she’d gotten the nerve to tell him yet.

Finally, he gently took her shoulders and leaned her back a few inches. When she met his gaze, she found his brow furrowed in concern. “You okay? I can slow down.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m fine.”

“You’re gripping the front of your dress against your chest as if you’re not ready for me to see your body.”

She glanced down, not having realized she was indeed doing exactly what he’d said. She loosened her fist, but didn’t let go yet. She conjured every ounce of strength to speak. “I’ve never done this before, Anders.”

He nodded, smiling at her reassuringly. “I get that. It’s been twenty-five years, but I remember the crazed feeling that comes with mating. It’s intense. It’s going to grow with every passing hour, and your mind will be blown after we’ve had sex and you find out the feelings don’t subside.” He rubbed her shoulders. “The emotional overload is overwhelming at first. Take a breath.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m not talking about the mating.” She bit her lower lip and held his gaze, willing him to catch on so she wouldn’t have to spell it out.

He drew his brows together again in concern. “What’s making your heart beat so fast then? You’re shaking too.” He stroked his hands up and down her biceps as if to warm her.

“Anders, I’ve never had sex.” There. She’d finally said it. Hopefully he wouldn’t think she was a freak.

His breath hitched, and his eyes widened. His mouth fell open and then he closed it.

Shit. She waited, letting him process.

Finally, he drew in a breath. “Wow. Okay. I get it now. I need to slow down. I’m sorry. I’m so dense.”

She shook her head. “No. Please. Don’t slow down. I just... It seemed like I should tell you. Now I have. Don’t treat me differently. I wanted you to know.”

“My God, Anna. I’m the luckiest man alive. I promise to make this unbelievable for you.” He reached for the hem of his shirt and drew it over his head, tossing it aside without looking. His hand came to settle over hers between her breasts. “Let me see you, baby. All of you.”

She released the dress, and it fell to the floor, leaving her in nothing but panties. Thank goodness she’d chosen her favorite matching bra and panty set. She’d only been able to dream they might end up like this, but she’d been prepared.

His hands came to her breasts and reverently cupped them.

She moaned and grabbed onto his waist as he thumbed her nipples. The tight buds stiffened further under his touch, and the restless feeling that had begun the moment he arrived shot through the roof. There was a fluttering sensation in her stomach, and her sex began to pulse against the silk of her panties.

Anders' hands were trembling as he molded them to her breasts. He slowly lifted his gaze. "You're so gorgeous." He suddenly lowered his hands to her waist, lifted her off the floor, and spun around to settle her on the bed.

Before she could grasp that this was really happening, his hands came to her panties and slid them down her legs. He smoothed his palms slowly back up from her ankles to her thighs, nudging them wider. "Open for me, Anna. I can smell your arousal. It's intoxicating. I need to taste you. You'll never be able to relax enough to let me inside you until you've had at least one orgasm."

He slowly parted her knees while he spoke until he had them pressed high and wide.

She fisted the covers at her sides while her wild heartbeat seemed to pulse in her sex more than her chest. She was both exhilarated and nervous. No man had ever seen her fully naked let alone spoken dirty to her or...oh God...he was doing it. He lowered his face to her sex and stroked his tongue between her folds.

She tossed her head back and cried out. Nothing had ever felt so good in her life. That one stroke of his tongue was better than any of the vibrators she'd used over the years. Ten hundred times better.

When he thrust his tongue into her and then drew it back out to circle her clit, she started shaking uncontrollably. She was going to come. Already. There was no way to stop it. The second he sucked her clit between his lips, she shattered, her entire body shaking with the vibrations of her orgasm.

Before she fully came down, Anders eased a finger into her. He added a second one seconds later. "You're tight, baby,"

he murmured against her pussy. “I’m gonna stretch you out a little before I take you.”

As if the first orgasm never occurred, she was already close to the edge again. As he scissored his fingers inside her, she gasped, trying to draw in oxygen, embarrassed that she was about to come yet again moments after the first.

“Give me another one, baby. I promise I’ll thrust into you before you even have a chance to come down this time.”

She moaned, her head rolling to one side as she succumbed to his order. Her channel gripped his fingers as the second wave of pleasure consumed her. She was still pulsing when his hands disappeared, and she blinked at him to find him shrugging out of his jeans.

Seconds later, he hauled her farther across the bed, climbed between her legs, and lined himself up with her entrance. His voice was strained. “You ready? I need you so badly.”

She glanced down at where he held his erection, wanting to see it, hold it, touch it, taste it. All the things he’d done to her.

“You can explore every inch of me afterward, Anna. After we consummate this mating. Yeah?”

“Yes.” She finally had the wherewithal to grab his waist. “Please, Anders.”

The moment those words left her lips, he thrust into her.

Her vision swam. Every sort of emotion filled her. She’d never felt so perfect. So happy. So connected with the universe.

Suddenly the world was brighter and everything was... right.

As he thrust into her, the connection grew. He was right. She wouldn't get enough of him for weeks or months. She would need to take time off work to satisfy her craving.

She didn't care.

Life was so good.

Anders was finally hers.

And she was his.

Anders' Mate is a novella that follows my Canyon Springs series. If you want to learn more about Canyon Springs, the first book in the series is *Caleb's Mate*.

SAVING SOFIA



AN UNDERGROUND NOVELLA

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ABOUT THE BOOK

It's been fifteen years since Sofia Leskov's heart broke. Sure, she was only twenty, but she was an adult, fully capable of making her own decisions. She knew her heart, and Roman Stasevich had burrowed his way into it for good.

Roman Stasevich has spent the last decade living in Chicago on an undercover assignment with Interpol. He never forgot the girl he left behind, but his job was not conducive to maintaining a relationship then, and it still isn't now. Besides, he's too old for her.

When Roman returns to the town where they met—Norfolk, Virginia—his only thought is a much-needed vacation on the beach. But fate lands him right in the path of Sofia, and she's amassed a pile of problems in recent years.

Their age gap hasn't changed, and Roman makes that clear from the moment he steps back into her life. Sofia doesn't give a flip about their age difference, however. If anything, Roman is sexier than ever.

Roman enlists the help of long-time friend Madox to get Sofia out of a bind, but neither Roman nor Sofia can prevent their hearts from tangling in the process. Their days together are numbered. Roman can stretch his vacation out several

weeks, but when he receives his next assignment, he must once again leave Sofia behind...

CHAPTER 1



Abram: Madox. You there?

Abram Gromov rubbed his temples with one hand stretched over his eyes while he waited for the return ping he knew would come. Madox was the sort of man he could count on to be near his computer at all times. Reaching him through this particular message site was a given.

Madox: Yep. What's up? I heard you wrapped up your case in Chicago.

Abram: Yes. Thank God. Ten years. Longest time I've ever been undercover.

Madox: Except that you're always sort of undercover.

Abram: This is also true.

Abram chuckled. He'd been undercover for one case or another for over half his life.

Madox: What can I do for you?

Abram: I need a vacation. I know you live near Norfolk. I had a case in that area once about fifteen years ago. Loved the view. Loved the laid-back atmosphere. Was hoping you might have a recommendation of a cabin or something I could rent on the water for a month or so...before I take my next case.

Madox: Incredible timing. As it turns out, I just got engaged. Moving to Maryland. Haven't put my place on the market yet. It's yours for as long as you'd like if you're interested.

Engaged? Crazy. Abram blinked at the screen, wondering if he was reading that right.

Abram: Engaged? Another one bites the dust. That's great, man. Who's the lucky lady?

Madox: Name's Rachel. And trust me, I'm the lucky one.

Abram: I'm so happy for you. Can't wait to meet her.

Madox: When we set a date for the wedding you'll be on the list.

Abram: Honored. You serious about your place? You don't mind? I don't want to put you out or stall the sale.

Madox: You kidding? We've known each other for years. I consider you a friend. One of the good guys.

When are you heading that way? I'll have the housekeeper leave you a key.

And just like that, Abram had a place to stay.

Abram: Thanks, man. Totally owe you one. That makes my life so much easier. I'm leaving Chicago tomorrow morning. Didn't know where I wanted to go until this afternoon. Can't believe how easy you're making this.

Madox: Must be fate. Place is yours. Stay as long as you'd like. Message me when you get there and I'll give you the deets on the security system.

Abram smiled. Knowing Madox, the details would be extensive and require three pages of notes. The man was a computer genius. He was also a retired Navy SEAL who freelanced for probably every branch of the military and the government. Abram had worked with him a number of times in recent years. Any time he needed someone to do a bit of digging that wasn't quite on the up and up, Madox was his man.

Abram: I'll pop you my flight info in a few minutes. You have no idea how grateful I am.

Madox: Anytime. Enjoy your vacation.

CHAPTER 2



Abram was exhausted by the time he arrived at the diner the following evening. For an extremely fit man who spent the last ten years working out and training mixed martial arts fighters, he had no reason to be so tired.

But the mental stress of living undercover for so long and tracking every move of the Russian Mafia had taken its toll on him. He wasn't kidding when he said he needed this vacation.

The second his job wrapped up he'd been on the phone with his boss in France ensuring his supervisor was clear on the fact that Abram would be taking some time off before his next assignment.

Perhaps a month. Maybe two. He refused to be specific. And he'd earned every moment of this much-needed rest.

Everything about him was pretend and deeply engrained. Even his name. He'd gone by Abram Gromov for so many years that he probably wouldn't answer to his real name anymore.

At fifty years old, he was well aware he'd spent his prime years solving a case. He wasn't sorry. He didn't believe he was the sort of man who was cut out for normal relationships that involved commitment and putting down roots.

The six Russian fighters he'd worked with for the last several months were the closest people he could call family. Between them and their women, he'd almost had a sense of home.

But not quite. Until the case was over, he hadn't been able to reveal his true role in the operation. He wasn't an MMA manager—not that he didn't have the experience from his younger days to play the part. But his job was with Interpol, and he'd worked closely with the FBI for so long he felt like he was a member of their team most days.

That included Madox.

Abram ran a hand across his face and sighed. The worst part about leaving Chicago and moving on was leaving behind the only friends he had. And the cut had been clean. They would never be able to trace him again. Zero contact. It was the only thing that kept Abram safe in his line of work.

Even his only sibling, a sister living in France, hadn't known his whereabouts for ten years. He needed to get in contact with her. And he would. Soon. After this vacation.

Meeting up with Vera would have to wait. Reuniting would be stressful. The last he knew she and her husband were living in a town in the south of France with their two kids. They would be twenty and eighteen this year.

A knife stabbed Abram in the chest thinking of all the years he'd missed. Would they even remember him? The most he'd ever done was think of each of them on their birthdays.

A shadow looming over the table shook Abram from his reverie. He lifted his gaze to find a teenage girl staring at him. How long had she been there? “Hi. I'm Marci. Can I get you anything to drink to start off with?”

“Oh. Sure. I’ll have iced tea.”

“Be right back.”

He was starving. After arriving early that afternoon and getting settled at Madox’s amazing place, hours had slipped away before he realized he’d never had lunch. Madox hadn’t been kidding. His cabin was decked out with every possible amenity for safety, surveillance, and communication.

One thing Abram would not lack in the next month would be good Internet. And if there was even the smallest chance in hell that anyone knew his identity and had followed him to Norfolk, he would sleep easy at night knowing the fortress was secure.

The young girl brought him a glass of tea and set a straw on the table. “Do you know what you want?” she asked, fidgeting in her spot as if she were shy, or scared.

He hadn’t paid that much attention to her the first time she stopped by, but now he lifted his gaze to see she was near tears. “You okay?”

“Yes. Of course.” She took a breath and swallowed. “If you’re interested in the specials, they’re on the board over there.” She turned around, pointed at the old-fashioned chalkboard, and then smiled back at him. A smile that didn’t stretch far enough to be believable.

Abram slowly shifted his gaze from her to the board and back. “Whatever you recommend is fine.” He shut the menu he hadn’t glanced at and handed it back to her.

“Okay. The pot roast is good. Darlene makes it. She’s the best.”

“Excellent. Pot roast it is.” He smiled as warmly as possible. He didn’t feel like being friendly at the moment, but

this girl needed it. And he was a decent guy.

As she reached for the menu, noises coming from the back of the diner made her flinch. She bit her lip and scrunched her face. “Shit,” she muttered.

Abram turned to stare at the door leading to the kitchen. People were definitely arguing in the back. Besides being unprofessional, it obviously distressed the teenager and undoubtedly had happened before.

Marci scurried away, leaving Abram to ponder her situation.

A male voice rose higher. His words weren’t distinguishable, but his tone was unmistakable. He was seriously pissed.

After a few minutes, the arguing stopped. A woman emerged through the door and abruptly turned to the left to shuffle toward the restroom. Had the manager or someone been yelling at her?

This was not how Abram wanted to spend his dinner hour. He wasn’t the sort of person to ignore someone else’s plight. He was conditioned to help. Fix things. But he was on vacation, he reminded himself. At the beach. He wasn’t here on an assignment. These people didn’t need his interference. Whatever their issues were, they didn’t involve him.

In no time at all, Marci returned with a steaming plate and set it in front of Abram. “Can I get you anything else?” Her voice was weaker than before, and her hands were shaking.

“No. Thank you. This will be fine.” Abram furrowed his brow as he tried to read Marci’s expression. Stress. Nerves. Fear.

Dammit.

She was right about the food, however. The first bite was amazing. Whoever Darlene was, she indeed could cook. The roast, potatoes, carrots, onions, and gravy were delicious.

The restaurant was about half full and rather quiet, probably because everyone inside was on edge having overheard the yelling in the back.

Abram finished his food and had drained his glass of tea when Marci showed up with a pitcher, refilled his drink, and set the check on the table. “Did you want dessert? I forgot to ask.”

“No. I’m stuffed. That was fantastic. Thank Darlene for me.”

“Will do. Take your time. I’ll be back in a few.” Marci was more relaxed than earlier, but still skittish.

Abram picked up the check, took a twenty out of his wallet, and set them both on the table.

A loud noise drew Abram’s attention to the kitchen entrance again. Something fell. A pan? Plates? And then a man yelled again.

A woman’s voice replied.

Abram hadn’t seen where the woman from earlier had gone after the restroom, but he assumed she’d been tending tables behind him. She was apparently back in the kitchen. Had she dropped something?

Jesus, it didn’t require that level of shouting.

“What the fuck is the matter with you?” The man’s voice was louder now. Distinct.

But then so was the woman’s. “Are you serious? You think I dropped that?”

Abram's entire world stopped. He didn't breathe or move.

He knew that voice. It had been fifteen years, but he would never forget that voice.

And then he heard it again, confirming his assessment. "I wasn't even near that pan, George. And you know it."

Yep. *Sofia Leskov*.

Abram's heart beat rapidly. He flattened his hands on the top of the table and gripped it with his fingers.

George yelled again. "You're the clumsiest waitress I've ever had. I don't know why I keep you."

That was enough. Abram had been near the breaking point with the asshole from the moment he entered the diner, but now that he knew who the recipient of his ire was, Abram couldn't stop himself from getting involved. He pushed from the table and stomped across the room, angling straight for the swinging door leading to the kitchen.

The second he pushed through the door, he met the man who had to be George.

"What the fuck are you doing in here? Customers aren't allowed in the kitchen." George held a knife in one hand and a towel in the other.

It didn't make much sense, but Abram was instantly on the defensive. "How about you put the knife down and stop screaming at your employees?"

A gasp to his left made him twist his head to find Sofia, eyes huge, mouth gaping open, staring at him. "Holy shit." She threw her hands in the air. "Could this day get any worse?"

Abram winced. Yeah. He deserved that. And more. He hadn't exactly been a model citizen the last time he'd seen Sofia. He hadn't expected to ever see her again either. Norfolk and its surrounding area was huge. Well populated. What were the chances he would run into a woman he briefly knew fifteen years ago? A woman who'd been hardly more than a girl at the time.

Slim. Non-existent. Except obviously not.

And this was no girl any longer either. This was a grown woman. She would be thirty-five now.

"Roman, what are you doing here?" Sofia asked.

Abram flinched. No one had called him Roman in years. Not since he'd last seen her.

No one he'd spoken to in fifteen years even knew his real name. He hadn't uttered it to a soul except Sofia all those years ago.

"Dude, I said to get out."

Abram released the door at his back and crossed his arms, returning his gaze to the asshole with the large knife. "You planning on stabbing your staff if they don't fall in line?"

"None of your business."

"Oh, but it is. You made it my business when you spent my dinner hour screaming at your waitresses back here while your customers were trying to eat. You get a lot of repeat business that way?" Abram stepped closer, hoping George would set the knife down on his own and not force Abram to wrench it out of his hand.

He would, if push came to shove. And this guy stood no chance against him either. He was tall, at least four inches

taller than Abram, but he hadn't been to a gym in forty years, and his flabby arms and paunchy stomach stood out as confirmation.

“You have a hearing problem?” George bellowed. “Get the fuck out of my kitchen.”

“Roman, do it. Get out. You're just making things worse.” Sofia's voice was lower, defeated.

Abram didn't even glance toward her. “I said, put the knife down. Do it now, or I'll do it for you.” It wasn't as though Abram believed the guy intended to stab anyone. It appeared he'd been in the middle of chopping onions on the cutting board in front of him when a pan had clattered to the floor. Nevertheless, Abram didn't like combative people to hold weapons while he attempted to talk them off their ledge.

George rolled his eyes, but he did slam the knife on the counter so hard it bounced and fell to the floor. “You happy now, you little fuck? Get out.” George pointed at the door. “Don't come back to my diner.”

“Oh, I don't intend to.” Abram turned his head to face Sofia. “How much does this asshole owe you?”

Sofia's eyes widened farther. “For what?”

“For the hours you've worked since you last got paid.”

“I don't pay my employees on fucking Wednesdays, you shit.”

“You do now,” Abram stated, still looking at Sofia. “Go write the woman a check for whatever you owe her. She's not coming back.”

Sofia fisted her hands at her sides and glared at Abram. “Who the hell do you think you are barging in to my place of

employment and ordering me around? I don't need you to decide where I work. Like George said, get out."

Abram was startled. He cocked his head to one side, trying to figure out in what universe any woman, especially the Sofia he once knew, would stay and take the shit this man was doling out like candy. "Not leaving you here. Get your purse. Let's go." He turned back toward George. "That check?"

"Go to hell." George leaned against the counter, spittle darting from his lips as he spoke.

Disgusting. This was a kitchen.

George turned back toward Sofia. "I think your last check should about cover what you cost me today." He nodded at the floor to his left.

For the first time Abram glanced down and found the concrete floor covered with sauce. The pan that fell must have contained the red gooey mess seeping across the floor.

"George, be reasonable. You know I didn't drop that pan. I wasn't even close to it." Sofia put her hands on her hips, but she looked as though she would cry at any second.

Why? This guy was an asshole of the largest variety. Why did she want to keep this job?

"You're fired." George pointed at the door. "Get out. Both of you. Now."

Sofia jerked in her spot. "You can't fire me. You know I need this job."

"I can do whatever the hell I want, and you should have thought of that before you made a mess of my kitchen. Now, get out of my diner. Don't come back. And take this fucker with you. He's obviously got a hard-on for you. Maybe you

can get him to pay you for a good lay to make up for today's loss."

Abram jerked his gaze back toward George. "Are you serious?" Who had the audacity to speak like that? It took every ounce of Abram's energy to keep from lurching across the distance, grabbing George by the neck, and pinning his smarmy self to the wall.

George chuckled as he wiped his hands on his towel. "Then again, I doubt this bitch has it in her. She's probably frigid. Has a stick up her ass a mile long. Thinks she's better than the rest of us. You can try fucking her, but I hope you have lube." He had the audacity to cackle.

Flames heated Abram's face. He forced himself to turn toward Sofia, took two steps to reach her, grabbed her hand, and hauled her through the door and into the main section of the diner.

Sofia twisted to grab her purse from under the counter. Good thing it was handy, because Abram had no intention of slowing down enough for her to search for it.

Most of the customers in the diner were staring with their mouths gaping open as Abram dragged Sofia through the front door.

Marci, the teenage waitress, was pressed into a far corner, looking like she might vomit. Or cry. Or both. Abram hoped she could quit and get out of this hellhole, but he wasn't going to stick around to find out.

CHAPTER 3



Moments later, Abram pushed through the glass door at the front of the diner and stepped into the parking lot. He had yet to glance at Sofia again. His only thought was getting her safely out of the diner and away from her fucked-up boss.

Sofia wrenched her hand free and stomped away from Abram without glancing back.

“Hey. Where are you going?” He jogged to catch up with her.

She yanked her purse up on her shoulder and ignored him, hugging the strap to her front while she walked across the parking lot. Before he knew it, she was on the sidewalk trudging down the street. Where was her car?

“Sofia?” He raced to catch up and match her incredible pace. “Wait.”

She ignored him again.

Finally he grabbed her arm. “Stop. Look at me.”

She twisted to face him, fury in her eyes. “Who the fuck do you think you are? Do you think you helped me out in there?”

“Yes.” *Of course.*

She laughed sardonically. “Well, you would be wrong. I needed that job.”

“Your boss is a dickwad.”

“That may be, but now I don’t have an income. And I needed the money.”

“You couldn’t possibly need the money that badly. Get another job. Why are you working in a diner anyway? The last time we were together you were going to college and working at the library. Did you not finish?”

She cocked one hip out to the side and rolled her eyes. “That’s right. Piece it together, asshole. Life isn’t perfect. It sucks. Sometimes it *really* sucks. And after your interference in there, it now sucks even worse. So if you don’t mind, get out of my face and go back to wherever you came from. I have a colossal pile of shit to figure out, and I don’t have time for you. Ever. Don’t come near me again.” She jerked her arm out of his grasp and stomped farther down the sidewalk.

Abram took a deep breath. He was shocked. Knocked off his feet shocked.

With another short jog, he caught up with her again. “Look, I have a car. Let me at least drop you off somewhere. You can’t just walk down the street. It’s getting late. It’s not safe.”

It was late November. Already dark out. And chilly. He watched as Sofia shivered and wrapped her arms around her middle. She wore nothing but the ugliest yellow polyester dress he’d ever seen. It barely covered her butt and it dipped low enough in front to accentuate her cleavage. It bordered on obscene and did nothing to make her look half as sexy as he knew she did underneath the ensemble.

She chuckled again with even less humor. “And you care why?”

“I’m not an asshole.” He flinched as soon as the words left his mouth. As far as she was concerned, he probably was an asshole.

“Really? Based on what evidence? The part where you spent hours befriending me in the library, telling me secrets about your life I probably wasn’t supposed to know, and then you disappeared without a trace? Because that was a total dick move.”

She held up a hand when he started to speak. “Don’t even give me some line of bullshit about how you were on a case. Undercover. I don’t want to hear it. You could have done something. Said something. Found me. Sent me a message. No way am I buying that you had to leave town without so much as saying goodbye.”

Unfortunately, she was right. But he had his reasons. And he would defend them to this day. Still, he could have said good bye at the least.

The truth was he hadn’t been strong enough. He knew if he’d faced her one last time, he wouldn’t have had the strength to deny her any longer. They would have ended up in bed. And she was far too young for him to take advantage of like that.

“You’re right. And I’m sorry. Please let me drive you home. It’s the least I can do.”

She blew out a breath, seemingly considering his offer. “Okay, but only because it’s damn far and my feet are killing me.”

He glanced down at her shoes. They were flats, but cheap, and they looked uncomfortable. He was pretty sure if he

picked one up and looked at the bottom, he would find it to be worn through.

Not wanting to risk her changing her mind, he decided to keep his mouth shut and nodded toward the parking lot at the diner. “Blue Camry.” He pointed at the car closest to them.

Sofia turned to walk toward his car, her shoulders slumped lower, her head facing the sidewalk. The gorgeous thick curls he remembered were now dank and limp. They were pulled back in a ponytail, several tendrils escaping to hang down around her face.

What happened to you, Sofia?



This could not be happening. How the hell had Roman shown up tonight of all nights and ruined her source of income in less than two minutes?

Fifteen years. That was a lifetime as far as she was concerned. And yet, she remembered him as if it were yesterday.

She might have been young when she met him, but she'd been old enough to know her mind. And he'd done nothing that entire summer but laugh at her advances, insisting he was too old for her.

He'd been wrong. She'd known that in the core of her being. There'd been no convincing Roman of anything, however. He'd been stubborn. Hard.

But he'd also had a soft side, and she'd seen it. She doubted many other people got the opportunity. When they were together, he'd smiled, joked, teased...lived. She'd had

the impression he didn't often experience life—as though he'd lived on the outside looking in.

His life had consisted of one case after another. He'd been married to his work. She'd understood. Even at twenty . And she hadn't asked him for a commitment or marriage or even to stay in town. All she'd wanted was to enjoy a summer together.

But Roman hadn't let his guard down. He'd clearly enjoyed her company, but every time she'd tried to get him to take things a step further, he'd turned her down. Held her at arm's length. Treated her like a kid.

It had hurt. It still did.

She slid into his rental car and buckled her seatbelt, dreading the fact that he was going to see her apartment next. If she hadn't been so damn tired and her feet hadn't been killing her, she would have insisted he leave her alone and walked all the way home.

“Where's your car?”

“Don't have one.” She looked out the window as he pulled from the parking lot, biting her lower lip to keep from crying. She didn't want to answer his questions. She hated how he made her feel around him after all these years. She wanted to slap him or punch him. Instead, she was trapped in his car, breathing his air, smelling his scent.

It all flooded back. The memories. He hadn't changed his soap or his deodorant. He smelled exactly the same. And she hated that it made her dormant girly parts come to life.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd had sex. Forever ago. That was for sure.

“You walk to work every day?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes I take the bus. You’ve thrown me off schedule.” *And cost me a job I couldn’t afford to lose.* She crossed her arms and shuddered, thinking of the implications. How the hell was she going to pay the rent? Let alone the nursing home...

“You’ll need to give me directions.”

She realized they were sitting at the edge of the parking lot. He hadn’t pulled out. *Duh.* “Of course. Turn right here.”

For the next several minutes he said nothing while she mumbled right and left each time they needed to turn. By the time they pulled up to her apartment building, she was on pins and needles. Damn him. Damn his effect on her. Damn it to hell that he had to see her like this. At her worst.

He pulled to the curb outside her building.

“Thanks.” She yanked off her seatbelt and grabbed the handle on the door.

Unfortunately, Roman also got out.

“I’m good from here. Thanks for the ride. Have a nice life.” She hoped her terse words would send him on his way.

They did not. He ignored her, rounded the hood of the car, and gently took her arm to guide her toward the building.

“Roman, I’m fine. You need to leave.” No way in hell was she letting him see her place. The sheer mortification would send her over the edge.

“Not leaving you on the side of the road. This neighborhood isn’t the best.” He glanced around as he led her to the door.

When they reached it, he tugged the metal handle to open it. “They don’t keep the building locked?” he asked.

“It’s a safe neighborhood.”

He lifted a brow, but didn’t comment.

She squeezed by him and turned around. “Roman, this is it. You’re not coming up with me. Go back to wherever you came from.”

“I’m not leaving you like this. You act like the world has come to an end over that shitty job. Now, you’re going to take me to your apartment, get yourself something to eat, and sit down and tell me what’s going on.” He glanced down at her body. “You don’t eat enough.”

“Fuck you.”

He sighed. “I deserve that.”

“Roman, go.” She pointed at the door.

He leaned against it, crossed his arms and ankles, and sighed. “Not going to happen, Sofia. We can argue all night, but I will win.”

“Jesus. You’re such a bully.” Had he always been a bully? Yes. Probably. She just hadn’t labeled it. He for sure always got his way. Even got the last word—or lack thereof.

“I prefer careful or concerned, but if you want to call me a bully, go ahead. It won’t change anything.” He unwrapped his folded arms and gestured toward the stairs. “Are we going up? Or are you on this floor?”

She stared at him. God, he was infuriating. Oh, what the fuck did she care? Let him see her apartment? Who gave a damn? *But I swear if I see pity in his eyes...* “Fine.” She spun around and pounded up the stairs.

Roman stayed right on her heels.

When they reached the third floor, she yanked the door open and continued down the hallway. As they approached her apartment, her stomach dropped. She closed her eyes slowly and stopped walking, willing the piece of paper taped to her door to disappear.

When she blinked her eyes open, it was still there.

Mother fucker. Not today.

Roman stepped around her, tore the paper from the door, and stated the obvious unnecessarily. “This is an eviction notice. Failure to pay rent. Is this your apartment?”

“Yep.” Nerves made her knees weak. She’d feared this day would come. But why did it have to be today? She leaned forward, set her hands on her knees, and drew in a breath, trying hard not to cry in front of Roman.

So much for avoiding his pity. On the flip side, at least he wouldn’t get to see the inside of her place.

Roman set a hand on her back. He rubbed up and down her spine for several moments. And then he spoke in a soft voice. “Let’s go.”

She righted herself and forced herself to meet his gaze. “Go where? Roman, I haven’t paid my rent. I’m sure my key won’t work in the door. My stuff is inside. I don’t own much, but what little I have is in there, and my landlord is probably going to hold it until I pay him. I don’t have the money.” The first tear fell unbidden.

Roman nodded. “I can see you’re in a bind. And lucky for you, I’m here. I have a place. You’ll come stay with me for the night. Tomorrow I’ll help you sort this out.”

She stared at him. “Are you insane?”

“Not even close.”

“You don’t know anything about me. You can’t take me to your place.”

He frowned. “Unless you’ve had a serious change of personality in the last few years, I’d say I know you well enough to take you home. And what other choice do you have?”

None. That was the truth. Any friends she’d had disappeared from her life years ago. She was alone now. Alone in a cold, hard world that didn’t care if she had money or not. It kept revolving either way.

Now she had a new set of problems. And the old ones were still there to keep her on her toes. Was she being tested? By a higher being? If there was a God, he was having a heyday watching her life slip into the gutter slowly. If she didn’t find a solution soon, what would happen to her mother?

CHAPTER 4



Sofia rubbed her forehead as she rode in silence beside Roman. She'd gone with him because she hadn't been able to think of another option. After pounding on the landlord's door to no avail, she'd given up.

Her head hurt. She was hungry. And now she was trapped once again with the flood of emotions Roman brought to the party.

He hadn't changed much. He was still sexy as all get out. Maybe he had lost a bit more hair, but he'd been balding even fifteen years ago. Instead of it making him look old, he looked distinguished. As far as she could tell, he was as buff as he'd been back then. He had a few more wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, but damn...

She refused to look at him, hating her physical reaction to him. As if a switch had been flipped, her sex came alive. She squeezed her thighs together, but her damn skirt was so short nothing was left to the imagination.

In contrast to his physique, she had changed a lot in fifteen years. She'd been hardly out of her teens at the time. Fit. Healthy. Happy. Grounded. She'd had plans. She'd wanted to be a high school teacher. She'd worked at the public library to

help pay her tuition. She had intended to be the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Her parents had emigrated from Russia when she was a baby. They'd worked hard their entire lives to provide for her. And they'd done their best. They'd contributed every extra dime they could to her schooling. In the end, however, fate had thought it might be funny for her mother to get Alzheimer's and her father to die of cancer.

"We're here," Roman stated softly. He climbed from the car, rounded the hood, and opened her door.

She hadn't meant for him to be all chivalrous with her, but she'd honestly been too drained to move.

"You live here?" she asked as she stepped outside as carefully as possible to avoid him seeing up her skirt.

"Well, not exactly. I'm just staying here for a few weeks. On vacation. It belongs to a friend of mine."

"I see." She followed him to the front door, waiting while he unlocked three different locks. When he opened the door, he darted inside and reached for a panel. She realized it was an alarm. "Your friend is very safety conscious."

"You can't imagine." He smiled, flipped on the lights, and shut the door behind her as she stepped inside.

The only belonging she had in the world at the moment was her purse. She'd give anything to burn the dress and shoes she wore. But she didn't even have a change of clothing. George's policy was for employees to turn their uniform back in when they quit or got fired, but to hell with him. He owed her money. He could fuck himself.

Roman led her farther into the house.

It was a nice place. Not huge, but loved. Organized. Taken care of.

As they passed the living room, it drew her attention. It was incredibly cozy with a large, brown, soft, leather couch and matching arm chair. It faced an impressive array of electronics, most of which she'd never owned in her life.

She jerked her attention back to Roman when he spoke. "Sit." He pointed at the table as he headed for the fridge. "I can tell you're tired, and you probably want a shower, but you need to eat first. I went to the store earlier. I do have food. I was just too lazy to cook it. That's how I ended up at your diner. I just got here today."

She set her purse on the floor, her gaze moving to the row of floor-to-ceiling windows next to the breakfast room that framed the most amazing, breath-taking view of the beach. "Holy smokes..." She wandered toward the window and stared out into the evening. The sun was setting on the other side of the house. The beach looked so serene. Peaceful. It called to her somehow. She felt compelled to forgo food, kick off her shoes, and wander out into the sand.

It wasn't as though she'd never seen the beach before. She'd lived in this area her entire life. But something about this particular moment affected her.

"Breathtaking isn't it?" he said from behind her.

If she wasn't dressed in her ridiculous uniform, hungry and tired, she would abandon the thought of food and sleep and go stare at the ocean, letting the sound of the waves soothe her.

Seconds ticked by, and then she turned to face Roman where he stood next to the table. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

His brow furrowed. “Was I ever mean to you?”

Yes.

He shook his head. “Okay. Don’t answer that. It was a jackass move on my part to leave without telling you. I’m sorry. I should have said something.” He propped his palms on the back of a chair. “You were so... And I was so...” He blew out a breath and turned back toward the kitchen. “What do you want to eat? I could heat up some canned soup? Or make a sandwich? Or I have some frozen meals? Just trying to think of something fast and easy. You look like you’re going to collapse. When was the last time you ate?”

Not today. But she didn’t say anything. Instead she shrugged. “I eat.”

Without waiting for a response, he took a bottle of water and the fixings for a sandwich out of the fridge, kicked it closed, and dropped it all on the table. He didn’t speak while he made her the perfect sandwich.

She slid into a chair at the table and bit the inside of her lip, watching him. He remembered what she liked. And her chest grew tight.

“There,” he declared, setting it in front of her. “Turkey. Ham. Lettuce. Light mayo. No mustard. No cheese.” He smiled triumphantly.

She lost the battle with the tears and let them fall down her cheeks silently.

He slid into the chair across from her and pointed at the sandwich. “Eat, Sofia. I know there’s a long story behind those sad eyes of yours, but I’m not going to force it out of you tonight. Eat. I’ll get you set up in the guest room. You can sleep. Whatever you have to say, it can wait until morning.

It can wait until never.

She ate the food, hardly tasting it around her nerves, but knowing she needed the nourishment. Her stomach hurt from eating so much too fast. She hadn't had a real meal in a long time. Sometimes she ate at the diner, but just enough to get her through the day. George made his employees pay for what they ate. He didn't even give them a discount. Asshole.

When she finished, she grabbed her purse and followed Roman down the hall. He entered a room to the right and turned around. "Guest room." He pointed across the hall. "Bathroom's there. I'll see if I can find you a spare toothbrush. I doubt my friend has anything girly for you to bathe with, but I'll take care of that in the morning." He smiled. It wasn't so broad that it reached his eyes, but it was caring.

And she felt like a heel for treating him badly.

He left you.

Did he deserve her wrath? She wasn't sure.

Roman snapped his fingers, bolted from the room, and returned a moment later holding out a T-shirt. "You can sleep in this. I'll sort out clothes tomorrow too. Okay?"

"Thank you." She took it from him, knowing it would take her a long time to relax with his scent enveloping her. But she had no other options.

Roman stepped forward slowly until he was in her space. He reached out with both arms and hauled her toward his chest.

Jesus. Rock solid muscle met her cheek.

"I can tell you've been through a lot. I'm so sorry. Let me help. I'm here. You're not alone." He kissed the top of her

head.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Did he have any idea what his actions did to her? Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples pebbled. And her panties were wet for the first time in years.

She didn't return the hug, but she did let him hold her for a long time. Finally, he released her and walked away. She listened while he headed down the hallway until he shut a door.

Even though she would give anything for a hot shower with good water pressure, she was too tired and drained to do more than peel the stupid yellow dress off her body, drop her bra on the floor with it, kick off her shoes, and tug the T-shirt over her head.

She crawled into the bed without bothering to use the bathroom. So soft. The sheets were clean. The pillow was fluffy. The shirt smelled of Roman. With that last thought, she drifted off.



Abram leaned against the door to the master bedroom forever.

He couldn't catch his breath. It had taken all his willpower to not shoot rapid fire questions at Sofia while she ate.

She was obviously exhausted, mentally and physically.

She clearly had a full plate that didn't include losing her job. He felt only a twinge of guilt for his part in that. After all, why on earth was she working at such a shitty place? She could surely get a job somewhere else doing anything else.

Right?

What the hell kept her going back to the diner day after day when she obviously didn't make enough money to pay her rent?

He didn't have the answers. All he had was new visions of the woman who had crept into his dreams for fifteen years.

She was older, but age hadn't dampened her looks. She needed a few pounds on her, a good shampoo, a haircut, and some clean clothes, but when all of that was fixed, she would be even more gorgeous than she'd been at twenty.

Had he made a mistake all those years ago? His gut clenched. It wouldn't help to think like that. It was done.

Besides, she'd been too young. He had to keep reminding himself of that. She was still too young. For him. He was fifty now. She was thirty-five. She deserved a man in her age bracket. Not some old geezer no longer in his prime.

No. The age gap was still insurmountable. If fate had meant for them to be together, she would have arranged for them to be born in the same decade.

Ignoring the hard-on that insisted the sexy woman in the other room was not too young for him, he changed out of his clothes, pulled on a pair of boxers, and headed for the attached bath.

Madox had a gorgeous home with amazing amenities.

Abram knew Madox had spent quite a few years holed up in this house working behind the scenes on his computers and avoiding the world. Apparently he'd found a woman who loved him. About time someone pulled him out of his shell.

Abram smiled, happy for his friend.

As Abram slid into bed, he tried to calm his racing heart.

Sofia Leskov. He'd lusted after her years ago and still did. She tore at his heart strings. He needed to handle her carefully or risk causing her to run. He also needed to tamp down his stiff cock and the urge to kiss the life out of her. She needed someone to help her, not consume her. Especially not some fifty-year-old guy with a balding head and too many wrinkles around the eyes to count.

Too much time spent in the sun in his youth had left him weathered. He was aware. He also knew he still had his body. And was thankful. Ten years working undercover as a mixed martial arts trainer would do that to a man. He had to stay in shape to be taken seriously. That was one perk of the last job he was grateful for.

Whatever the next job entailed, he sure hoped it didn't involve a desk or he'd be doomed.

He listened closely, noticing Sofia never left the guest bedroom.

He ached for her. What was her story? He longed to know.

Tomorrow he would get her some clothes and toiletries. And then he'd get himself some answers.

CHAPTER 5



Sofia woke to the scent of bacon. For a moment she was disoriented and bolted upright, thinking she'd dozed off against the counter at work.

She glanced around the room while reality kicked in.

Roman.

Jesus. She was in a house with Roman. And he was cooking bacon.

Her stomach growled. She was starving. He was right about one thing. She hadn't eaten enough in months.

She pushed to sitting, wondering how she was going to face him. She needed a shower and clean clothes. She needed a toothbrush and coffee.

What she didn't need was to leave this room and confront Roman wearing nothing but his T-shirt and a pair of panties. She also did *not* want to put that damn polyester dress back on. The idea made her cringe.

Besides... it was no longer on the floor next to the bed.

Her face heated as she glanced around. *Oh God.*

She was certain she'd left her dress and her bra on the floor. As well as her shoes. All of that was gone now.

Had Roman come in and taken her clothes? Why?

She slid her feet to the floor, padded across the room, and eased the door open. The scent of bacon and now coffee assaulted her, further tempting her. But since she couldn't see Roman when she glanced both ways, she darted across the hallway and shut herself in the bathroom.

She pursed her lips as she glanced at the counter next to the sink. A pile of new clothes sat neatly folded on the white tile. He'd thought of everything. There was a bra, panties, a T-shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes.

For a moment she stood there frozen. The gesture was extremely thoughtful. The thought of him purchasing such intimate apparel for her was almost more than she could bear. She glanced at her watch. It was ten o'clock. She couldn't remember when she'd ever slept that late. No wonder he'd managed to acquire all that stuff already.

She pushed off the door, trying to ignore the feelings swirling around in her head, and turned on the shower. It heated while she stripped out of the T-shirt and panties and climbed in.

Luxury. For three years she had been living in the hellhole that was her apartment. The water rarely reached a bearable temperature, and the water pressure made it impossible to rinse the soap thoroughly out of her hair.

This shower in Roman's friend's home felt so good she moaned and considered never getting out. When she finally opened her eyes and looked around for soap, she found a neat row of items Roman had also obviously purchased while she'd slept.

Damn, the man was good.

She inhaled the scent of lavender from the shampoo and nearly died of excitement. Her hair had been a disaster for over a year. That's how long it had been since she'd been able to afford luxuries like specialty shampoo. This one was probably no big deal, and Roman would have no idea what he'd done for her, but it was huge.

The conditioner felt equally amazing. The razor he'd bought was sharp. The body soap equally girly. She had tears running down her face by the time she finished bathing. And she didn't know if they were tears of joy, fear, exhaustion, hope... The list went on. She couldn't seem to stop them from falling.

Sofia grabbed a fluffy towel when she was able to force herself to get out of the shower. She wrapped up in it and took deep breaths, trying to regain some composure before she dressed and exited the bathroom.

Taking her time, she was amazed at how well everything fit. That explained why he'd taken her clothes off the floor. Most likely to get the sizes.

She tried not to think too hard about the matching white lace bra and panty set. Feminine. Dainty. But not too suggestive. How did the man pick this stuff out?

By the time she exited the bathroom, she was a ball of nerves. She didn't bother with the shoes yet, but carried them into the living room and set them on the floor next to the couch.

For a moment, she stared at Roman's back where he stood at the stove. God, he was beautiful. Still so muscular and fit after all these years. She imagined he must work out nearly every day. The way his arms moved over the pan at the

stove... His ass was as tight as she remembered, one of his best features. His shoulders... Damn. Broad and relaxed.

The black T-shirt he wore this morning pulled tight against his muscles. She wanted to run her hands over the planes of his body, the same longing she'd had fifteen years ago. Nothing had changed. Nothing. The ache she'd felt then slammed back into her now.

And she hated how he affected her. How he could control her just by being in the room. He made her want... Want something she couldn't have, because he wasn't offering it to her. He hadn't then, and she knew instinctively he wouldn't now.

She had to yank her gaze away from him in order to breathe. She turned her face toward the windows facing the ocean. The sun was rising, its rays casting a gorgeous sheen over the water. It called to her again this morning as it had last night.

Roman turned from the kitchen counter, drawing her attention. He held a spatula in one hand, and he froze. There was no expression on his face. His gaze roamed up and down her frame as if he weren't sure who she was.

The self-conscious feeling she had earlier increased tenfold. She cleared her throat. "Thank you... For the clothes and stuff."

He seemed to shake out of his trance. "You're welcome. I hope it all fits. I gave your sizes to the sales lady and let her pick some things out. We can go back out later and get more, assuming we can't get access to your apartment yet."

"You can't keep buying me things. This is too much already. I don't have any way to pay you back." She clasped

her hands in front of her and stepped toward him.

He waved away her words as if they were offensive. “Don’t worry about it. Please. It’s nothing.” He nodded toward the table. “Sit. I made breakfast.”

She shuffled toward the table and sat in the same spot as last night. Roman waited on her like last night too. She needed to crack the weirdness in the air before it consumed her. “If you could just drop me off at my apartment, I’d appreciate it. I’ll sort things out with my landlord in no time. Misunderstanding I’m sure.”

Misunderstanding my ass. I can’t remember when I last paid the rent.

Roman set a plate of food in front of her and another across from her. He headed back to the counter and returned again with a mug of coffee. “Do you still take it with cream and sugar?”

She nodded, taking the mug from him. Damn. He was good. And he made things that much harder.

He sat across from her, grabbed his fork, and started eating. The freaking chivalrous man had waited for her to wake up before eating.

She was starving, so she didn’t hesitate. Bacon, eggs, toast. More than a normal human woman would eat in the morning. But she hadn’t had a hot breakfast in longer than she could remember either.

When he was finished, he leaned back, holding his coffee in both hands. She wasn’t far behind him. Hunger did that.

“You want more? There’s plenty.”

“No.” She shook her head. She could probably eat another entire plate of food, but then she’d feel sick.

“Okay, then talk to me.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I know. I can tell. But do it anyway. Tell me what I’m working with, so I can help.”

“You can’t help, Roman. And I’d never ask you to. My problems are mine. I own them.” *And they are monstrous.*

He frowned, hesitating, and then leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table and shortening the distance between them. “I sense you’ve been going it alone for a while. And while I know I pissed you off royally when I left, you have to know I’m a good guy at heart. I want to help. Lighten the burden. Talk to me.”

She glanced down at her fingers and pulled her hands into her lap, knowing they were about to start shaking.

“Okay, let’s start with the obvious. You’re out of money. You had a job that must have paid enough for the rent on that horrific excuse for an apartment, and yet you haven’t been paying it. It doesn’t seem to me that you’re spending the money on clothes or cars or makeup or hair products. Which means you either have a huge debt or you’re doing drugs.”

She jerked her gaze to his, horrified.

He smiled. “Got your attention. Come on, Sofia. I know you aren’t doing drugs. So where’s the money going?”

She took a breath. Who cared if he knew? “My mother. She’s in a home. Alzheimer’s. She hasn’t known who I am for a year. I don’t even visit her anymore. It’s too sad, and I only leave there stressed and in tears.”

“Okay, and your dad?”

“He died of lung cancer five years ago.”

“So you’re handling this all on your own?”

“Yes.”

Abram nodded.

“Roman—”

He stopped her with a grin.

“What?”

“I’m trying to get used to hearing that name. Roman. Haven’t heard it in ten years.”

“Jesus. You were on an assignment that long?”

“Yep. So long that I now think of myself by another name.”

“What was it?”

“I’ll tell you sometime, but it’s too fresh right now. And I don’t want anyone to know who I am. So Roman it is. We’ll think up a good last name to go with it.”

“Roman is your real name, right?”

“Yep.”

“The one your mother gave you?”

“Yep.”

“How hard is it to answer to Roman?”

He smiled again. “It’s not. But when you say it... Well, it sounds seductive. Nothing like how my mother said it.”

Her face burned.

He chuckled. “Anyway, Roman. I’ll try to get it in my head. Roman. Roman. Got it. Okay. Now back to your mom. What the hell does this nursing home cost every month? Do you mind if I look at your statement? Try to help you figure this out. There has to be a way to make ends meet.”

“Sure. You can look. If we can get back into my apartment.” She was growing more comfortable. Why had it seemed so hard to let him in? *Maybe because he hurt you the last time you saw him?*

“We will. I’ll talk to your landlord.” He stood, grabbed their plates, and tucked them in the dishwasher. “You feel like heading over there? We can stop and get some more supplies on the way back.”

“If we get in, we won’t need anything else.”

He tipped his head to one side. “Why do I doubt that entrance to your apartment will suddenly cause you to be flush with clothing and accessories?”

She sighed. No sense arguing. But no way in hell was he going to buy her anything else.

She turned to face the ocean, letting the sun hit her face where it streamed through the window. “Do you mind if I step outside for a moment before we go?”

He was smiling when she turned back to him. “Of course. It’s beautiful, isn’t it? I wandered out there a bit myself this morning. Early.” He padded over to the sliding glass door and opened it, motioning for her to pass.

Sofia took a deep breath as she stepped into the cool morning air. It felt wonderful, the air this close to the ocean seemingly cleaner. Fresher. She inhaled long and slow as if

taking in oxygen she'd been desperate for. And truthfully she had.

She stood on the wooden deck, closed her eyes, and tipped her head to the sun. A sense of peace washed over her for the first time in years. She had no money, no apartment, no job, and a pile of bills she couldn't pay, but for a second, the universe stood still long enough for her to breathe.

Roman set a hand on the small of her back, drawing her back to reality.

God, his hand felt good. Right. As though they'd been together for years. An old married couple stepping outside in the morning to enjoy the sun.

Except it had been years since she'd felt Roman's touch. And she didn't remember it affecting her so strongly.

She was older now. A woman. How long had it been since anyone's touch filled her with so much emotion? She swallowed back the lump in her throat and forced herself not to cry.

Until last night she hadn't allowed herself to realize she'd been on the edge of an emotional breakdown. Undoubtedly her frayed nerves had been what caused her to get into an argument with George. Not that it was difficult to argue with George. The man was a world-class dick. He knew how badly she needed her job, and he took every opportunity to harass her and throw it in her face.

And now it was over. She never had to see him again.

She was, however, out of a job. It was the only job she could find in the area without a degree or experience. With it she barely kept her chin above water.

Or maybe that was a lie. After all, she hadn't paid her rent in months. She was far enough behind on her utilities that they were in danger of being shut off. She couldn't remember the last time she'd purchased anything for herself that wasn't absolutely mandatory. And human contact was nonexistent.

She took a sudden step forward, needing to break away from the feel of Roman's hand warming her back through the T-shirt. Moving quickly, she jogged down the three steps off the deck to slide her bare feet into the sand.

Heaven.

It shocked her to realize she hadn't come to the beach in years. She hadn't taken the time to press her toes into the sand, stare at the waves, feel the breeze, soak in the sun, or inhale the scent of ocean. Those were luxuries she couldn't afford.

But this morning, for a few minutes, she wanted this. This pause in life Roman had inadvertently given her. This gorgeous man she felt looming one pace behind her. Could he sense her need to be alone with the universe for a moment?

With a long inhale of the salty scent of ocean, she wandered forward. She continued to breathe deeply as if she hadn't had enough oxygen in months and could somehow fill her lungs with a restorative supply that would have to last her another long stretch of time.

Because the truth was she couldn't stand here in the sand for more than a few minutes, ignoring the reality that was her life.

"Come on. Let's walk." Roman's gentle voice wafted into her consciousness. Not unwelcome. He wrapped his fingers around her elbow and gave a slight tug.

She glanced up, squinting into the sunlight. One side of his mouth tipped up in a smile. His eyes twinkled. “You need some vitamin D. The apartment can wait a few minutes. Let’s stick our toes in the water.”

She nodded, her emotions so close to the surface she couldn’t speak. And then she let him lead her to the edge of the water.

Several other people meandered up and down the beach. A group of children squealed as they ran in and out of the waves.

Roman slid his hand down her forearm. He threaded his fingers with hers. A current ran up her arm and through her body. The sun’s rays warmed her. The morning air was cool, but Sofia wasn’t cold any longer. She was underweight and often shivered, but not with Roman touching her.

She should yank her hand free, get away from this man who would break her heart again, and run fast back to the real world before she completely lost her mind.

Roman interrupted her resolve again to tug her forward. He stepped into the few inches of water lapping at his feet and turned his body to face her. He clasped her other hand and pulled gently. “It’s chilly, but it feels good.”

She stared at his feet. Sexy damn feet she’d never seen naked before. His jeans hung in the water, but he didn’t seem to care as the dark line of moisture crawled up the denim.

Suddenly he released her hands and crouched before her. He rolled up the hems of her jeans almost to her knees. And then he stood. “There.” Once again, he took her hands and led her forward.

So few words between them. And yet, so many emotions.

Two small steps was all it took for her toes to hit the edge of the water and sink into the sand as the wave retreated.

Roman stepped closer until inches separated them.

She lifted her gaze from their feet to his abs. Rock hard.

He let go of her hands and smoothed his palms up her arms until he could pull her against him, closing the remaining gap between fantasy and reality.

She sighed against his chest, inhaling his scent that now overshadowed the ocean water.

She was in a different dimension. A parallel universe.

“It’s going to be okay,” he whispered into her hair, threading his fingers into the locks at the base of her head.

He couldn’t know that. In fact, he was so wrong. It was not going to be remotely okay. Not even close. Unfortunately, it was going to be worse. If she turned and walked away from him, raced to the street, jumped into a stranger’s car, and let someone, anyone, drive her back to her real life, she would never be okay again.

In just hours, Roman had marked her again. Deeply. With so few words and nothing but his presence. The pain was already unbearable.

Her chest pounded against his as though syncing their rhythms. Her breasts felt heavy, tight, swollen. His pecs were hard beneath her flesh. Her nipples pebbled. An ache, a need really, grew in her stomach.

The warning signs were all there. The danger to her heart was intense. And still she let him hold her.

Finally, he pulled back, cupped her face, and tipped her head to meet her gaze. “We should get going.”

She nodded and let him lead her back to the house. In silence she put her shoes on while he did the same. Heedless of his damp jeans, he led her out the front door.

After locking the house up like a fortress, they were once again inside his rental car.

Roman started the engine, the sound breaking the spell that had held her captive all morning.

She buckled her seatbelt and sat straighter.

Before driving away, he turned to her. He reached out a hand and ran it through a section of curls that hung loosely by her face. “Your hair looks healthier this morning. I always did like it down.”

She blinked. “You did?”

“Yeah.”

“You never said a word to me about my hair.”

“There are a lot of things I never said to you fifteen years ago. That’s just one.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“Because you thought I was too young for you? Because you were on a mission? Because you never intended to stay with me?” Those last two words should have stayed inside her head. But it was too late.

“Mostly. You *were* too young, and you still are. That hasn’t changed.”

Sofia twisted in her seat and leaned toward him. “That’s the most insane thing I’ve ever heard. It was ludicrous fifteen years ago, and completely preposterous now. I’m fucking

thirty-five years old. And besides, who said I was interested? It was a long time ago. I've moved on," she lied.

"Have you?" He tipped her chin up and forced her to meet his gaze. "Have you, Sofia? Because I haven't. And I don't think you have either. When I heard your voice last night from my booth in that diner, I nearly came in my pants."

She flinched.

He held her chin steady. "That's the effect you had on me then, and nothing has changed. I'm not proud of how I treated you, and I still can't offer you anything more now than I could then, but I'm not going to lie and say I wasn't attracted to you. Nor that I'm not today."

"What are you saying?"

He sighed. "I don't know." He let go of her chin to stroke a finger down her cheek and then her neck.

She leaned into his touch, though she wished she had the strength to slap his hand away. He was going to hurt her. Again. She knew it with every fiber of her being. The damage was already done. Even if she got out of the car and let him drive away from her right that second, she would be devastated.

But it wasn't going to be that simple. No. He was going to burrow into her heart again and then leave her with a hole so large it would never be repaired.

"I'm going to help you because it's who I am. I'm one of the good guys. I may come off as an asshole, but I'm not. Not deep inside. If things were different. If we were closer in age and I didn't work for Interpol, I would never let you go. But those two facts will never change. So, you're going to have to

let me help you get back on your feet and figure things out to make your life better.”

“And then I’m going to have to let you walk away. Again.”

“This time I’ll say goodbye. I swear.”

Does he think that will make it better? She twisted in the seat to stare out the window, breaking contact with his warm finger. “Don’t bother.”

Roman pulled out of the driveway and drove toward her apartment without commenting on her jibe. When they arrived, he jumped out and raced around to let her out too.

She took his offered hand, but as soon as she was out of the car, she jerked her fingers free. No way could she allow herself to touch him. It was too much. It burned through her soul. Every time his skin met hers, he left a mark on her. She wouldn’t be able to wash it off with soap and water. It would be permanent. The fewer marks, the better. Right?

Sofia led him to her landlord’s apartment and let him knock on the door. This time it opened. When the man saw Sofia, he crossed his arms and spread his legs wider to snarl. His stance did nothing to make him intimidating. The guy was a jerk. And smarmy.

He wore a white wife-beater shirt and dirty jeans. His feet were bare. His hair was too long and looked like it hadn’t been combed in a month. His apartment smelled like stale beer and cigars. It leaked out into the hallway.

Sofia shuddered.

JP Sterling looked from Sofia to Roman. “She ain’t paid her rent in four months. If she dragged your ass over here thinking to intimidate me with your size, it won’t work. I need four months’ rent, and payment for changing the locks, and

then she can have a set of keys. If she don't have the cash, I'll empty her apartment and give her stuff to Goodwill in five days. Simple as that."

"How much does she owe you? Perhaps we could strike a deal. You seem like a reasonable man. How about I give you two months' rent, and you let us move her stuff out right now."

JP frowned. "Why the hell would I agree to that? Bitch owes me four months'."

"Because if you don't take my offer, you get nothing, and you have to go to the trouble of clearing out her stuff. If you take two months' and give us a few hours to clear it out, it'll save you the trouble and provide at least part of the money."

JP narrowed his gaze, contemplating.

Roman continued. "Sofia didn't intentionally leave you high and dry. She's taking care of her sick mother. Did you know that? She's doing the best she can. Has she ever given you any trouble in all the time she's lived here?"

"No. 'Cept she owes me money."

"I hear you. And I know you're pissed, but she would've paid you if she could. How about it?" Roman reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money that made Sofia gasp. Where did he get all that cash?

He didn't even count it. He simply held out the stack of hundreds toward JP. "This should be enough for you to see it in your heart to let us clear her belonging out."

JP snatched the pile of money, stuffed it in his pocket, and reached for a set of keys on a pegboard next to the door. "Bring these back when you're done. And I don't want any trouble."

“You have my word.”

Sofia couldn't believe what just happened. She trailed along behind Roman to the stairs, unable to speak. It wasn't until they were upstairs and he had her apartment open that she finally said something. “You gave him money.”

“Yep.”

“How did you know how much to give him?”

“I looked up the rent on this building earlier this morning. I had a plan.” He winked as he ushered her inside.

“I can't believe you gave him money.” She was stunned, but suddenly stopped in her tracks as he shut the door. She spun around. “Roman, I can't pay you back.”

“Didn't ask you to.” He didn't meet her gaze. Instead, he wandered inside, glancing around. “How much of this do you really need to keep? Because I wasn't completely honest with your landlord. I don't intend to actually clear the place out. I just wanted you to be able to retrieve what meant something to you and get out of here.”

“And go where? Roman, I don't have a place to live. I don't have anything. I could grab what I need with two hands.” She turned in a circle. “Look at this place, Roman. I don't have belongings.” Her voice rose as she freaked out.

He must have known that though, because he grabbed her shoulders and tipped her chin up to meet his gaze again. “Calm down. Deep breaths. You'll stay with me. I'm here for at least a month. That buys you time to figure things out. Whatever means something to you goes with us. Whatever is useless stays. Pictures? Documents? Clothes?”

She couldn't wrap her head around his offer. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I can. Because you need me. Because no one has taken care of you in longer than I can contemplate. You need a friend. I showed up at just the right time.” He shrugged. “Call it fate. But I’m here. I have a house big enough for both of us for the foreseeable future. And you need a place to stay.”

How could she say no?

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now, let’s get to work. I’d rather not stay here long enough to give that landlord of yours enough time to reconsider my offer and come banging on the door wanting more money. This place is a shithole, and he’s charging way too much rent to his tenants.”

She couldn’t argue that point. “I’ll grab my suitcase.”

“Good girl.”

CHAPTER 6



Roman carried the last of Sofia's meager possessions into Madox's house and shut the door behind him. He brought her clothes to the spare bedroom and set her important papers on the kitchen table.

He knew she was exhausted, and although he would love to dig into the information about her mother's nursing home and solve that problem for her as soon as possible, there was no rush. Her mother wasn't going anywhere, and any issues with paying that bill monthly couldn't be solved overnight.

Sofia looked beaten. Her shoulders slumped, and with each passing moment, it seemed she grew closer to crying.

He didn't mind a woman crying, but he hated to see her hurting.

He followed her to the guest room where she was sorting through the tattered pieces of her clothing, took the shirt out of her hands, dropped it onto the bed, and spun her around. "Leave it for now. Come."

She blew out a breath and nodded. She let him lead her farther down the hall to the bedroom he was using. She also let him guide her to the bed and set her on the edge.

He removed her shoes, pulled back the covers, and pressed her shoulder until she lay on her side tucked into his bed.

“Why?” she asked, curling into a ball.

“Because your room is a mess with all that stuff, and you’re exhausted. You need a nap. And this room is currently more peaceful. Sleep.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, though he had no idea why he did so. And he probably shouldn’t have.

Sofia was quick. She grabbed his arm with her free hand and turned her face toward his mouth until their lips met.

For a moment he was too stunned to react, but it gave her enough time to lick the seam of his lips, driving him crazy with lust. Before he could stop himself, he grasped both her shoulders, flattened her to the bed, and tipped his head to deepen the kiss.

Fireworks.

Damn she was sweet. Her usual tentative self fled the room as she slid her tongue into his mouth and dueled with his.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, he knew this was a horrible idea. He knew he should stop. Pull back. Run. Escape. Anything. But he was powerless to release the contact with her soft lips. Tasting. Teasing. Learning.

Consumed with the need to finally kiss her after all these years of wondering what could have been, he was imprisoned by her kiss. He never wanted to stop. Ending it would mean facing reality. And that was the last thing he wanted to do. Who needed the real world anyway? It was highly overrated.

Sofia grasped his waist and hauled him closer. She flattened her palms on his abs, spread her fingers, and

smoothed them up to his chest. The feel of her touching him was beyond words.

He wanted more.

He wanted everything from her.

He needed to put a stop to this.

Groaning, he broke the kiss and pushed himself to sitting next to her on the bed. He panted.

She was gasping for air too. Her hands had fallen to his waist again.

“Sofia...”

“Don’t say it,” she admonished. “I swear to God, Roman, if you insinuate I’m too young, or you’re too undercover, or the world was fucking not made for the two of us, I’ll never forgive you. Give me this one damn moment. Please.”

He nodded. She was right. There was no sense in denying the chemistry. It was explosive. He wanted more. Never in his life had he felt that level of intensity with a woman.

If he was honest with himself, the summer he spent with Sofia had ruined him for any other woman he’d met since then. Not that he’d been available for anything serious in all those years anyway. But even if he had been, no one ever measured up to Sofia.

His memory was of a sweet carefree woman, barely an adult. Innocent. Fun. Happy. Laughing.

All that was gone now. But it was also still there, buried beneath the surface. And he wanted to bring that back out of her if it was the last thing he did. Even if it killed him to walk away this time. He would do so, knowing he’d brought her back to this world and made her smile.

“Stop thinking so hard,” she said. “I can see your mind working. Coming up with a thousand reasons why we shouldn’t have kissed. Don’t list them. It was beautiful. And I want to hold it close to my heart. Don’t ruin it with stupid clichés.”

“I was actually going to suggest we do it again.” Did he really say that? Could he head down this path and come out the other end intact? Could she?

He would make sure she did. But his own heart? He knew it would be broken. It was a price he was suddenly willing to pay.

Her mouth opened as if to protest whatever he said. And then she closed it and licked her lips. “Do it. Do it now before you change your mind.”

Roman twisted his body the other direction so he could lie next to her. He lined their bodies up, leaned over her, cupped her face, and met her lips again.

Yes.

The same reaction.

Bottle rockets.

Explosives.

He heard nothing but the sound of his heart beating. The rest of the world ceased to exist. This kiss was deeper. Less tentative. For both of them. More demanding.

And he wanted more.

He thumbed her neck, feeling the beat of her pulse. And then he eased his hand lower to flatten it on her chest above her breasts. The feel of her skin against his fingertips made his

cock hard. Not that it had been anything but hard from the moment he first heard her voice last night.

Sofia reached her small hand around his waist and then lowered it to cup his ass.

Jesus.

So hot.

He tightened his butt cheek under her touch.

She gripped harder, digging her fingers into his muscle.

When he needed more, he nibbled a path away from her lips to trail down her neck and into the V of her T-shirt.

Her skin was so soft. Smooth and pale. He remembered it being darker that summer. Maybe in his imagination. Or maybe she'd gotten more sun that year.

He needed more.

In a swift move, he was on his knees, straddling her waist, his hands on the hem of her shirt. "Tell me to stop."

She shook her head. "God, Roman. Please. I need you. I need this." She tipped her head back, exposing more of her neck.

That pushed him too far. He tugged her T-shirt over her head, forcing her arms up above her to tangle in the cotton, fighting to get released.

Roman left the shirt around her wrists and grabbed her hands with both of his, leaning over her. "Stop."

She squirmed another moment and then met his gaze. Hers was wild with arousal. Smoldering. Heady.

He wanted her like he'd never wanted another woman. And she felt the same.

“Stop wiggling. Let me explore. I need to see you. I need you to stay still, or I’m going to come in my jeans.”

He somehow got through to her, and she nodded. Her gaze was unreadable however, as though she weren’t completely seeing him. Was she in her head?

Good. He wanted her to experience the same thing he was. Euphoria. At his hands. Something she would never forget.

But he needed to be sure they were on the same page first. He released her wrists and straightened his body above hers. He brushed a soft ringlet of her curls off her face. “Sofia, are you sure?”

“God, Roman. Yes. Never been more sure of anything. I’ve dreamed of having sex with you for fifteen years. Now is good.”

He chuckled. “Now is good?”

“Yep.”

“Tomorrow might be better.”

“Nope.” She squirmed again, bucking her hips between his legs. She fisted her hands in the T-shirt, struggling to free them.

“Leave your hands there. Stop moving.”

She swallowed and met his gaze. “Why? I’m burning up. I want you to fuck me. Now. I want to feel your hard muscles under my fingertips.”

“I’ll give you the first, but you’re going to have to keep your arms above your head this time. If you touch me, I’ll explode.”

She nodded, relaxing marginally into the mattress. “Please,” she begged.

Roman eased his palms up her bare stomach to cup her breasts. They were smaller than he remembered. Still a handful, but not as full and lush.

She was fucking gorgeous even today. If he thought this skinnier version of her was her best self, he would never give it another thought. But he knew she hadn’t eaten enough in months.

He thumbed her nipples through the lace of her white bra and stared down at the innocent color, knowing it was the perfect choice. Her skin was beautiful against the shimmering white satin. Pure.

It wasn’t that he thought she was a virgin. He knew better. But he intended to show her another side of sex this afternoon.

Judging by her reactions, he was confident he would put all previous lovers to shame. No way in hell had she ever been this aroused. And he also doubted she’d been dominated.

She shuddered each time he gave her a subtle command. His cock grew stiffer too.

It was time to take his cues from her, tell her what he wanted, and watch her unfold like a birthday gift.

He molded his hands to her breasts for another few seconds, loving the feel of them in his palms. But even more, he liked the way she arched her chest into his touch and moaned.

Yeah. She might not have experienced what he was about to teach her, but she was going to enjoy it.

He released her breasts to reach over her head and lift her hands higher until they touched the slats on the headboard.

Leave it to Madox to have a missionary-style bed with slats at the head and the foot. Why wasn't Roman surprised?

Sofia wrapped her fingers around the rungs and calmed. Her breathing was erratic, but her body stopped wiggling.

Roman danced his fingers down her arms from her wrists to her biceps and then he skimmed her shoulders and lower to tease the top edge of her bra.

She moaned.

"Can you keep your hands there for me?" he asked casually.

"I'll try." Her voice was hardly audible.

He lifted his gaze from her chest to her eyes. "You can do better. I know you can."

That sweet tongue of hers slipped out to moisten her lips again. "Why?"

He set his hands on either side of her head and lowered his face closer to hers. "Because I asked you to. Because you want to please me. Because I'm going to take everything you ever thought you knew about sex and destroy it in one hour."

He watched her throat work as she swallowed and nodded slightly.

He lifted one hand to stroke a finger gently over every inch of her face. "You're so gorgeous. Never doubt for a second that I did a double take the first time I spotted you in the library. And the way you came over to me like a timid mouse to see if I needed any assistance finding a book." He hadn't come to the library to read. He hadn't even noticed the books.

“You said you didn’t read,” she whispered.

“Yeah. You somehow managed to teach me the value of reading that summer in spite of myself.”

“You needed educating,” she teased.

“Apparently.” He grinned. “Now let *me* educate *you*.”

“How?”

“Let me take you someplace new.”

“You’re speaking figuratively.”

“I am.”

“Will you hurt me?”

“Never. Not one hair on your delectable body.”

“I think I want you to take me there.”

“Oh, I know you do. You’re so wet for me right now, you have your thighs smashed together to try and keep from leaking.”

Her cheeks turned red.

He smiled. “It won’t work. I’m going to make you come so hard you’ll lose your vision.”

“Okay.”

God, she was cute. She had no idea. And yet she so readily consented, just as he knew she would fifteen years ago if he had asked. But he had more willpower that summer. And rightfully so. It wouldn’t have been fair to take her down this path at her age with her lack of experience and knowing he couldn’t stay with her.

Today was only marginally different. She was older. He convinced himself she deserved to feel what it was like to

come undone for someone. Would he make it difficult if not impossible to find another man she could spend her life with? Yes. Undeniably yes.

But he found he was suddenly a greedy bastard who wanted her more than he had the ability to turn her down.

“You’re going to leave me after you take me, and I’ll never recover,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“Yes.” There was no sense sugarcoating it.

“I don’t care. If you don’t do it, I’ll always wonder what if?”

“I know.” He leaned forward and gently kissed her lips. “I know, baby. I know. That’s why I’m going to take you. You’ll be mine. For as long as I’m here, you’ll be mine. And when I leave, it’ll hurt. But I’ll do my best to help you get through it.”

“No one will be able to replace you.”

“Someone will,” he lied.

She didn’t believe him. He read it in her eyes. But she also didn’t care. She was willing to take the risk. That was half the reason he wanted her so badly, and he was just selfish enough to do it.

It had been a long time since he’d been with a woman like this. With the intent to claim her body so thoroughly that she was figuratively branded by him in a way that created an unbreakable bond.

It was rare to find a woman who could handle his level of dominance. Crave it. Even before she had any idea what he was offering, promising, demanding.

Sofia was ready. Willing. Eager. Her heart pounded so hard he could feel it, almost see it. Her pupils were dilated. Her

mouth dry. Her pussy wet. He didn't need to touch her to know it was true.

“Take me, Roman,” she muttered.

He lurched forward, wrapped his palms around her wrists again, and sealed her lips with his.

She opened to him, letting him fully in. She stopped fighting to get the upper hand, but let him circle her tongue, drag it into his mouth, release it with a pop.

She moaned, the sound musical and arousing.

Her eyes rolled back when he released her lips. Her mouth was wet, and she did nothing to lick away his kiss.

Yeah, she was his.

“These hands don't move,” he restated as he released them again.

She didn't respond verbally, but the way her body arched told him his words did their job.

He watched her face for several seconds, telling himself he needed to control the beast. *Slow down, Roman. Deep breaths. You'll take her there, but don't rush. This is not a race.*

He wanted to see her breasts first, so he popped the front clasp on her bra, grateful to the saleslady for that selection.

Her breasts popped free, swollen, heavy. Her nipples were a rosy pink that made him stifle a groan. The tips were small, as he'd envisioned them. Some day he would suckle them long enough to make them tender and large, but not today. Today he would give them exactly what they needed to make her squirm, but he had too many parts of her body to explore to give them the full attention they deserved.

Sofia moaned as he tapped the tips, watching them expand slightly from that minor contact.

He lifted his gaze to find her gripping the rungs of the headboard so hard her knuckles were white.

Good.

“Do you have any idea how sexy you are?” he breathed. He hadn’t meant to say those words out loud, but they’d escaped on their own.

Sofia lifted her knees until her thighs hit his butt.

“Legs straight, Sofia. Flatten them.”

She moaned again as she did what he asked.

God. Did her nipples get harder?

Fuck me. She’s so submissive. Did she even know it?

Does she even realize it now?

It didn’t matter. What mattered was learning to read her cues and taking her to the cliff until she tumbled over it.

“How many men have been inside you, Sofia?” He knew the question would unnerve her. That was the point. He wanted to know what he was up against before he went any further. And more importantly, he wanted her to feel the slight discomfort of opening up to him.

“Two,” she admitted shyly, her lips curling into her mouth, her eyes closing.

Fuck. Two?

He suspected she’d had little experience, but two? She was thirty-five years old. His cock pressed against his jeans so hard it hurt.

“When?” he demanded.

She hesitated.

“When, Sofia?”

“A long time ago. I haven’t had the time or energy for men.”

“Five years? Twenty?”

“After you left. In college. Before my mom was sick and my dad died.”

He stared at her in disbelief, trying not to react. “You were a virgin when I was here.”

“Yes.”

Fuck. He’d suspected, but hearing it out loud...

Part of him wanted to stop immediately and not make her life more miserable by tempting her with something he could only provide for weeks. Anything longer wasn’t possible. He might be able to lengthen his stay to a few months, but eventually his boss would call with an assignment, and he would have to leave her behind with no way to contact him. Ever.

That was his job. It was what he signed up for years ago. He had traded a normal life for one that made the world a better place to live. And he refused to regret that decision. He was good at his job. Some assignments took longer than he would like, but he always got the bad guy.

Sofia lifted her hips into his groin. “Your turn to stop overthinking. If you think you’re somehow going to ruin me by fucking me, you’re wrong. You ruined me fifteen years ago without ever kissing me. I knew. Maybe I didn’t fully understand. Maybe I still don’t. But deep inside, I knew then,

and I know now too. Withholding the ending doesn't change anything. It just leaves me frustrated. Show me, Roman. Show me now."

Was she right? Could she already sense what he was all about without him taking her?

He searched her eyes and found she was telling the truth. She was his. She'd always been his. He just hadn't faced it.

Now was his second chance. Squandering it would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Suddenly needing his bare skin against hers, he whipped off his shirt and then swung his leg over her body to wiggle out of his jeans, taking his underwear with them.

Sofia twisted her head to the side to watch him as he extracted a condom from the pocket of his jeans and set it beside her.

She giggled softly. "You always carry one of those around?"

"Yep. Always." He swung back around to straddle her legs again and work the button and zipper on her jeans.

She gasped, and he glanced up to find her staring at his cock.

And then he smirked. Ignoring her reaction, he tugged her jeans down her body and tossed them aside. Without any warning, he grabbed her knees, spread them apart, and held them open while he lowered his body between her legs until his face hovered over her pussy.

He inhaled her scent for the first time and moaned. He would never forget this moment. He'd intentionally left her panties on. Unveiling a woman's sex for the first time was

smoking hot. For both him and her. Doing it slowly, taking it in stages, could drive a woman mad with arousal.

He was aiming for that.

The first thing he did was tuck his thumbs under the edges of her panties to draw the elastic away from her tender skin.

She arched her hips off the bed.

He stopped moving. “Ass on the bed, baby. Let me explore.”

“Roman...”

“Ass. On. The. Bed.”

She lowered her butt, moaning as she did so.

Oh yeah. She grew hornier every time he commanded her.

Her thighs shook beneath his palms. “Roman...”

God, he loved the sound of his name coming from her lips. Especially since it was his given name. No woman besides Sofia had ever known his name or called him by it. He had no idea why he'd shared it with her in the first place. She didn't know his last name. But for some reason even fifteen years ago he'd wanted her to call him Roman. It was real. Something special.

And it still was.

When he lifted the sides of her panties away from her pussy again, they were wet. He released them with a slight snap and buried his nose in the slit of her outer lips, inhaling her scent and then nuzzling her in an upward motion until he could kiss her clit through the satin.

She inhaled sharply.

He sucked her clit into his mouth through the panties and flicked his tongue over the bud.

She writhed against him.

He hooked his finger over the top edge of lace and tugged the elastic down far enough to expose her clit. He was surprised to find her brown curls groomed to a slender triangle. Impressive for someone who hadn't had sex in a number of years. Had she done it this morning? He doubted it.

He fingered the triangle of hair and then pressed on the hood of her clit to pull it back. The swollen pink bud was wet with her arousal.

She tried to squirm, but he held her steadier this time, pressing into her thighs with both forearms.

When he flicked his tongue over the sexy little tip, she screamed.

Jesus, she was responsive. No woman had ever been this responsive with him. Had he known she would be? Even fifteen years ago?

If he was honest with himself, yes. He had suspected. That was one of the main reasons he hadn't permitted himself to touch her—aside from her age. He'd known she would drive him wild with her reactions, making it that much harder to leave her.

He pressed his cock into the mattress, trying to keep from coming. He released her panties, letting them fall back into place over her pussy. And then he pressed his palm against her wet heat.

“Roman. Oh, God. Roman. Please. I need you.”

“I know, baby. And you’ll have me. When I say. Not before. Stop trying to control things. Let yourself go. Let me direct.”

“Okaaay.” Her voice was soft. “Are you going to let me explore your body too? I want to touch you. Run my hands over the hard planes of your chest and abs. I want to hold your length, taste you.”

“Mmm. That does sound nice. I’ll make you a deal. You hold still for me and let me take you over the edge first, and then I’ll flip onto my back and give you equal time.” Was he insane? He would never live through something like that.

“Okay.”

The truth was, he wanted her hands on his body too. He’d visualized her mouth wrapped around his cock so many times over the years that the fantasy had solidified itself in his mind.

And here he was, in a position to make it a reality. And he wasn’t strong enough to turn it down.

But first he wanted to take her to the moon. He could tell no one had ever given her the attention she deserved. No one had ensured she felt loved or desirable or sexy. No one had made her scream out uncontrollably from a deep penetrating orgasm that rocked her body.

All that was about to change.

He grabbed her panties and lowered them down her legs. As he tossed them aside, he let his gaze fall on her bare pussy for the first time. So precious.

Unable to stop himself, he leaned forward and dipped his tongue between her lower lips, dragging her moisture out and tasting her tangy sweetness. He continued to stroke her sensitive skin with his tongue until it flicked over her clit.

She moaned. Her thighs shook. “Roman, I’m gonna come.”

“That’s the idea.” He blew against her swollen clit and then sucked it into his mouth. Holding her firmly with both hands on her thighs, he closed his eyes and enjoyed every little jolt of her body. When her orgasm washed over her, he felt the pulses in her clit. Tiny little whimpers escaped her lips at the end of every shallow breath.

Music.

And he didn’t let up. That was just the beginning. He wanted her to come harder. He lessened the suction on her clit as the muscles in her thighs relaxed, but he didn’t release her. Afraid to let go of her leg and risk her trying to lift off the bed or close her thighs, he kept his fingers on the tender skin while lowering his thumb to her entrance.

She stiffened as he slid into her channel, a long lower moan filling the room. “Roman...”

Damn she was tight. He knew she would be, but Lord.

He pressed his cock into the mattress, desperately trying not to come. He wanted to come in her hand or her mouth, not on the bed. But the taste of her, the feel of her, the smell of her, the little sounds she made...

He was losing the battle to hold it together.

He pressed his thumb as deep as he could and angled it toward her G-spot.

She screamed out.

Oh yes. She was expressive. He loved it.

He rapidly flicked his tongue over her captured clit and stroked her G-spot at the same time.

Her hands suddenly landed on his shoulders.

He smiled inwardly, wondering when that would happen.

Instantly he pulled his thumb out and released her clit.

She gasped, her eyes opening wide when he lifted his gaze to meet hers. “Did I say you could move your hands?”

“No.” She swallowed, releasing him to hold her hands up as if she were under arrest. “Shit. Roman. Oh God. Don’t stop. Please.”

He lifted his brows. “Told you I was dominant.”

She shook her head. “I know. And it’s hot. I...forgot.”

“You forgot? Or you were curious to find out what would happen if you disobeyed?” It took every ounce of his strength to keep his face schooled in a calm expression. She was so sexy all flustered, wondering what he would do and shivering with the need to come.

Her rosy nipples were pebbled into stiff peaks. Her chest rose and fell gently with every breath.

“I... I don’t know. But, Roman... Please.”

“I’ll give you choices.”

“Okaaay...”

“You grab that headboard and don’t let go again while I make you come. And then I spank your sweet ass for the interruption. Or, I flip you over and spank you now until you come.”

“Spank me?” Her eyes flew open wide.

Fuck me. “Oh yeah. And you’re going to love it.”

She licked her lips, though it appeared her mouth was too dry to moisten them. “You seriously want me to choose?”

“Yep.”

“And you think I would come from having you spank me?”

“Oh, baby, I know you will.”

She shook her head. “I don’t see that happening.”

He grinned. “Okay, since you’re so doubtful and unable to make a quick choice, we’ll go with both.” He nodded toward the headboard. “Grab the rungs, Sofia. Do. Not. Let. Go. Again. If you do, I won’t let you come, and I’ll spank you anyway but just enough to leave you very very frustrated and needy. I’ll only have to do that once.”

She blinked. Time froze for a second. And then she lifted her arms and grabbed the headboard so tight her knuckles were white.

“Good choice.” He dipped his face back to her pussy and sucked her clit into his mouth again so fast she squealed. He wanted to reach deeper into her pussy, however, so he released one thigh and drew his hand between her legs to thrust two fingers into her tight warmth.

Sofia probably had no idea how noisy she was. She moaned and whimpered and nearly cried out over and over while he brought her back to the edge. When her sounds dipped in pitch, he knew she was close, and he set his teeth gently on her clit.

That was all it took. She climaxed instantly, a rush of her arousal coating his fingers. He released her clit to lap at her pussy, pulling his fingers out so he could fuck her with his tongue.

She gasped and her body jerked, but she didn't let go of the headboard.

He didn't want to give her time to think. Nor did he want her to lose the edge of euphoria she felt. So he lifted his face and grabbed her hips. "Let go now. Flip over."

She blinked, her fingers releasing the headboard. She was still high from the orgasm. Her body would not readily obey.

He helped her onto her belly and then lifted her knees and bent them up under her until her ass was in the air.

She drew her arms up to brace herself on her elbows, her face on the bed, her head tilted to one side to rest on her cheek.

Roman set one knee between hers to keep her legs spread. He rubbed her ass with his palm, taking in her soft white skin for the first time. He needed to be gentle with her.

"I'm going to spank you now. Gently at first. I won't hurt you. Feel my palm on your bottom. The soft burn will bring you back to the edge."

She nodded but didn't speak.

He lifted his hand to land the first soft slap.

She flinched and then sighed.

"See. Not bad. Don't stiffen." He did it again. And then several more times, increasing the pressure with each strike.

Pink spread across her bottom, making his cock so stiff he had to press it into her thigh to keep it from bobbing. He braced her with a hand on her lower back and continued to spank her, watching her subtle cues closely.

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and fought the moans that escaped anyway. So damn sexy. Her knees

spread wider.

He nearly came.

She wanted this. Liked it. Craved it.

She was submissive in every way. How long had she needed someone to take care of her and show her what it was like to be worshipped? Forever probably. Maybe she didn't even know what she'd been waiting for. Needing. Craving.

He would show her. He would show her everything. He had one month. No, he would call his boss and make it two. And he would do everything in his power to make her whole and ready to face the world before he had to walk away.

She thrust her ass into his palm with each strike.

He was careful to keep the pressure at a minimum. The last thing he wanted to do was leave any marks that wouldn't disappear in a few hours. She would feel the sting for the rest of the day, but it would only make her blush and crave more.

Her breathing became ragged, and she lifted her face, her back dipping like a stretching kitty.

He knew she was close, and he lowered his strikes so his palm hit the juncture of her thighs and her ass.

Her mouth fell open, her eyes shut, her head angling back farther, elongating her neck. She needed more. Just a touch to send her over the edge one more time.

He released her lower back, slid his arm around to her belly, and then smoothed his hand lower until his fingers toyed with her swollen lips.

“Yes. Oh, God. Roman...”

He spanked her faster, rapid strikes that weren't hard enough to hurt, just a slight change to get her attention. The second he introduced two fingers to her pussy, she screamed.

Yes. That's what I wanted to hear.

Her body shook violently, her pussy milking his fingers while he flattened his other hand on her ass and rubbed the pink skin. He added a third finger, stretching her tighter.

Her pussy pulsed several more times before she relaxed her muscles and would have collapsed to the bed if he hadn't been holding her up.

He eased his fingers out of her, grasped her hips, and lowered her to the mattress.

She didn't move except to continue breathing heavily. Her hair hung across her face, blocking her eyes, nose, and mouth.

He swiped the long locks off her cheek and tucked them behind her ear. And then he lowered himself to his side next to her and stroked a hand up and down her body, paying close attention to her heated bottom.

When she finally blinked her eyes open and met his gaze, her expression was serious. "I can't believe you did that."

He smiled. "Told you I would."

"That was so...hot."

"Yeah. It was from my vantage point too."

"You weren't kidding."

"About what?" He'd told her so many things.

"About showing me something new. You're a dominant."

"Yes."

“And I’m ruined.”

He cringed. He could lie and tell her, or himself, she would be fine. That there were other dominants in the world who could satisfy her needs when he left. But he wasn’t sure it was entirely true, and he couldn’t stand the thought of another man touching her anyway.

She snaked out a hand and stroked his arm. “It’s okay, you know. I’ll be fine. I need this. You showed up at the right moment in my life. I might have fallen into a thousand tiny pieces if you hadn’t arrived precisely last night to rescue me from myself. I don’t think it was an accident. And I know you’re going to leave me, but let’s ignore that for now and enjoy every second of time we have together. Please. I’ve never felt so strongly in my life.”

He lowered his face and planted a kiss on her cheek, gently. She needed sleep. She probably hadn’t slept much in months. And besides the stress of what awaited her in her life, he’d just taken her deep into a place she’d never been before.

Maybe it had been too soon and he should have waited, but it was done now. There was no going back. She needed aftercare and a nap.

His cock ached, but it would have to wait. As soon as she fell asleep, he would slip from the room and take himself in hand.

He lowered his head to the mattress, facing her, inches separating them, and continued to smooth his hand up and down her body. “Sleep, Sofia. Rest. You’re exhausted.”

“You—”

“I’ll be fine. Not going anywhere.”

“No. Oh God.” She started to lift onto her elbows, but he pressed his palm between her shoulder blades.

“Stop stressing. Rest.”

“You said I could explore you after. You promised.”

“And you can. After a nap.”

She lowered back to the mattress, her brow furrowed. “Seems rather unfair.”

“It’s part of D/s, baby. I chose to take you to the point of exhaustion fully knowing you would need to rest afterward. Stop worrying.”

Her eyes fluttered shut. She fought it for a few more moments, but then her body relaxed into the mattress, her breathing evened out, and just like that she was asleep.

Roman stayed for a while, staring at her glorious body, her smooth skin, her tangled curls spread across her neck and back, the pink glow of her sexy ass.

He closed his eyes next to her, unwilling to stop touching her long enough to touch himself. His cock eased back from the precipice enough that he thought he might live. And then he let himself rest beside her.

After all, he’d arrived in Norfolk only yesterday after a ten-year case in Chicago that had left him depleted. He needed sleep at least as much as Sofia. And he let it take him under.

CHAPTER 7



Sofia blinked awake to find Roman sound asleep on his side next to her. His hand rested on her lower back.

She smiled. She'd never been so comfortable or warm or relaxed. She purposefully shoved all thoughts of reality to the back of her mind to concentrate on this moment here with Roman.

Judging by the light streaming across the room, it was midafternoon.

She let her gaze roam up and down his frame for several moments, taking in his tight body. He was all planes and angles. When she let her gaze lower to his cock, she licked her lips. It was semi erect even in sleep.

He hadn't made love to her, and yet she'd had three fabulous orgasms at his hands. In fact, the slight burn across the skin of her ass reminded her how he'd made her come.

She flushed at the memory of how hot it had been to have him spank her. Or was it the embarrassment of knowing she'd come completely undone under his palm?

Either way, her face heated.

A glance at his profile told her he was still out cold. His breathing was deep and slow. His lips were slightly parted.

Full lips she'd enjoyed having all over her earlier.

Her sex came alive again as if unaware she'd already been completely sated several times. She clenched her pussy, gritting her teeth to keep from moaning. She was pretty certain she screamed loud enough to shatter glass earlier.

It was her turn. He'd said she could explore after. But then she'd been so tired. And he'd insisted she rest, and her eyes had been so heavy.

Now though...

She eased her torso away from him gradually so his hand slid to the mattress, freeing her. For a moment she thought he'd woken with the movement, but all he did was roll onto his back and sigh.

Perfect.

And damn. His cock lay half stiff against his thigh. Huge even partially erect. The soft hair surrounding his length was the same dark shade as the hair on his head. He kept his hair cropped close, probably to avoid drawing attention to his receding hairline. Though she didn't know why he would bother. He'd probably been slowly losing the battle for twenty years. And it was sexy as hell.

She knew he was fifty, but his body belonged to a man much younger. No one would believe he was that old. She, on the other hand, probably looked far older than thirty-five from the stress of the last few years alone.

At the moment, she didn't give a shit how old anyone was. She wasn't tired anymore. She was eager to know this man's body. And she intended to bring him awake—with her mouth.

Carefully arranging herself lower on the bed next to his hips, she inhaled his scent. The clean fresh soap he used that

morning. The edge of saltiness from being so close to the ocean. The musk of sex...

She couldn't wait any longer. She leaned over his body and licked a line from the base to the tip of his cock.

It swelled.

She did it again.

This time, he groaned softly.

But when she sucked the tip between her lips, he flinched. His hand flew to her hair to tangle in the messy curls. "Damn, woman. Don't you warn a guy?" His voice was husky with sleep. Not angry. Amused.

"Mmm," she responded around his cock as she sucked it deeper into her mouth.

It shot from half erect to fully erect in moments. The stiff length had a ridge under it from the thick vein.

She tongued the vein while she reached with her hand to grasp the base and hold him steady. There was no way she could fit him entirely in her mouth anyway. She had almost no experience with this, and he was too long.

He didn't seem to mind. His hand remained on her head, but he neither pushed nor pulled. Just gripped.

Emboldened, she drew her body over his to straddle him, opening her pussy over his legs. The position made her horny and probably had been a bad idea, but she liked the way he reached with his free hand to stroke her breast.

She eased her mouth off his cock until only the tip remained inside, swirled her tongue through the slit at the top, and then lowered back down, hollowing her cheeks to suck him harder.

“Jesus, Sofia.”

Assuming his tone meant he liked what she'd done, she did it again. The third time, he stopped her from descending by bucking upward, grabbing her under the arms and hauling her up his body.

She pouted as he held her suspended above him, her pussy now resting over his length. “I was just getting started. It was my turn. You said—”

He shook his head. “Another time. I don't want to come in your mouth right now. I need to be inside you.”

Well, if that's what he wanted, she wasn't going to complain. Already she nearly dripped with arousal from tasting him.

While he studied her face, she reached between them, grasped his cock, lifted her hips a few inches, and lined him up with her entrance.

Just as she was about to slide down his length, he grabbed her hips and stopped her. “Sofia. Woman. Shit.”

She smiled slyly. “You said you wanted to be inside me...”

“I do. But I generally prefer to control the when and the how. And you forgot protection.”

Her face grew serious. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” He lowered her onto his thighs so his cock rested against her pussy between her spread legs. The friction caused even more brain cells to leak out of her body. How could she forget protection?

He palmed the bed next to him until he found the foil pack he'd set there hours ago, and then he handed it to her. “Put it on me.”

“So bossy.” She took it from him with a grin.

He narrowed his gaze. “Does your ass still burn?”

She shivered. “Yes.”

“Then stop talking and roll the condom on me before I lose my ability to care. One of us needs to bring some sanity to the bed.”

He was right. Her fingers shook as she tore the package open and then rolled the rubber down his length. “Now, may I please fuck you?” she sassed.

He grabbed her hips again and lifted her until she was poised over his cock. No movement on her part would enable her to lower herself with his tight grip around her, however. “You may be on top right now, but no, you won’t be fucking me. I’ll do the work. You’ll take what I permit how and when I permit it. Understood?”

She nodded, moisture leaking out of her at his tone and the command in his voice. Damn bossy man was sexy as hell ordering her around. “Please, Sir?”

He slammed her down over his cock, filling her so full so fast she gasped.

She reached forward with both hands to brace herself against his chest. Her breasts swayed heavily between them.

“Say it again,” he demanded.

For a moment she didn’t know what he meant. Her entire world had shrunk to the feel of him stretching her tight channel so far it almost hurt as the slight twinge of pain switched to intense pleasure.

“Say it again,” he repeated.

She shifted her gaze from the spot where he was buried inside her to his face. Realization dawned. "Please, Sir." Her voice was completely different that time. No longer teasing or sassing or making fun. She spoke in a serious gentle tone of submission.

He moaned. "Yes. Like that. That's how I want you to say it. Do it again." He still held her hips, keeping himself completely thrust inside her while the pressure made her squirm with the need for friction.

"Please...Sir... Please fuck me." She would say anything to get him to move. But those words of submission seemed to turn him into someone else. Someone darker. Not in the sense she was afraid of him. More like he was sliding into a natural role that suited him completely and made him at home.

It was intense. Scary in a way. Frightening in the sense that she knew she was about to fall more completely under his spell. "Please. Let me ride you, Sir."

He searched her face and must have found something he approved of because he released her hips and smoothed his hands down around to her tender ass. With slight pressure, he encouraged her to lift.

She planted her knees firmly at his sides and rose off him several inches, only to slam back down, wanting to feel his fullness buried to the hilt once more.

She tipped her head back and moaned around the stretch.

His hands moved to her shins. "Lift your knees, baby. Plant your feet."

She did as he told her, the new position causing her clit to no longer rub against the base of his cock.

"Now ride me."

She used the balls of her feet for leverage and lifted off him.

He grabbed her hands next, tugging them from his chest. “Cup your breasts.”

She shivered. She’d never touched herself in front of a man before. Could she do it now?

His eyes were deep pools of darkness, making it difficult to tell if his pupils were dilated or not. She assumed yes and cupped her breasts, arching her back and using her feet to keep her spine straighter to avoid falling forward.

“That’s it. So sexy. Pinch your nipples.”

It was becoming apparent that although she was on top, she was in no way in control of a single act of this lovemaking.

Roman wasn’t kidding. He was fully dominant and in charge.

And it was sexy as hell.

She pinched her nipples hard enough to sting, shocking herself and drawing a moan from her mouth.

“That’s it. You like that. You like the slight pain, the rush of arousal that follows.”

She nodded, unable to focus on his face any more. Her clit... God, nothing was touching it, and she needed the friction. She attempted to lean farther forward to graze it against the base of his cock, but he stopped her with his grip on her hips. “Not yet. Fuck me first. You may play with your nipples, but don’t come until I say so.”

“Yes, Sir.” His words made her so much more aroused she didn’t see how she would be able to obey them, but she would

try. She rose off his cock at his nudge and then lowered back down.

“You’re so tight. So wet.” He gritted his teeth as he spoke. “I’m not going to last.”

She wanted him to come. Wanted to see what he looked like when he lost control.

The need for something to touch her clit swirled constantly in her brain, but she transferred the craving to her nipples, twisting and pulling them as if the friction would make up for what she really wanted. Meanwhile, she forced herself to focus on his face.

He did all the lifting, controlling every move she made, keeping her planted as long as he wished and then holding her suspended with equivalent command. As he let her pussy consume him again, he spoke. “You have no idea how sexy you are.”

He was right.

“Do you want to remain on top and make me come without touching your clit? Or would you prefer I flipped you onto your back and fucked you until we both come?”

He was so full of choices. And she noticed yet again, his options were both shocking. Not choices at all. Just two methods of figuratively torturing her body into submission.

She badly wanted to retain some control and know she made him come herself, so she decided to forgo her own orgasm in order to watch his, knowing if she let him take over, she would lose herself and not get to watch him come. “I’ll stay on top, Sir.”

“Good girl.” He released her hips. “Keep your fingers on your nipples, your back straight for balance, and don’t come.”

Did he realize that telling her not to come was the same as demanding she peak? It made her that horny.

She ignored the pulsing from her clit and took the opportunity he'd given her to lift several inches off his cock and slam back down. She pinched her nipples harder, enjoying the mix of pain and pleasure. The feel of him inside her pussy was almost enough to bring her to orgasm by itself. Not quite. Maddening. But it felt so damn good.

She fucked him faster, loving the way he permitted it even though she understood in the back of her mind that he was still controlling her while she did the work. She had command of her speed and pressure and even the grip she used to squeeze his cock with her channel. But she didn't have the ability to come. It would remain elusive until he either touched her clit or let her do it. At this point, she wouldn't mind doing it herself.

His face was strained as he grew closer. His jaw tight. His lips pursed.

She somehow managed to remain upright while she slammed him into her as deeply as possible over and over again.

Finally, he snapped, his mouth opening, his face tensing, his hands once again grasping her hips. He held her steady, his cock fully buried. And she watched as he came. He grunted as he pulsed inside her. It took a full minute before his face relaxed and he could focus on her eyes. "Sexiest moment of my life."

She gave a slight nod, so needy she wasn't sure she would survive if he didn't let her come. Could a person die from unfulfilled arousal?

“Now.”

Now what?

“Let go of your breasts and touch your clit.”

Seriously? He wanted her to rub herself for him?

“Don’t think about it. Just do it.”

She released her nipples and dropped her hands to the space between her legs where her clit hovered inches from his cock.

“Lick your fingers.”

She stared at their connection while she sucked two fingers into her mouth and pulled them back out with a pop.

“Stroke your clit, baby. Do what makes you feel good.”

She couldn’t say what made her feel good. She wasn’t in the habit of using her fingers to masturbate. When she needed relief, she usually grabbed something more powerful. With batteries. Or a charger.

But she wasn’t about to let this opportunity slide. He might change his mind if she didn’t act fast. And she doubted he would let her come any other way than by her own hand right now.

She reached between her legs and pinched her clit between the two fingers, and then she stroked them over the tip, bringing to light how close she was to orgasm already. She moaned at the sensitivity and then flicked her clit rapidly. It didn’t take long for her to know she was close. “May I come, Sir?” she asked, hoping her words would please him.

“Yes, Sofia. Come for me.”

She pressed her fingertips into the spot below her clit, the base where all the nerve ending collided. And then she came. Hard. And it felt amazing with his cock inside her and his eyes on her body.

She might have fallen forward, but he braced her with his hands on her waist while she rode the waves of sensation and then sucked in a deep breath.

“Sexiest thing ever,” he stated as he lowered her to her side, rolling with her, keeping himself lodged in her pussy. “You take my breath away.”

CHAPTER 8



For the longest time, Roman stared at her, holding her gaze while he stroked her back. Eventually he eased his cock out of her channel, leaving her sorry for the loss of connection.

“Don’t worry. It will fit snugly back in again in a while.” He leaned to the side of the bed to grab a tissue and dispose of the condom.

She flushed. How did he read her so well?

He flattened his hand between her shoulder blades and pressed forward. “Roll onto your belly. I want to see your bottom.”

Mortified by his words, she did as he commanded, happy for the ability to bury her face in the pillow.

Roman’s fingers danced across the heated skin of her ass. “Perfect. Pink. But not bruised.”

She held her breath. It was insane letting him scrutinize her so closely. Then again everything they’d done was insane today.

“Does it hurt, baby?”

She shook her head against the pillow. It didn’t. When he touched her there, it served more as a reminder of how hard

she'd come while he made her ass that color, and that thought aroused her all over again.

He flipped her onto her back and leaned over her to stare at her face, inches separating them. He studied her, and he must have been satisfied with what he found. "You have to be starving."

Her stomach rumbled at his words. Lord. Even that part of her anatomy reacted to him.

He smiled. "Let's get you fed. And then I want to see the bills you have from the nursing home."

Did he have to ruin a perfectly awesome moment with a mention of her mother and the extremely dire situation Sofia was in?

If he read her disappointment, he ignored it, slapping her thigh lightly and then rolling off the bed. He tugged his jeans up his legs but left them unbuttoned. Hot as hell.

When he reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet, she wobbled. Her legs didn't feel completely capable of holding her upright for a second.

She finally got her balance and reached down to grab his T-shirt off the floor.

He stopped her. "Leave it. I like you naked."

She righted herself. "Roman..." No way was she going to wander around the house with no clothes.

He lifted a brow, daring her to argue. "Your body is fucking gorgeous, Sofia. I want to see it. All the time. I might not be able to have you forever, but please let me have everything I can get while I do have you."

She fought the emotion rising up in her throat at his mention of leaving. She'd had him less than a full day. How many were left? Thirty? Did he say he might stay longer? And where would that leave her?

Fucked.

Literally.

But she would take every single thing he offered her for as long as he offered it. Because she was in that deep.

No matter the cost, she was in for whatever he would share.

Was the price too high? Undoubtedly. But it had already been paid in full in the last few hours. Nothing would change the pain of losing him. So she might as well enjoy it while it lasted.

He tugged her hand and led her out of the bedroom and down the hall toward the kitchen. When they arrived, he lifted her off the ground and set her on the island.

She wiggled. "I'm naked, Roman. This is making me uncomfortable." She glanced at the window. The sun was setting. But there were no curtains. She knew they were too far from the beach for anyone to see anything inside, but she was still unnerved.

Roman smiled. "Get over it." He followed her gaze and glanced outside. "No one can see in."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. And I also know the shred of risk that someone might see you will make you more aroused."

Damn him again. Her pussy gripped at the emptiness when he spoke those words.

She followed him around the room with her gaze. When she asked if she could help him cook, he declined. When she asked if she could at least get off the counter, he rejected that plan too.

So she sat. Naked. And enjoyed the scent of red sauce filling the kitchen as he made spaghetti. She tried to remember the last time she'd eaten homemade sauce and failed.

He was good in the kitchen. Quick. Efficient. In no time, a gourmet meal was on the table, and he finally helped her hop down to join him.

“You’re spoiling me.”

“You need it.”

He was right. But she didn’t like it.

When they finished eating, he also insisted she go take a bath while he cleaned the kitchen.

Best day of her life. It might have started as shit getting her stuff out of her sad excuse for an apartment, but the rest of it had totally made up for the beginning.

She ran a bath and eased into the hot water, leaning back and letting herself drift off. She thought Roman would join her. She kept expecting him to step into the room at any moment. But the water got cold, and she finally forced herself to get out and wrap in a huge fluffy towel. He hadn’t said anything about towels being forbidden.

With that brazen thought in her mind, she padded back toward the front of the house in search of her man.



Roman finished cleaning the kitchen and then picked up the pile of bills for the nursing home that sat on the far end of the table. He only meant to take a glance and see what she was paying to help him understand what she was up against, but the total shocked him, forcing him to take a seat and go through everything more thoroughly.

With no regard for the passage of time, he eventually pulled out his laptop and powered it up. In less than a minute, he had shot a message off to Madox.

Abram: Forgot to contact you earlier today. Sorry about that. I'm here. Everything is perfect.

Madox: Good. I was wondering.

Abram: Listen. I need your help. Off the record.

Madox: Of course. Anything.

Roman smiled. Of course that would be Madox's response. He expected nothing less.

Abram: I have a friend. Well, more than a friend. Long story. But she's in a bind. I'm holding her bills in my hand. Her mother has been in a nursing home for six years. She has Alzheimer's. I'm seriously concerned about what Sofia has been paying this home for all these years. The numbers are suspicious. Can you check the place out for me?

Madox: Sofia huh? You've been in Norfolk how many hours?

Abram: Funny guy.

Madox: Sorry. Yes. Of course. Shoot me the information you have. I'll do some digging. Get back to you.

Abram: Thanks, man. Owe you one.

Madox: No you don't.

Roman entered several lines of information concerning the nursing home and the pile of bills. He then closed the computer, still holding the bills in his hand. A chill ran up his spine. Something was terribly wrong.

Which meant one of two things. Either Sofia had been taken to the cleaners for all these years at the horrific expense to her own health and well-being and she would never recoup the money. Or Roman, with the help of Madox, would figure out a way to wrong this right.

Roman hoped for the latter.

Something made him glance up to find Sofia shuffling across the room wearing a towel.

He smiled. "Sorry. I got distracted. How was your bath?"

She stepped into his open arms when he stood and held them out for her. "Marvelous."

He inhaled her scent. "You smell wonderful."

"You bought the body wash." She tipped her head back to meet his gaze. "I hope you didn't pick a scent you hated."

He shrugged and lifted a tendril of hair that hung down her neck, having escaped the band holding the rest on her head. "I

just grabbed a pretty one. I didn't test it out."

"Risky," she joked. "Could have been awful."

He leaned forward until his nose touched hers. "Doubt it. Not after you used it on your body. But more importantly, why are you wearing a towel?"

She grinned. "You said no clothes. You never mentioned anything about towels."

He reached under the bottom edge that barely covered her bottom and gave her cheek a slight pinch.

She yelped and tried to jump out of his embrace.

Did she really think he would let her go?

More importantly, could he ever let her go? A burn in his chest grew with every passing moment. This woman was so much more than he allowed himself to believe fifteen years ago or even last night.

She was his perfect match.

A dull ache in his temple twitched as he stared down at her silly expression. Leave her? What was he thinking?

He shook the thought out of his mind, turned her to face the bedroom, and ushered her back down the hallway. He never even paused at the room she'd slept in last night. That seemed so long ago.

From now on, she was sleeping in his bed. But for how long?

CHAPTER 9



Roman blinked at the screen in front of him, willing the words to scramble themselves into a different order.

He read the next message from Madox and sighed.

Madox: I'm sorry, man. Wish I had better news. You might want to get a lawyer.

Roman sat back in the chair at the kitchen table and stared out the window at the early morning sun. It was so damn pretty out there. So serene. So perfect. Staring at the waves lapping into the shore, it was hard to believe there was evil lurking in the world.

But there was an abundance of it, and an unfair dose had been poured in Sofia's lap for years.

He couldn't help wondering what would have happened to her if he hadn't coincidentally come to Norfolk for vacation and eaten in the diner where she worked on precisely the evening she hit rock bottom.

He shuddered. Was it a coincidence? Or did fate have a hand in things?

He rubbed his temples and closed his eyes. He had work to do. A lot of it. This was not how he pictured spending his days

at the beach. But then again, he wouldn't trade anything if it meant he also got to have Sofia in his bed.

He finally pushed back the chair and stood to go check on her. It was nine in the morning. She'd slept late again. And he couldn't blame her. She probably needed two months of sleep to make up for whatever she'd gotten in the last few years. Between working too many hours and stressing over bills mounting daily, it was a wonder she hadn't gone insane.

He found her on her back, still asleep, her arms tossed over her head. The sheet had drifted to her belly, leaving her breasts bare to his view.

He stood next to the bed for a long time watching her breathe.

She was so gorgeous. So strong. So damn perfect. Why had he ever thought his age made a difference?

And now that he didn't give a shit about the decade and a half between them, what was he going to do? It wasn't like he could bring her with him on his next assignment. He didn't have any control over where and when it was located. Involving a civilian was not permitted.

His chest tightened again.

Fuck.

She stirred and then blinked up at him, a smile spreading across her face. "How long have you been standing there?"

He shrugged. "Not long."

"Why don't I believe you?"

He smiled and set a knee on the bed to lean over her and kiss her lips. And then he sat beside her and took her hand. He hated ruining the gentle, easy, early-morning look on her face.

“I wish you could stay in bed all day and let me pleasure you until you’re worn out, but we have a problem.”

She flinched. “What is it?”

He met her gaze. “That nursing home has been robbing you blind. We need to go talk to them.”

“What?” She sat up abruptly, paying no attention to her nudity, which pleased him. “How do you know? Are you sure?”

He nodded. “My friend, the one who owns this house, he did some digging for me. It’s bad. The owner has been charging several clients way too much money for years. Not just you. You’re one of the lucky ones. I can see looking at your finances that you wouldn’t have been able to make the next payment. Then things would have really gotten ugly.”

“Ugly how? I mean I knew I was in trouble, but surely he wouldn’t have kicked my mom out to the street if I explained things. I thought maybe I could make an arrangement with him. She’s been there for years. I’ve never missed a payment.”

Roman pursed his lips for a moment and then continued. “Yeah, you’re half right. He wouldn’t have tossed her to the street. And he most assuredly would have made an arrangement with you. I know this because he’s preyed upon several other women in your position over the years.”

“Then why do you look so distraught? And what do you mean about him overcharging me? How much?”

“A fuck ton, baby. And I’m distraught because his ‘arrangement’ with other women like you wasn’t the sort of ‘arrangement’ that involved sending monthly checks to keep your mother’s spot in her bed.”

She stiffened. “Roman. Spit it out. What are you insinuating?”

He took a deep breath. “What that asshole does is provide seemingly top-notch care for a patient while over-charging their loved one for years, sometimes over a decade. He knows they’ll run out of money eventually. And he doesn’t care about them no longer being able to pay because he’s already collected far more than they owe for all that time.”

“You mean like insurance? That I didn’t know about?”

He shook his head. “Sofia, what I mean is he never tells the women he over charged them. Instead he has them backed into a corner they can’t escape, and he trades sex for the continued care of their loved one.” There was no way to put it more bluntly.

She gasped, yanking her hand out of his and hauling the sheet up to cover her breasts as if he’d personally violated her. A reasonable response. “Please tell me you aren’t serious.”

“Oh, I’m deadly serious. He has at least nine women about your age rotating in and out of his office every few days to *pay* with their bodies for the continued care of their mother, or father, or grandparent.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Please God. No.”

Roman reached out and tugged Sofia into his arms.

Thankfully she let him.

He rocked her gently back and forth, and when it seemed she wasn’t going to completely fall apart on him, he kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair. “There *is* good news.”

“How is there good news?” she asked his bare chest.

“You haven’t been blackmailed by him yet. And I got here just in time to help.”

“How?” She leaned back. “What the hell am I going to do? Should we call the police? What will happen to my mother?”

Roman shook his head. “Slow down, baby. I have a plan.”



Sofia didn’t like the look on Roman’s face. She stared into his deep brown eyes, but couldn’t read his *plan*. Hell, it had taken her several minutes of explanation to grasp the full scope of what she was facing. A tear fell down her face. She wiped it away. “I don’t have another option. My father chose this facility. At the time, he had money. I didn’t. He was already sick himself. Dying.”

“Were you with him when he made arrangements for your mom?”

“Yes. Always. Every time. I knew I needed to be on top of things. I knew he would eventually leave the pieces to me. He did his best to make every possible arrangement. And I promised him I would take care of Mom if it was the last thing I did. I promised.” Her voice wobbled as it grew louder. She felt frantic. She squeezed Roman’s biceps too tightly, practically shaking him to understand.

He ignored the grasp of her fingertips, threaded his hand in her hair, and held her steady. Grounding her.

She choked on a sob, but held it in check.

“Sofia, look at me.” His voice held the commanding tone she’d learned to obey. It wasn’t sexual this time, but demanding all the same.

She met his gaze.

“Were you with your dad when he made the arrangement with Kenneth Viking at the nursing home?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Would it have been obvious your dad was sick?”

“Definitely. In fact, Mr. Viking pulled me aside to ensure I would be able to continue paying for my mother’s care in the event my father passed.”

Roman nodded. “That’s what I suspected.”

She swallowed. “You mean that disgusting piece of shit would bribe me to sleep with him if I went in there today and told him I was out of money?”

“Yes. And that’s exactly what I need you to do.”

“What?” she shouted. She tried to free herself from Roman’s grasp, unsuccessfully.

He nodded again. “Calm down, baby. I didn’t say you were going to go through with it. I simply stated that I needed you to go talk to him. I’m going to hide a recording device on you and tape the entire conversation.”

It took her a moment to absorb his words, and then she cringed. “Oh, God. That seems dangerous.”

“It won’t be. He’ll never know you’re recording him. You’ll tell him you’re considering his offer and get the hell out of there as fast as possible. And then you’ll wait in the car while I go in and have a few words.”

No. No way. She managed to wiggle out of Roman’s grasp and slide off the side of the bed to pace the room. She grabbed

a T-shirt of his off the floor and put it on even though she knew he would normally argue.

Luckily he didn't move.

She needed to think, and she needed space without him touching her to do it. She rubbed her temples with both hands as she paced the room. Finally, she stopped and faced him. "I can't let you do that, Roman. Let's just call the police."

"And say what? That you suspect Mr. Viking is going to ask you to trade sex for eldercare? That won't be good enough, Sofia. They'll need more to go on."

"What about the other women? Could we contact them and get them to all call the police? That would work." *Wouldn't it?*

"It might. And it might not. But it would take time. Time you don't have. And then the police would close the place down, and it would be years before you see your money. If ever. Meanwhile, your mom would be homeless, and you would have a hard time finding another place for her. You and dozens of other people in the same predicament."

"Damn it." She tipped her head back to shout at the ceiling.

"My way is quick and efficient."

"What about all the others? You don't think it's a shit move to leave them all in a bind prostituting themselves?" Everything Sofia knew about Roman would suggest he wasn't nearly that big of an asshole.

"Of course not, baby. Come here." He reached out a hand toward her. His voice held that command again. It lured her toward him whether or not she thought it was a good idea to let him touch her.

She melted every time his skin brushed against hers. Nevertheless, she stepped toward him.

He reached out and hauled her into the V of his legs. He brushed a lock of hair off her face and cupped her cheek. “Please trust me. You know me better than that. You have to know I have it all figured out. Go take a shower. I’ll fix you some breakfast, and then I’ll explain the plan on the way.”

She took a deep breath. She did trust him. More than she’d ever trusted another human being. She had trusted him enough to let him dominate her. She had trusted him enough to let him into her heart when she knew he was going to break it. She had also trusted him enough to let him spank her. Her ass was still sore with the reminder.

She nodded. “Okay.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 10



Sofia fidgeted the entire drive to the nursing home. She listened intently to every instruction Roman repeated. By the time they arrived, she had memorized exactly what to say. Now she needed to put on her game face and go inside.

He turned to face her and took her hand. “You’ve got this. You know that, right?”

She nodded, her head bobbing too fast. “Yes. Got it.” She twisted the bracelet she wore.

He set his hand on top of hers. “You’re okay. Don’t worry about being nervous. You should be nervous. Kenneth Viking will expect you to be nervous. You’re coming in to tell him you’ve run out of money. If you didn’t appear stressed, something would seem strange.”

“Right. Of course.” That logic actually helped. She reached for the door.

He grabbed her arm. “Sofia, look at me.”

She turned back toward him. “I’m good. I’ll be fine.”

“Babe, you’ll be terrific. I know you. You’re strong. We’ll win this battle and any other that creeps up, okay?”

“Yep.” *Any battle that occurs before you leave me again, you mean.* She stepped out of the car and made her way to the

front door.

After telling the woman who worked at the front desk she was there to see the director, she took a seat, trying not to fidget. The lady at the desk was new. Sofia had never seen her before. Of course, Sofia hadn't been there in six weeks this time, but still.

Within minutes, the woman returned and told Sofia that Kenneth would see her now. The lady was older. Maybe sixty. Graying. Did she know what kind of man she worked for?

Mr. Viking stood from behind his desk, beaming at Sofia as she entered. "Ms. Leskov. What a pleasure. I haven't seen you in a while. Everything been okay?"

He knew. Suddenly Sofia was certain this fucker knew exactly when her money ran out and how long it would be before she showed up to suck his cock. Joke was on him today. She wasn't going anywhere near this asshole's nasty dick.

She took a seat across from him, conscious of the fact that she suddenly felt much calmer than she should. She needed to act more nervous. Twisted.

She played with her hands unnecessarily in her lap. "I'm in kind of a bind."

"Oh?" He sat up straighter, lifted a brow. "What sort of bind?"

Oh yeah. The fucker knew.

"I've lost my job. I'm short this month. I'm trying to catch up. You know how it is." She gave a fake shrug. "I was hoping you would be able to give me a few extra weeks to come up with this month's payment. Hopefully I'll find another job and get it back together quickly." She rambled. Intentionally. That had been the plan.

“Oh darn.” Kenneth slouched with great exaggeration. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry.” He shook his head slowly, a sad puppy expression on his face.

“Yeah. Snuck up on me. I’m searching everywhere, but I wasn’t able to finish my degree. It’s hard to find something.”

He continued to shake his head as though commiserating with her.

She fought the bile rising in her throat, threatening a revolt of the delicious breakfast she’d eaten.

Kenneth leaned forward, setting his elbows on the desk. “That stinks, Ms. Leskov, but I’m afraid we have a strict policy here. If you don’t have the funds, you’ll have to move your mother to another facility by the end of the month.” He glanced at his calendar. “This Friday.”

For a moment she froze, thinking this had gone completely wrong.

And then he leaned back as though pondering, tapping his lips with one finger. He smiled, cocking his head to one side. “You know, Sofia, you’re an attractive woman.”

Jackpot. He had switched from Ms. Leskov to Sofia.

She sat up straighter. Thank God Roman schooled her on how to react. Otherwise she might have fainted. She wasn’t the sort of person who was generally strong enough to handle this sort of thing. No one in all her thirty-five years had ever suggested she prostitute herself in lieu of payment for anything.

“Perhaps we could come to some sort of arrangement. After all, you’ve had an exemplary record with us for years.”

“Oh, thank you, sir. I was hoping you would see it that way. I’ll do anything.” *Vomit.*

He tapped his pencil on the desk, eyeing her speculatively. “Did you know I’ve always admired you?”

She shook her head. “No. Really?”

“Yes. Amazing, intelligent woman like yourself trapped in a messed-up situation having to care for aging parents.” He sighed as though seriously sorry for her.

Again she thanked God Roman had shown up in her diner two nights ago. If he hadn’t, she would still be sitting here at this moment but with far less armor. “Thank you, sir. I can see you understand.”

“It will probably take you a while to get back on your feet, and I don’t want you to have to worry about your mother. I know it’s hard.”

She forced herself to pretend to relax into the chair.

He also pretended to ponder further. And then his eyes lit up. He stood, came around to her side of the desk, and leaned his ass against the edge. His legs were inches from hers, making her uncomfortable. “Are you in a relationship, Sofia?”

“What? No. I don’t have time for that sort of thing.” She waved a hand through the air, dismissing the idea.

He reached out and stroked her cheek and then grasped her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. Not at all like Roman. Not suggestively. Not as though she had a choice in the matter. He literally forced her.

She swallowed, her stress genuine.

“If you’re unattached, and I am too, maybe we could strike a bargain.”

She smiled, trying to seem eager. Trying not to freak out over his hand on her skin. His smarmy hand that made her cringe inside. “Anything.”

He leaned forward.

For a moment she thought he might mean *now*. That he might kiss her and expect her to suck him off right this second or something. She nearly peed herself.

“I work long hours,” he whispered. “I get bored. It’s lonely here.”

“I’m sure.”

“Maybe you could agree to visit me a few times a week.”

“Visit?” She feigned ignorance.

“Yeah.” He leaned closer, his rank breath making her stop inhaling. “An exchange. I’d ignore the payments you owe for a few months, and you’d...” he shrugged, “...you know, return the favor.”

She forced her eyes wider. “Sex? You want me to sleep with you?”

He licked his lips. “I’m an attractive guy.”

“Yes. Of course. I mean, I can see that.” She leaned back, trying to dislodge him and put some distance between them. “But, let me get this straight. You’re saying if I sleep with you, you’ll let my mother stay here?”

He smiled. “Now she’s catching on. What do you say?”

She paused, forcing herself to look shocked. Frankly, it wasn’t difficult. She *was* shocked. Even though she’d been prepped for this exact conversation, it still stunned her to hear it out loud from this piece of shit.

He spoke again. "I mean, not necessarily sex. There are plenty of things you could do that wouldn't involve penetration if you'd prefer." He moved his thumb from her chin to her lips and dragged it across the bottom one, tugging it down.

She thought she might throw up. "I see." She needed to get him to suggest more. Himself. Out loud. Verbally. So that she wasn't the one speaking. Roman had made that part abundantly clear. "What other things?"

He chuckled, releasing her and sitting back. Thank God. "Oh, Sofia. You're a smart girl. Surely you've given a blow job before, yeah? A hand job? Anal? Whatever you need. I'm accommodating."

Yep. The bile seeped into her mouth. She nodded. "I understand. Can I think about it?"

He nodded. "Sure. Of course. Take the day. Come by tomorrow. I'll be here." He rounded back to his side of the desk.

She exhaled in relief. Her greatest fear had been worrying that he might expect her to start immediately.

"But Sofia, on Friday you need to have other arrangements for your mother if you choose to turn me down. I'd hate to see you in a bind." He straightened several papers on his desk. "I'm sure you understand my position. This isn't a charity institution. It's a nursing home. I don't make concessions like this for just anyone. I've known you for a long time. You're a cute girl. I just thought you might find me attractive too. We could strike a bargain, come up with something that was a win-win for both of us." He winked, his grin huge.

She stood, nodding slowly. “Okay. I’ll call you tomorrow. Or come by.”

“You do that.”

She turned around, walked calmly out of his office, sped her pace down the hall, and then bolted through the front door.

She ran around the side of the building where Roman had parked the car and sat waiting for her in the driver’s seat. Before she reached the vehicle though, she turned away from him, leaned over the bushes, and vomited.

In seconds, he was behind her, his hand holding her hair at her neck. “Sofia? Oh God.”

She shook her head rapidly. “I’m okay. Give me a second.” Another wave of bile surfaced, and she hurled again.

Her legs shook. She didn’t want to lower herself to the ground next to the building. As it was she would be lucky if no one saw her.

“Baby... I’m so sorry. Did he...?” Roman’s fingers dug into her neck with more pressure.

“No. Seriously. It went exactly as planned.” She took a deep breath, righted herself, and lifted the bracelet still attached to her wrist. “Hope this thing worked.”

Roman rubbed his face with his free hand and led her back to the car. He helped her inside, rounded the front to his side, and then started the engine. He grabbed her thigh, but said nothing else. When he pulled out of the spot, she panicked.

“What are you doing? I thought you were going to go in after me?”

“I am, baby. But first I’m going to take you home. Regroup. Listen to the conversation. Return with my ducks in

a row.”

She jerked her gaze to him. “You weren’t listening?”

He cocked his head to one side. “No. Madox was. He was afraid if I listened, I would get hotheaded and stomp inside and ruin the entire plan. And he was right. If I had known how distressed you were, I would have rushed in there and punched that fucker in the face.”

She smiled. “My hero,” she teased.

He chuckled, but not with enough humor. “Don’t judge me that kindly yet.”

CHAPTER 11



Three hours later, Sofia paced the living room of Madox's oceanfront home, waiting for Roman to return. When they'd gotten home, he'd sent her outside to dig her toes into the sand with strict instructions that she stay where he could see her while he listened to the taped conversation and spoke to Madox.

By the time he came outside to get her, he seemed tense but relatively calm. She knew he'd probably broken a few things in Madox's house, but he didn't mention specifics.

He led her back inside, told her not to open any doors or windows, set the alarm, and left in his rental car.

And then she'd paced. His precautions seemed over the top. It wasn't as though anyone was chasing her or stalking her. Kenneth Viking didn't have plans to kidnap her or anything. His intentions were clear—either she fucked him twice a week or her mother would be put out on the street.

He was even kind enough to permit her to use her mouth, her hand, or her ass if she wasn't interested in actual vaginal intercourse. She shuddered again thinking about his words.

It would be a long time before she recovered from this afternoon's meeting and got his voice out of her head. She

hoped whatever Roman planned was successful because she never wanted to set her eyes on Kenneth Viking again.

The door suddenly opened, and Sofia whipped around to face whoever entered, her hand on her heart as if she was expecting an intruder.

Roman looked calm. He smiled, came across the room, pulled her into his arms, and then lifted something in the air.

“What’s that?”

“A check.”

“A check? For what?”

“For the total amount of money you overpaid Kenneth Viking for six years.”

She gasped, glancing at the dollar amount. It was astronomical. She grabbed it. “Are you serious? How did you get this?”

He smiled. “I might have suggested it was in his best interest to return the stolen money to you unless he wanted to find himself in jail by the end of the day.”

“But, my mother. Oh God.”

Roman squeezed her tighter, pressing his hard body against hers. “Relax. I’m a smart guy. I had an ambulance there to move her to another facility while I was meeting with Mr. Viking. She was already safely out of harm’s way before he made the intelligent decision to return your money.”

She couldn’t believe it. “But what about all those other women? We can’t leave them high and dry, prostituting themselves to that asshole while I save myself.” Her voice rose. She was seriously concerned about Roman’s decisions.

He smiled broader. “Sofia. Come on. Do you think so little of me?”

“No.” She didn’t, but...

“Just because I forced his hand and took that check and moved your mother doesn’t mean I didn’t call the police and report him the moment I left the building. The place is swarming already. And the check has already been electronically deposited to your account.”

“What? How could you do that? That’s not possible. I didn’t sign it. You don’t have my account number.” She stopped talking. He’d done it. Somehow he’d managed. “Forgot who you are.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t me this time. Moving money around and spying on people through a bracelet isn’t in my line of work.”

“Madox.”

“Yep.”

She blew out a long breath. “I’m gonna name my first child after him.”

“Not a bad idea.” Roman hugged her tighter, kissing her softly. “If he’s a boy I mean. If not, we might not want to name our daughter Madox.” He released her, turned around, and headed for the kitchen as if he hadn’t just dropped a bomb in her lap and fled.

“Wait. What? What did you just say?”

He reached into the fridge, grabbed a beer, and twisted the top off. He lifted it toward her. “You want one? I’m on vacation. I’ve been on vacation for two days so far, and I haven’t had a chance to enjoy it.”

She shook her head rapidly. “No. I don’t like beer. Roman?”

He opened the sliding door, still acting nonchalant as though he hadn’t flipped her world upside down. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She couldn’t get her feet to move. *We’ll name our first son Madox?*

“Roman,” she shouted.

“What?” He stood in the doorway, a brow lifted in fake confusion.

“You just said we would name our first son Madox.”

“Yeah. It has a nice ring.” He took a long swig of his beer and licked his lips. “I like it. Are we going for that walk now?”

“Walk? Are you crazy? You can’t just say something like that and then casually go on with life. You’re confusing me. You have a job. You’ve made it perfectly clear that when your boss calls, you have to go do the next assignment. You’re leaving me. There will be no first-born son. No Madox. No daughter. Just me. Here. Alone. Picking up the pieces after you leave. Do not joke about something like this.”

He gave her a crooked smile and padded back toward her, setting the beer on the table until he reached her and hauled her against him. “Changed my mind.”

“Changed your mind? About what?”

“Us. Kids. Leaving.”

She couldn’t breathe. “And?”

“And I decided I’m not letting you go.”

“What... What does that mean?”

“It means I called my boss, told him I had a woman in my life now, and he needed to either assign me somewhere that would make it possible for you to go with me or fire my ass.” He shrugged. As if it were no big deal, he shrugged. “I don’t think he’ll fire me. Have you ever been to France?”

Her eyes widened. Breathing wasn’t her only problem. She also had no heartbeat and her blood had stopped pumping. “You’re serious?”

“Yep.” He kissed her. “I’m in love with you. Have been for fifteen years. You’re perfect for me. Not letting you go this time.”

“You’ve been here like forty-eight hours.”

“Didn’t need more time than that.”

He was right. She had known she was in love with him the second he stepped into the diner two nights ago and told her boss to essentially fuck himself. He had reinforced her opinion time and time again since then. “You’re in love with me?” She wanted to hear it again.

“Yes.”

“Say it again,” she teased, imitating the demands he tended to make of her in bed.

“I love you, Sofia Leskov. Go with me. Wherever I go, go with me.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you.” He smirked.

“You’re sure?”

“I love you.” His voice lowered, he set his forehead against hers, and he kissed her nose. “Please say yes.”

“I don’t know what I’m saying yes to, but I’d say yes to anything you asked me.”

He lifted her off the floor, spun her around, and whooped like a teenager who just got a date to the prom.

When he finally set her feet back on the ground, he kneeled in front of her, removed her sandals, and then stood once more and took her hand. He led her to the edge of the water without another word and held her against his side. “It’s so beautiful out here. I told my boss we were staying here for at least a month.”

She was still in shock. Her heart raced. She planted her hand flat on his chest to remind herself he was real.

They stood there for a long time in silence.

Finally, she spoke. “I love you too, Roman.”

“I know, baby.” He kissed the top of her head.

She sighed, leaned her cheek against him, and watched the waves come in. It didn’t matter if her jeans got wet. It didn’t matter that these were the only jeans she owned—the ones he bought her yesterday.

She didn’t figure she needed much clothing for the next month anyway.

Roman wasn’t likely to let her leave the house again. And he didn’t care for clothing. All she needed was a bikini so she could relax on the beach a few hours a day, and she would be set.

“Do you really think the money is in my checking account?”

“Yes. I checked it myself. It’s there.”

“Good. Because I need a new bikini.”

He smiled. “I think we can arrange that.”

“And maybe some lingerie.”

“Mmmm. Highly overrated. It looks nice, but then it ends up on the floor. And in your case, there’s a good chance I might tear it trying to get it off you. Also, let me point out that I’m not getting any younger. If you want to have a few kids, we need to get started on those—like yesterday.” He kept his gaze toward the ocean.

She smiled against him. Yep, this man was hers. Or she was his.

What did it matter?

As long as they had each other, clothing optional, they had the world.

Saving Sofia is a novella that follows my Underground series. If you want to learn more about The Underground, the first book in the series is *Force*.

THREE'S A CRUISE



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Three's a Cruise is a previously released novella that has returned to me from the publisher. It was my first foray into menage romance that released in 2013.

When a dream vacation gets an unexpected bonus, anything is possible...

Haley and Jordan are about to embark on their dream vacation, a cruise out of Miami, Florida. Arriving a night early, they head for a local bar where they meet the sexy Nathan and engage in an unexpected threesome.

Nathan has also arrived in Miami tonight by coincidence. He has to work tomorrow, but tonight he intends to let his luck at finding the two lovers drag him away from responsibilities.

After Nathan flees in the night, Haley and Jordan have no hope of ever seeing him again. But fate has a way...

CHAPTER 1



“I’m so glad we did this,” Haley shouted over the roar of the bar music. She glanced around at the Miami crowd. The dimly lit place was packed with an eclectic variety of Friday-night patrons. Everyone from the suits who came straight from work to young girls in denim miniskirts and tight crop tops filled the dance floor and squeezed around each other, vying for a table.

“Did what, hon?” Jordan smiled at her, a wry grin on his face. “Went out for a drink?” He chuckled. “Baby, if that’s all it takes to make you happy, we can go out every night.”

Haley glared at him, but all in fun. “Ha ha. Arrived at the port a night early, doofus.” She swatted her boyfriend playfully on the arm. “I feel so much more relaxed knowing we’re already here so we can’t miss the ship in the morning.”

“You’re right.” Jordan took her in his arms and kissed her soundly on the lips. “As usual. I would never doubt you. Now, do you want to dance...or just stand here?” He nibbled a path to her ear. How could she refuse?

“Let’s do it.” Haley nodded toward the floor, grabbed Jordan’s hand, and headed that way. She squeezed into the throng of dancers and shook her hair back, peeling a few strawberry blonde strands from her cheek.

After several songs, Jordan leaned in to speak to her. “Gonna hit the men’s room. I’ll be right back.”

“K.” With so many people bouncing around the floor to the popular pop hits, it didn’t really matter who was with whom.

Haley lifted her arms in the air, shimmied to the beat, and let her eyes close partway. All she wanted right that minute was to relax and begin to enjoy their vacation.

One week. Seven nights and seven days out on the open water. No responsibilities. No work phone calls. Just endless stretches of deep blue water and white-capped waves. The idea was so luxurious, she smiled to herself.

“Hey, gorgeous. Mind if I join you?” The deep gravelly voice dragged Haley from her personal reverie. She opened her eyes wider to peek at the owner of the voice.

Dark brown eyes peered down at her from very close to her face. The owner of that delightful gaze was a tall man with wavy brown hair and suntanned skin. His mouth was lifted at one corner in a half smile and his eyebrows rose in question.

This man was a few inches taller than Jordan with eyes a shade lighter and skin a shade darker. He was sex on a stick. Haley licked her lips and nodded. “Sure.” She squeezed a few inches to one side to make room for the muscular hunk and resumed her dance moves. Maybe tonight would turn out even better than expected. Assuming this newcomer was up for a threesome.

Haley knew she was fit and attractive. First of all, Jordan told her so daily, and second of all, this wasn’t the first time she’d been hit on in a bar. She didn’t mind, especially when the stud doing the hitting was as sexy as this guy.

When the fast-paced song ended, there was a pause in the music. Warm hands wrapped around Haley's midriff from behind. She knew those hands. Jordan's breath tickled her ear as he spoke. "I slip away for one minute and you find someone else." His words were playful, teasing.

Jordan held his hand out to the stranger. "Jordan, and you are?"

Jordan squeezed Haley up close to his chest, his arm resting right under her breasts. Damn him. He knew that drove her crazy. She heaved in several breaths while she watched the stranger take Jordan's proffered hand reluctantly.

"Nathan. Sorry, dude. I didn't realize she was with someone."

"No apology necessary. She's her own woman. Besides, I enjoy watching her dance. I'm gonna go get a beer." Jordan nodded toward the bar. "Either of you want anything?"

Nathan stared Jordan down, his eyes narrowing while Haley bit her lip. Would the man take the bait? She and Jordan had engaged in threesomes several times in the past, but it wasn't always easy to find a willing partner to join them. A delicately balanced conversation often ended in disaster.

Haley held her breath, thankful for the lull in the pounding music of the bar. She glanced toward the stage and noticed that the band seemed to be switching out.

Finally, a slow smile spread across Nathan's face. His eyes widened to a more normal size. "You want me to dance with your woman while you go buy me a beer?" He tested the water.

"That'd be perfect. Haley is insatiable. She can out dance anyone. I'd love the break." The double meaning didn't go

unnoticed by Haley. Insatiable my ass. Did Nathan catch his insinuation too?

Without waiting for a response, Jordan leaned around Haley's shoulder and kissed her briefly on the lips. As he sauntered away, he let one hand trail all the way down her arm until just their fingertips touched before he released her. He even winked.

A quick glance in the direction of the confused newcomer showed his gaze penetrating her.

As though on cue, music began to play once more. A slow song.

"For all you lovers out there tonight," beamed through the microphone. A cringing squeak came from the speakers and then a soft melody began.

Nathan hesitated, but Haley didn't let him slip away. She could practically taste him already. He stood so close their bodies touched. His huge frame warmed the space around her. She loved a large muscular man...and so did Jordan. Nathan smelled delicious, either his cologne or some spicy aftershave enticing her.

Haley ran both hands up his chest and settled her forearms on his shoulders. She pasted what she sincerely hoped was a seductive smile on her lips. "Are we going to dance, or just stand here?"

The man was a statue, still frozen and stunned. Finally, he gave a quick shake of his head as if to clear it and grinned down at her. "Who am I to question my good fortune?"

Nathan pulled her in tight, his wide palm spanning the space between her short tight blouse and the low waist of her jeans.

Haley sucked in a breath. Warm fingers teased her bare skin, his thumb and pointer drawing languid circles in the hollow of her back. Her nipples pebbled under the thin lace of her bra, standing at attention. If she leaned forward one more inch, she'd be able to press them into his firm pecs.

As it turned out, Nathan did that for her. His silky navy shirt slipped easily against her own cropped white blouse, torturing her as they danced.

The man could move. Once he got over the initial shock of the arrangement she had with her boyfriend, he relaxed into the best dance partner she'd been with in a long time, except for Jordan, of course.

Nathan's free hand strayed up Haley's back until he tangled it into the curls at the nape of her neck. "I love your hair. It's so long and the shade is mesmerizing. It's what caught my eye when I came in."

Thank God for the slow music and the lower volume or Haley never would have been able to hear Nathan's soft words as they wafted through her hair and into her ear from several inches above her. She had to crane her neck to stare up into his face. A wave of his hair hung over one side of his forehead almost covering his eye. When he shook it back, it fell immediately into the same spot.

"Thanks." Jesus, it had been a long time since she'd fallen for another man. Even when she and Jordan found a third to spend the evening with, the attraction was never this blatant.

Where would this interesting evening lead? Would Nathan in all his obvious manly security be willing to spend an evening with her and Jordan? It would be the ideal way to enjoy the night before their cruise. Thousands of miles from

home and about to leave in the morning—they'd never see the man again.

Perfect. Right? Why did that idea already sadden Haley? She didn't know this Nathan from Adam. She really shouldn't be salivating over him. He could be an axe murderer for heaven's sake.

No way.

Those eyes of his seemed to penetrate into her soul as he watched her. She'd never believe he was evil or had any ill intent. He was just a guy out for the evening, probably a local from Miami, out to have a good time. And what good luck for Haley. And Jordan.

The slow song ended and one with a faster pace began. Haley moved to the music, shaking her ass back and forth in time to the beat.

Nathan chuckled. "Girl, you can sure move."

Oh, you have no idea.

Could she be the luckiest woman on earth tonight? Where did Nathan's tastes lie? Did he go both ways? It didn't really matter how far he was willing to go. Jordan and Haley were flexible in their liaisons. Even when they visited fetish bars, they met all types of people. Their tastes ranged from voyeurism to bisexual interludes. Anything in between was tantalizing. If Nathan wanted to watch, that would get Haley off all by itself. If he were willing to join in with either or both of them, even better.

Haley was sure of one thing—she'd always be safe. Jordan was a cop. The man went nowhere without a weapon. Under no circumstances would she ever be in danger.

And Nathan didn't strike her as the dangerous type.

Haley danced around him, seductively shimmying her ass and thrusting her breasts out. When she got behind him, her hands trailed up his firm butt and settled on his waist for a moment. She glanced at the bar. She needn't have. Jordan's gaze pierced them even from that distance. The man would be salivating, though this time she wasn't sure the allure was mostly her. Nathan, with his muscles, height, and tan, was just Jordan's type.

Haley hoped for Jordan's sake that the man wouldn't turn them down and would be willing to play a bit. Sure enough, Jordan's penetrating gaze was locked on the dancing couple. He clutched a beer in his hand, but he didn't lift it to his mouth. Haley's inner devil smiled as she continued the charade, performing for her boyfriend the best way she knew how.

Two faster dances played before Haley felt parched. "Shall we go find that beer?"

Nathan kissed her palm and led her off the floor. He didn't hesitate. It was a good sign. Firmly gripping her hand, Nathan tugged her through the throng of patrons to the bar.

When Haley could finally see around the man's wide expanse of shoulders, they were right in front of Jordan. He smiled and handed them each a glistening bottle of cold beer. "Cheers."

Jordan sat on a high stool, his legs spread several inches apart. She'd seen that stance before. He always assumed it when he needed to accommodate a hard-on.

Nathan took a long swig from the bottle while Haley watched his Adam's apple bounce up and down. She itched to lick her tongue up that line of his neck.

When he'd quenched his thirst sufficiently, he settled his gaze on the two of them. "Do you guys do this often?"

"What? Dance?" Jordan grinned, a knowing expression slanting his eyes as he raised his brows in mock confusion.

"Pick up a third." Nathan was blunt. His gaze didn't falter.

Oh, he was on board all right. If he'd not been, he'd have glanced away. Instead, he stared them both down, gazing from one to the other. Challenging them.

Haley's pussy wept. Moisture filled her lace thong and seeped into her jeans. She had to squirm to alleviate the pressure against her clit. Why had she chosen such tight jeans tonight?

She set a palm on Jordan's thigh and gripped with all her might. She wanted this. His leg tensed. He reached his hand behind her and squeezed her ass. He wanted it too.

"Not often, but yes, we have on occasion—when the right person comes along." Jordan pointedly avoided saying 'man'. Sure, they usually did threesomes with another man, but it wasn't mandatory. Sometimes a woman struck their fancy as well.

If she were honest with herself, Haley would have to say she preferred a man. There was nothing more earth shattering in the orgasm department than having two strong men break her down to the least common denominator. The more dominated she felt, the harder she came—and in succession, the orgasm was even more forceful for Jordan. He claimed to enjoy sex more when Haley was the most satisfied.

The deep gaze coming from two partners as they sent Haley over the edge of the abyss could shatter her world into tiny pieces until the fragments lay all over the room.

Haley held her breath while she waited for this scene to play out.

Nathan cleared his throat. “I assume you two are on vacation. Do you have a room nearby?”

“We do.” Jordan stood. It was all the answer he’d needed. Turning, he laid a few bills on the counter behind him.

Haley let her hand rest on Jordan’s ass as he spun back around. She tucked her fingers into his pocket in her usual manner and her nerves calmed when he lifted his arm and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Jordan nodded and led the way out of the bar. He hailed a taxi and in moments the three were settled in the back seat of the yellow cab. Each man set a hand on one of Haley’s thighs. They sucked all the air out of the car and left her gasping for breath. The driver never raised a brow. It was Miami. He’d seen it all.

Thank God the hotel was close. Haley didn’t think she could have ridden much farther with those ten fingers toying with her through her jeans. As if they’d discussed it ahead of time, Jordan and Nathan swirled and rubbed between her thighs in tandem, neither reaching her center, both leaving her panting and needy by the time they reached their destination.

Would Nathan be as attentive to Jordan as he was to her? A glance at his face as they exited the taxi showed Nathan staring at Jordan’s ass encased in his favorite fuck-me jeans. The worn denim always hugged his butt perfectly, driving Haley bonkers when he wore them.

The elevator ride to the fifteenth floor was quiet. Jordan held Haley’s hand, but Nathan didn’t reach for her. After getting pawed in the taxi, she was bereft of his contact.

Haley clenched her legs together, only relaxing them when it became necessary to walk again.

Not releasing her hand, Jordan juggled the key card to their room, unlocked it, and pushed the door open. Both Haley and Nathan crossed the threshold as Jordan held the door.

The room was nice. Not exquisite, but more than they needed for one night in Miami. Haley was glad they'd gotten it now. They both worked hard all year and deserved a glamorous vacation now and then. Jordan kept odd hours as a detective and Haley put in over fifty hours most weeks as an accountant. When they kicked back, they meant business.

CHAPTER 2



Wind blew into the room through an open glass sliding door, the sheer white curtain billowing in the cool evening breeze.

“I love the Miami weather.” Nathan stepped toward the balcony and held the curtain back to gaze out at the city lights. “The view is spectacular from here.” Breathtaking, if he was honest.

“That it is.”

Nathan turned his head toward Jordan’s voice and found Jordan’s gaze roaming up his frame. Piercing brown eyes appraised Nathan from the bottom up. He should have felt self-conscious, but instead his skin heated under Jordan’s steady gaze.

The man was smaller than Nathan, but most people were. He was still solid, well-built. Obviously he worked out. His hair was nearly black and cropped short. He reminded Nathan of a marine. Hell, perhaps he was. Nathan wasn’t about to ask. The less he knew the better.

Nathan didn’t live in Miami. Hell, these folks didn’t either. They were on vacation for heaven’s sake. He’d never see them again. No sense muddying the waters with a closet full of information. He was here to fuck and get fucked, not swap life stories.

Kicking off his shoes, Jordan headed to the bar. He nodded at the king-sized bed. “Have a seat. Who wants a drink?”

“I’ll just have water. I don’t like to drink too much in strange places.” Nathan chuckled. “I hate waking up not knowing where I am.” It had happened. He didn’t want a repeat performance. Not to mention, he had to be at work bright and early tomorrow.

Haley pulled off her shoes, settled up against the headboard and crossed her legs. “I’ll have a glass of wine. Red if there is any.” Haley wrapped a lock of strawberry blonde curls behind one ear and gazed up at Nathan. She opened her mouth as if to say something and then closed it just as quickly.

The woman was a pixie. Tiny compared to even Jordan. Dwarfed by Nathan. But what she lacked in size, he was certain she made up for in personality. She was a pistol. Sexy as hell with her shiny curls and long eyelashes. She wore very little makeup and she didn’t need it. He loved the way her cheeks flushed when she got aroused. He could practically smell her need to be touched.

Jordan returned, balancing three drinks—a bottle of water, a beer, and a glass of red wine.

“Thanks.” Nathan took the water and sat on the edge of the bed. The plastic was cool to the touch and he wished it wouldn’t seem odd to roll the bottle across his forehead. Regardless of the cool breeze coming in from the open door, it was hot in here. Or maybe it was just him.

Jordan took a long drink of his beer and set the bottle on the nightstand. Haley tipped her head back and swallow a gulp of the wine, and then Jordan leaned in and kissed her on the lips. For a moment it seemed neither of them remembered Nathan was in the room.

Haley reached for him then around Jordan's body. "Join us?"

Nathan hesitated. The couple was very much in love. There was little doubt. Had they really done this before as they'd implied? He didn't want to ruin their relationship if this was all just a game to them, an experiment that might go bad when they really gave it a shot. It took an extremely solid, committed relationship to withstand letting another man in for a taste.

It was rare.

Nathan knew better than most. Until a year ago he'd been in a long-term arrangement with two other people. The sex had been fantastic, but after a few years the tension had begun to wear on them. Jealousy had gotten in the way when two of them had had sex and left one party out. They'd all three gone their separate ways, leaving Nathan wondering if such a threesome were really possible in the long run.

Nathan was attracted to both sexes. It wasn't really a gay or hetero thing for him, more of an attraction to another person, sometimes female, sometimes male. Both Jordan and Haley made his cock harder than he'd ever remembered being in his life. What were the chances?

When he'd first seen Haley on the dance floor, he'd frozen to the spot and stared at her sexy ass shaking to the rhythm. When she'd received him with a warm smile, he'd died and gone to heaven. The moment Jordan had arrived and wrapped his arms around his girlfriend, Nathan had nearly swallowed his tongue. The man was chiseled from the best granite. The world had stopped spinning in that moment while Nathan had begged God to let him have these two people.

God was good.

Nathan climbed onto the bed and ran a hand across Haley's thigh, squeezing her flesh through the confines of the tight jeans. The material hugged her to perfection, as though custom made to fit her frame. Hell, what did he know? Maybe her clothing was designer. He wouldn't know designer clothing if it hit him in the head, but these people seemed affluent. After all, they were on a glorious vacation in Miami on the fifteenth floor of a fine hotel.

Nathan was in Miami to work. Without that, he couldn't have afforded the airfare even to get there. He didn't care. He got by just fine. His job was always entertaining and fulfilling and afforded him many opportunities. He worked to live, not the other way around. His parents and siblings had always shaken their heads at him and told him he could do better, but he didn't see their angle.

His life was perfect just the way it was.

Jordan released Haley's mouth and grappled with her to untangle her legs. When he finally pulled them straight, he dragged her frame down the bed, forcing her to lie back. "That's better."

Leaning across her, Jordan turned his gaze to Nathan. "You gonna watch? Or you wanna join?" His eyebrows rose in question. The rise and fall of his tone indicated he was serious. He didn't mind either way. He was just asking.

Nathan smiled at him and leaned the short distance of separation between them until his head pressed against Jordan's above Haley's chest.

He licked his lips and watched Jordan's reaction. The man didn't flinch. Jordan countered by licking his own lips.

Tentatively, Nathan gripped Jordan's shoulder and gave a subtle tug. The man closed the gap and took Nathan's mouth with his own.

Nathan exhaled on a long moan as Jordan claimed his lips, angling his head and diving inside with his tongue in a nanosecond.

Fuck, that kiss knocked Nathan off balance. The man could kiss. He didn't hold back. As soon as Jordan let him in, Nathan toured the recesses of Jordan's mouth like a starving man. Jordan tasted of beer and mint, an odd combination that somehow made Nathan's cock even harder. He longed to have these firm unfaltering lips wrapped around his dick.

Speaking of his rock-hard shaft, through the haze of the best kiss he could remember, Nathan became aware of tiny fingers wrapping themselves around his length. Even through his jeans, he grew harder. He could feel the warmth of the palm surrounding him.

Sweet heaven on earth.

Nathan broke the kiss and glanced down to see Haley, each of her hands wrapped around the cocks above her breasts. She smiled at them, her eyes saucers. "Don't stop on my account."

"I don't know about you, but I think it's awfully warm in here. I could go with fewer clothes." Jordan leaned back on his knees and whipped his T-shirt over his head. The tight black material had been about as sexy as a man could get in Nathan's opinion, but now that it was gone, Nathan sucked in a breath and held it. Firm pecs filled his gaze. Jordan may not have been as large as Nathan, but he rivalled him in the gym.

Beneath a fine dusting of black hair, Jordan's nipples pebbled while Nathan stared.

He must have taken too long to move—which wasn't hard to believe because he was still wrapping his mind around his good fortune—because the next thing he knew Jordan was unbuttoning the front of Nathan's shirt, languidly, without taking his gaze off Nathan's.

With a half-smile, Jordan spoke again. "Do I have to do everything?"

Nathan let Jordan continue. He didn't think he could hold his hands steady enough at that moment to push buttons through holes anyway. Instead, he reached for Jordan's chest and flicked his finger over a nipple. Jordan flinched, but didn't stop his mission to get Nathan divested of his shirt.

"You're not helping." Jordan chuckled as he plucked the last button free and pushed the material off Nathan's shoulders. He didn't lose contact, though. He kept both hands firmly against Nathan's shoulders and ran them down over his pecs, molding his hands to Nathan's muscles as he went lower and lower. "Smooth. Haley likes a smooth tanned chest, don't you, babe?"

Nathan looked down at her. Haley's eyes were clouded. She gazed back and forth between the men. She still held both cocks, but her hands were steady, nearly gripping now to hang on for dear life rather than exploring.

Nathan wanted her naked. Now.

With a raised eyebrow at Jordan, he nodded in her direction.

"Go ahead. Unwrap. She's exquisite." Jordan sat back next to Haley and nodded toward his girlfriend.

Nathan turned his attention back to the sexy goddess beneath him and leaned down to take her mouth. She was

divine. Firm and sure like Jordan. She took as good as she gave in a dueling of tongues that made Nathan decide if he died right then, life would have been worth it.

Haley reached for Nathan's chest and ran her palms up to his shoulders, gripping him firmly in place over her mouth.

Nathan grinned against her. Did she think she held all the power? She was beneath him, two men in fact, and she weighed, what, one-twenty soaking wet?

Fine. Let her think she was controlling things for a few minutes. What could it hurt? In no time at all, Nathan intended to have her writhing beneath him, begging and pleading to be pushed over the edge.

We'll see who's in control then.

While Nathan took his time exploring Haley's mouth, he reached between their bodies and untied the loose knot on the short blouse she wore. He then went to work on the few buttons holding the white material together over her bra. His fingers were surprisingly more agile than a few minutes ago when he couldn't seem to remember his own shirt was even on.

As soon as he worked the last button loose, Nathan pulled back to stare down at his prize.

Fuck, she was hot. Haley's pink lace bra did nothing to conceal her arousal. Rosy nipples poked forward behind the nearly transparent material. Her chest heaved under his perusal and he couldn't resist reaching up and flicking the front clasp open with one hand.

As though he'd never seen breasts before, Nathan grazed his fingertips over her perfect soft skin and watched as

goosebumps covered her flesh and her nipples puckered even further.

Nathan flicked his thumb over one distended tip, and Haley arched into his touch, moaning as though she were on the edge of an orgasm already.

A glance at her face proved him right. “Uh-uh. You don’t get off that easy,” he teased, removing his touch from her chest and watching as Haley exhaled and lay back against the bed. Nathan turned toward Jordan. “Is she always this responsive?”

“Yep. Pretty much. Especially when we do something like this.”

Like this hung in the air. A threesome.

“She’ll orgasm at our command even just watching us fuck each other if we tell her to,” Jordan continued.

Was that a suggestion? Nathan adjusted his cock and then decided there was no need for the pretense. He popped the button constraining his erection and slid the zipper down.

With an exhale of relief, he sat back and wiggled out of his jeans, taking his boxers and socks with them. He looked back at Jordan. “We could do that. Maybe later. I rather like the idea of watching her come undone the first time.”

He waited a beat, staring at Jordan, challenging the man to join him with just a look.

Jordan stood beside the bed and got to work on his own jeans. “You get rid of hers. I’ll get rid of mine.”

Nathan didn’t need another nudge. He ran his hands up Haley’s legs from her knees to her waist, his thumbs brushing firmly across her sex on the way.

Haley squirmed, but didn't stop him. She even lifted her ass to help when he tugged the tight stretchy material off her. Her pink thong that might have matched the bra remained in place. Who cared if the set were a match? The thong consisted of about an ounce of scrap material and covered almost as much of her.

A dip in the bed made Nathan glance to his left. Jordan crawled toward them, took a seat next to Haley, and ran his hand from the base to the tip of his cock. Nathan would have choked if he'd been able to swallow. Come dripped from the tip, and he longed to lean forward and lick that drip off the head of the thick, hard dick only inches from his mouth.

“Do it.” Haley's voice reached him as though from far away. “I want to watch.”

As though in a trance, Nathan obeyed, leaning forward until he could run his tongue over Jordan's mushroom-shaped head. The taste was salty and masculine. He inhaled the scent of the soap Jordan had used to shower earlier.

“That's so fucking hot.” Haley's mumbled words were barely intelligible. The pounding in Nathan's ears blocked out nearly everything.

Reminded now of the woman he was leaning across to get that taste, Nathan turned back toward her. He needed to see her better, spread her out before him. With the delicate movements of a man undressing the most fragile of beings, Nathan pulled the blouse and bra from Haley's body and tossed them on the floor.

When he finished, she arched her chest toward him. Without being touched, her nipples begged for attention.

Jordan set a hand on Nathan's back and grazed his fingers up his spine. "Suck her tits...if you like to see writhing."

Nathan leaned down and took one pointed nipple between his lips, flicking the tip with his tongue while gently biting down.

"Oh...my...God." Haley nearly shot off the bed. She gripped Nathan with both hands on his shoulders, and he had no idea if she was pulling or pushing him. What he did know was he didn't like her to have control over this encounter.

Nathan released her nipple with a pop and turned to Jordan who had positioned himself behind Nathan and was currently beginning a torturous meandering of palms and fingers up Nathan's thighs and back. "Can I restrain her?"

He pointedly didn't ask Haley the question. It wasn't her call. If the woman enjoyed bondage and thrived under it, Nathan wanted Jordan to make that decision. It was one thing to tie up one's own woman and drive her mad with need. It was asking a lot to tie up someone else's girlfriend.

A long slow smile spread across Jordan's face. "Oh, hell yeah." He jumped off the bed and returned a moment later with a black backpack.

Holy fuck, the man brings a bag of sex toys on vacation?

"Hales?" Jordan asked. "You okay?"

"I will be if one of you would just fuck me. I can't stand the suspense."

"Is she always this pushy? Demanding?"

"Sometimes, but when she is, I usually put an end to it quick." Jordan winked at Nathan from behind. Haley couldn't see what was coming out of the bag.

The first item was a blindfold, which Jordan handed to Nathan, motioning with a nod to put it on her.

Nathan didn't even raise an eyebrow. He grabbed the thick black material and whipped it over Haley's head, securing it firmly behind her.

While he did that, Jordan crawled to one side and took Haley's hand to pull it up above her head.

"I don't get to watch?" She pouted, even pushing her bottom lip out. Nathan licked that lip and then bit it gently between his teeth. "Later, sweet. Later."

Imitating Jordan's movements, Nathan lifted Haley's other arm above her head, and between the two men they locked her tiny wrists into the soft cuffs Jordan had produced, securing her to the bed frame.

Haley moaned. "Please."

"I love it when she begs." Jordan climbed back down the mattress toward the backpack of tricks. Next, he pulled out a ball gag that made Nathan's eyebrows arch. "Just in case she can't behave. We don't want the neighbors calling security."

Nathan took the gag and set it by Haley's face, allowing the rubber to touch her cheek in warning. She groaned again and bit her lower lip into her mouth.

"Stop that. It's distracting." Nathan pulled her chin and released the lip. Next, he leaned down, kissed that offended lip, and sucked it into his mouth. "Thirsty?" he asked when he'd released her.

Haley didn't acknowledge him. Nathan reached for her wine, took a swig into his mouth, and then resumed the intimate kiss, releasing the smooth red wine between Haley's parted lips.

“Mmm.” She swallowed around the moan. He did it again.

Nathan wiggled down to straddle Haley’s legs. When he pulled the scrap of lace aside to see her sex, he sucked in a breath. “She shaves.”

“Except when I shave her myself, yes.” Jordan grabbed one side of Haley’s thong and tugged while Nathan grabbed the other. In an instant, they had her naked.

Nathan settled between her legs, pushing them as wide as he dared. “Now that’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.” He wasn’t an inexperienced man, but he’d never had a woman who would shave for him. At least not entirely. “Is she more sensitive this way?” Was that even possible? The squirming nymph he currently held down was threatening to come before he touched her.

Jordan didn’t answer. Instead, he took Nathan’s ass cheeks with both hands and began to massage them.

It was hard to concentrate on the two opposing forces warring inside Nathan. The sexiest, sweetest pussy he’d ever seen before him and the hottest man he’d ever been with threatening to undo him from behind simultaneously.

“Lick her, but I’m warning you. She won’t last.”

Nathan didn’t want her to come too fast. He wanted to watch her writhe, her chest heaving and falling, her mouth hanging open, poised to beg.

There was little doubt that was what was on the tip of her tongue and it made Nathan smile. He let his gaze settle once more on her pussy, grateful Jordan was taking his time behind him. If the man started probing too soon, Nathan would surely go blind and miss out on the Haley Show.

Nathan pressed his cock into the bed and prayed he could keep from coming just as prematurely as Haley.

A long inhale of Haley's pussy forced a low groan to escape Nathan's lips. He didn't like to lose control like that, but it couldn't be helped. To keep himself from moaning again, he settled his mouth against her opening and dipped his tongue in as deep as he could.

She's so wet. Moisture dripped down from her pussy in a trail to her ass. Would they breach her tight rosebud this evening? At this rate, Nathan wouldn't get two hours of sleep before he had to go to work in the morning. Tomorrow was going to be a long day. Right now, he just didn't care.

Nathan held Haley firm, parting her thighs a bit wider. He pulled back from her pussy when she stiffened. "Not yet, baby. Hold on for a while."

He glanced at her face as her head rolled from side to side, her mouth parted.

Fuck, she was hot.

Resuming his torture, Nathan licked a circle around her clit and then leaned his cheek against her bare skin to rub his face on her smooth warmth. Mercy, she was going to be the death of him. Both Haley and Jordan actually. A noise behind him alerted Nathan to the distinct pop of a lid. Lube. Seconds later, cool lubricant touched his skin and Jordan wasted no time pushing a digit into Nathan's ass.

"Take it slow, man. I want to watch Haley come."

Jordan chuckled. "Am I bothering you?" He held Nathan against the bed with the same firm pressure that Nathan held Haley with, torturing Nathan in a similar fashion. Payback was a bitch.

Desperately trying to ignore the pressure against his prostate, Nathan flicked his tongue over Haley's clit once again. With his pointers, he pushed the hood up to expose her nub and blew across her sensitive skin.

"Please," she muttered. "Oh, God, please..."

Nathan closed his mouth around Haley's clit and sucked. She arched into his lips and held herself rigid, her butt hovering above the bed, her heavy pants filling the air. As soon as Nathan pushed his thumbs into her pussy, she exploded around him, her clit throbbing against his lips, her pussy gripping his thumbs and pulsing around them.

When she screamed, Nathan released one hand and flung it up over her mouth. He stuck his thumb inside, knowing she could taste herself on his skin, hoping it was enough to keep the volume down. It worked. The woman sucked his thumb deep and hard, threatening to push Nathan over the edge with her. He gripped her chin and released her clit. "Don't, you little nymph. I don't want to come against the mattress."

She stopped, but she smiled around his hand, the corners of her mouth curving up under his palm as he eased his thumb out.

"I need you inside me," she mumbled against Nathan's fingers. "That wasn't enough. It only took the edge off."

"Insatiable little wench, aren't you?"

"It's exhausting really," Jordan teased.

"At least let me watch you two." Haley's voice was just shy of a beg.

"I have an idea." Jordan released Nathan's ass and Nathan sat up between Haley's legs.

When he turned around, he found Jordan rummaging through the backpack again. How many things were in there?

“Pull the mask off so she can watch me suck you off.”

Nathan paused, his gaze on Jordan’s head. Really? Damn, his luck just kept getting better.

Following Jordan’s lead, Nathan tugged the black material over Haley’s head and took her mouth in a hard kiss. Jordan climbed forward and propped Haley’s head up on several pillows. “Is that a good view, Hales?”

“Perfect.” She grinned as though she’d won the lottery, but her face fell an instant later and Nathan turned to see Jordan holding up a huge vibrator. “I said I needed you inside me, Jordan. Either of you really. Don’t torture me with that thing. I can’t take it.”

“You can.” Jordan didn’t pause. He reached between Haley’s legs and pushed them open wide again.

Nathan watched while Jordan stroked his girlfriend through her slit and then reached deep inside her pussy with two fingers.

“Still wet for us. You’re so sexy when you’re this wet, babe.” Jordan took the dildo and pushed it deep inside Haley’s pussy.

She moaned. “Jordan,” she warned. “I can’t watch with that inside me.”

“I’ll put it on pulse. Keep you on edge.”

Haley shook her head, her eyes wide. “That’s worse.”

“I know.” Jordan chuckled. When he was satisfied, he pushed a button at the end of the vibrator and activated the pulsing.

Haley bucked. Both men, seeming to think alike, took a thigh and held her still.

“Watch us,” Jordan commanded. “Eyes on us, mouth closed, or we’ll gag you and strap your stomach down to hold you still.”

Nathan moaned again. The woman was so hot. With her eyes bugged out of her head and her cheeks flushed a deep red, he nearly came just thinking about sticking that gag inside her mouth.

Jordan turned to Nathan. “Lie next to her. Make sure she has a good view.” He commanded Nathan just as he’d done Haley, which made Nathan grin. Nathan was way larger, but if Jordan wanted to play Dom, so be it. The role was making Nathan hotter by the second.

Nathan lay in Haley’s direct line of sight, leaving his cock sticking into the air. Jordan wasted no time situating himself between Nathan’s legs. He sucked Nathan in so deep on the first draw that Nathan shot off the bed, lifting his torso into the air. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from coming too soon.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he divided his attention between concentrating on the hot mouth driving him mad and keeping the hot mouth from driving him mad.

After a few more deep strokes, Jordan gave Nathan a break and licked his cock from the bottom to the tip, swirling his tongue in the pre-come dripping from the top. With one hand, he held Nathan’s thigh. With the other, he pushed Nathan’s legs apart slightly and reached between them to stroke his balls.

Nothing compared to receiving a blow job from a man. It was simple. Only a man could understand exactly what a man needed. Too much pressure and fondling the scrotum would be painful. Not enough and the act was wasted. Jordan knew just what to do and how to keep Nathan on the edge...and he was a master.

Nathan gripped Jordan's shoulders with both hands. "I'm gonna come. Stop."

Jordan released him and climbed up his body. "You sure?" He kissed Nathan. "How do you want to come? Where?"

Nathan breathed deep. "In Haley's ass," he blurted, "with you in her pussy. Right after I take you to the same edge you just took me."

Jordan grinned. "It's a plan."

CHAPTER 3



“Hello?” Haley squirmed next to them and Jordan jerked his attention toward her.

“Hales, you okay?” He smiled. Of course she wasn’t. She had a large dildo in her pussy and her face was scrunched up in a look that always preceded her best orgasms.

Jordan glanced at Nathan. “Shall we let her tip over the edge again first?”

“Yep.”

Jordan reached between her legs and increased the setting on the vibrator, pressing on the base to push it as deep as possible.

Haley lifted her torso. Her eyes closed and she tipped her head back toward the ceiling.

Nathan reached across and pinched her clit. She shot to the moon, bucking and moaning against their hands. Jordan didn’t release pressure until she flinched from the sensitivity.

“Is anyone going to fuck me or do you both plan a slow teasing that lasts all night?”

Jordan climbed across Haley’s body so that each man had a side. He released her hands, kissed her limp lips, and smiled down at her. “Tired?”

“Not yet.” Her stamina never ceased to amaze him.

He massaged her wrists and brought her hands down to her waist. After brushing her hair from her face, he sat back. “Would you mind sucking on my friend here for a minute? He’s been neglected.”

Haley smiled back at Jordan, sat, and crawled toward Nathan. Her ass swayed seductively, and he had to hold back a moan. No matter how long they were together, he never tired of staring at her fine butt.

Nathan sat to her other side, but when she shoved him, he fell back against the bed. Haley took in this new partner of theirs from head to toe.

“I haven’t really had a good look at you. I was...kinda tied up.” She smirked and Nathan watched as she gazed her fill.

Jordan couldn’t blame her. Nathan was a sight to behold. Tall, dark, and sexy, the man had deep brown eyes that Jordan couldn’t take his gaze from. Anybody, male or female, would surely stop in their tracks when they encountered him.

Nathan’s cock bobbed in the air and the man took the length in his own hand and caressed it with abandon. Until Haley swatted him away and took up where he’d left off.

“Is it okay if Haley sucks your cock first? She looks anxious.”

Nathan nodded. His speechlessness spoke volumes.

Jordan chuckled to himself behind Haley. Imagine that. The two of them rendering a huge specimen like Nathan speechless?

Haley climbed between Nathan’s legs. While she leaned down and took Nathan’s length between her lips, Jordan

reached between the man's legs under Haley's chin. Oh, he knew what Nathan needed. Just as Nathan had known how to touch Jordan.

Jordan fondled Nathan's balls and then reached lower and pressed into the man's prostate from the outside. He watched as Nathan gripped the comforter with his fists and lifted his torso off the bed.

Nathan only let this scene go on for about a minute before he shoved Haley off him with a firm hold on her shoulders. "Enough. I want inside you."

Jordan released Nathan's balls and pulled Haley toward himself. He lay back on the bed where she'd been moments before and Nathan lifted her onto Jordan as though she needed assistance.

With her legs spread wide around Jordan's hips, he lined up his cock and pushed all the way inside her in one quick thrust. She was ready. There was no need to prepare. She was so fucking wet and hot she had to fight to keep from coming just on the entrance of one cock alone. Her struggle was all over her face, her teeth gritted, her eyes squeezed shut, her mouth hanging open.

Nathan popped the lid on the lube and Jordan watched Haley's face while she waited to be completely filled.

She squirmed around his cock, her pussy clenching as she anticipated the other man entering her.

When she stilled, Jordan pulled her head down to his chest and gazed at Nathan over her back. Nathan spread a generous amount of the oily substance down Haley's crack and then held her cheeks open as he pushed one finger inside her. "Man, she's tight."

Jordan knew that. He'd taken her there many times.

"Gonna stretch you a bit, Haley. I don't want to hurt you."

Nathan held her ass with one hand and pushed a second finger inside. She moaned.

After several moments, he pulled out. "Ready?"

"Yes," Haley muttered against Jordan's chest.

Nathan leaned to one side, grabbed his jeans from the edge of the bed and pulled a condom out of the pocket. Fuck. Jordan was glad the man had his head on straight. They always practiced safe sex. Well, not between the two of them. Haley was on the pill and they tested frequently to make sure they were both still clean, but when they brought in a third, Jordan hadn't ever lost his mind concerning protection. What had Nathan done to his good sense?

Nathan rolled the condom down his cock, gazing into Jordan's eyes. Jordan didn't know what was sexier, being buried deep inside Haley, or watching Nathan take her ass.

Finally, Nathan pressed inside her. Slow easy strokes that grew deeper with each pass.

As Jordan watched, Nathan tipped his head back in concentration. He pushed in all the way to the hilt finally and exhaled long and slow. Jordan smiled. He knew that feeling.

"Move," Haley muttered. "Oh. God. Guys, move."

Nathan looked back down and pulled out. When he pressed again into Haley, Jordan lifted her off his own cock. They started a slow rhythm, perfectly in sync as though they'd rehearsed it. In just minutes, Jordan was gritting his teeth. "I'm gonna come, Hales."

“Thank God. I don’t want to be the only one.” She lifted her head and gazed into his eyes with all the love he hoped he reflected back to her.

Nathan jerked one last time deep into Haley and held her hips tight against his balls. When his face contorted with a knowing look, Jordan came right behind him, settling Haley on his cock.

Haley whimpered for a moment, and then she moaned long and loud. “Fuuuccck.” The word was drawn out.

Nathan pulled out and collapsed next to them on the bed, flopping onto his back. “Sorry, I couldn’t hold myself up any longer. That was...”

“Incredible,” Jordan finished. An understatement.

Haley kissed Jordan on the lips and relaxed a few minutes against his chest before she climbed off him with a wince. “My legs will be wobbly for days,” she joked. “Be right back.”

Jordan watched her ass as she sauntered into the bathroom and closed the door. Jordan listened to his and Nathan’s heavy breathing for a while before he spoke. “You okay?”

“Not sure yet. Can’t feel my limbs.” Nathan chuckled. “It might sound cliché, but I’ve personally never had sex that good before.”

“Me neither.” Jordan took a few more deep breaths and relaxed into the bed. His eyes grew heavy. “It might sound even more cliché, but I’m so tired I could sleep for a week.”

Haley returned and climbed up between the men. She tugged the comforter up from the bottom of the bed and snuggled in as though she did so every night. She didn’t say anything about what would happen next, but she kissed Jordan soundly and then leaned in the other direction and did the

same to Nathan. Jordan didn't even feel jealous. Not a twinge. He should have.

Usually when they included a third, the buck stopped after the sex. Never had they slept with a third. The build-up and the act were all part of the passion, but the aftermath—the cuddling—that was a different story. Cuddling was intimate. It included deeper feelings than fucking.

Neither Jordan nor Haley had ever snuggled up to their third and made nice.

Something was different. Jordan closed his eyes, relaxed his muscles. He barely breathed. Nathan had struck a nerve. The man was fucking hot. For the first time, Jordan considered getting a phone number. Could they do this again? Where did Nathan live? Here in Miami? Maybe. He did say he had to be at work in the morning.

So tired. Haley's arm wrapped around his. Was she also touching Nathan? Jordan couldn't think any more and fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 4



Haley woke with a start. Eyes wide, she scanned the room. Where was she? Oh, right. Miami. The cruise. They were headed to the port today. A glance at the window showed the sun barely peeking over the horizon. It was early still. Plenty of time.

A warm body adjusted next to her and she turned her face toward Jordan.

Wait. Last night came crashing back to her. The bar. The dancing. Nathan.

Haley bolted upright. Nathan? He wasn't next to her. Was he in the bathroom?

More thoughts crept in uninvited. They'd slept with a third. That was a first. Haley smiled. It had been awesome, better actually. So good she wanted to do it again. Maybe they could repeat the performance this morning before boarding the ship.

But where was Nathan? The bathroom door was open. The light was not on.

"Nathan?" Was he gone? "Jordan?" She shook her boyfriend's shoulder. "Where's Nathan? Did he say anything to you?"

Jordan turned onto his side and opened one eye. “No. Why?”

“He’s gone.” She didn’t mean to sound so disappointed. Hell, they hadn’t even exchanged last names, let alone phone numbers. Maybe he’d left a note. Maybe he was on the balcony. Why did she care so much?

Haley eased her legs over the edge of the bed and stepped on the cool tile floor. She gingerly ambled to the open sliding door. The morning air wafted toward her, crisp and refreshing. Nathan was not there.

Haley turned back to the room and wandered around. Nothing. No note. Just...nothing. Like he’d never been there.

With a deep sigh, Haley resigned herself to this information. He was gone. It was as it should be. They never kept a third for a second performance. She crawled back into bed and cozied up to Jordan who’d barely even stirred. Warm and heavy, Haley fell back asleep.



It seemed like only seconds passed before Jordan shook her awake. The man smiled down at her. “Are you going to sleep all day? We’re going to miss the boat.” His hair was wet. He’d already showered and dressed.

Haley sat up. She should be excited. She tried to smile, but she felt a renewed bit of grief over the loss of... Loss? She’d never really had Nathan. He’d just been a fun interlude for the evening, right?

“It was good, wasn’t it?” Jordan lifted an eyebrow, his face serious. Then he smiled. That was all he was going to say

about it, but it was enough. At least she wasn't crazy. It had been good.

Haley scrambled out of bed, showered, dressed, and packed. They were on the shuttle to the ship in no time.

In line to board, Jordan wrapped his arms around her from behind and leaned his chin on her head. "That breeze feels fantastic. I hope we get some of that out at sea. I'm looking forward to long leisurely days spent lying on a lawn chair soaking up the sun."

"Me too." Haley tucked her fingers around Jordan's and leaned back against him. Her favorite place in the world.

She had to shake the nostalgia and get over it. A random man with only a first name had fucked her senseless in Miami, Florida. She knew nothing about him. She didn't live in Florida. She had no proof that he did either. There was no way to track him down. It was time to move on.

By afternoon Haley had stashed their bags in their cabin and was lounging on a chair on the attached deck watching the shoreline as they prepared to take off.

"I'm so glad we upgraded to a cabin with a balcony. Until you get here, it's hard to imagine the difference. I think I'd be claustrophobic in an inner cabin." Jordan took the empty seat next to Haley and tipped his head back. "They're predicting excellent weather conditions. It takes two days to get to the first port. What shall we do?"

Haley turned toward Jordan and found him holding an itinerary. He smiled. "There's entertainment every hour on the hour, everything imaginable. Want to plan our days or wing it?"

“Wing it.” That she was sure of. Just the word plan made her cringe. If she did nothing but eat and swim, she’d be happy.

“We have the early dinner slot. You want to get dressed and head for the closest bar before we dine? Get a few drinks, maybe join one of these games in a lounge? There’s trivia or... Hey, how about this riveting introduction to the cruise?” Jordan laughed.

“Sounds good. I’ll put on something sexy...something to lure you into my web of deceit all evening.” Haley rose and lifted her eyebrows a few times to entice her boyfriend.

Jordan took her hand as she passed. “Sweetheart, anything you wear will make me drool. You know that.” He tugged her arm until she leaned down and kissed him.

By six-thirty, Haley had enjoyed two frou-frou drinks and beaten Jordan in a rousing round of trivia. She had no intention of letting him forget it any time soon.

In no time at all, they were seated in the dining room with a table of three other couples making introductions. They’d be dining all week with these folks, so Haley put on her best smile and made pleasant conversation while they got to know each other.

“Good evening, folks.” The deep voice of their waiter interrupted the chit-chat from behind Haley.

The voice rang familiar in her head and she froze.

“My name is Nathan. I’ll be your waiter this week. Anything you folks don’t have, just let me know and I’ll make sure you get it.”

Haley grabbed Jordan’s leg and squeezed his thigh until her fingers ached under the pressure. She didn’t move a

muscle or turn around. Her heart beat nearly out of her chest. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

And then Nathan rounded the table, reaching between two guests to fill a water glass as he continued. “Would anyone like to start with a...” Nathan coughed, choked really.

Haley raised her gaze and met his.

His mouth hung open, the last word dangling in the air unspoken. His face turned beet red and he swallowed hard. Then he licked his lips and Haley trembled, remembering those lips on her nipples, her clit, her pussy, just a few hours ago.

Another guest chuckled and finished Nathan’s sentence. “Drink?”

A collective silence ensued before Nathan recovered enough to continue. “Yes,” he muttered. “Sorry.” He pasted on a fake smile and turned toward the rest of the guests. “I’ll get your drink orders first and be right back.”

Haley watched as his hands shook. He didn’t write anything down. It was obviously his custom and he was surely very good at his job under normal circumstances, but this was anything but normal. How the hell was he going to remember what eight people had ordered? She felt miserable on his behalf.

Nathan did not look directly at either her or Jordan again before he walked away from the table. Haley glanced at Jordan who nodded. She excused herself and followed Nathan’s path toward the bar.

Nathan faltered in his steps, moving without exact precision. He even bumped into a few chairs in his path. When he reached the bar, Haley was on his tail and leaned in next to

him. She let her arm brush against his, igniting a fire that rushed up her arm and down through her chest.

“You okay?” she whispered.

“Fine.” He didn’t turn in her direction.

“Nathan...”

“It’s fine. Let’s just forget about it.” Nathan called his order to the bartender, faltering after the fourth drink. “Damn,” he muttered.

“The woman in red wanted Merlot and her husband ordered a gin and tonic.” Haley laid a hand on Nathan’s arm. “Talk to me.”

“Thanks. For keeping the orders straight. I think I’ve got it from here. I was just shocked, is all.” He finally turned to face her. “Can we just...pretend last night never happened? I have a job here and you have a luxury vacation to enjoy.”

Nathan’s words stung. Was that how he saw her? And Jordan? Rich folks on vacation?

“Nathan—”

“No.” He stopped her and she leaned back when he jerked his arm from her grip. He lowered his voice. “Please. This is uncomfortable enough as it is. Don’t try to make it into something it isn’t.”

“What? A quick romp between the sheets?” she hissed. “Why did you run? You didn’t even leave a note. You just snuck out in the middle of the night and I—”

“You what, Haley? Don’t give me some line about how much you cared.”

Haley flinched and took another step back as though she'd been slapped. In fact, her face stung with the force of it.

Nathan continued, his voice low as he leaned in for her ears only. "Go back to your seat. Spend a wonderful week with your boyfriend. Pretend you never saw me before in your life. Don't give me some bullshit line about how great last night was and how much you wish we could do it again. You've never once taken a third for a second romp, have you? Huh?"

She didn't respond. Her mouth hung open, but no noise came out. He was right, damn him. But this was different.

"Don't look at me like that. This is not different." Was he a mind reader? "I'm your waiter," he spat out through clenched teeth as though the word alone were a profanity.

Was that what this was about? His job?

"It wouldn't matter what you said right now, Haley. I need this job and I love this job. Hell, I'm normally even good at this job. The staff is not permitted to fraternize with the guests. Period. End of story. So, slink back to the table and forget about me. Got it?"

It didn't matter if she had it or not because Nathan turned on his heel and walked away.

Haley wandered to the restroom to collect herself. She looked in the mirror and stared at her reflection for several minutes. Women came and went around her, but she barely noticed them. When the room was finally empty, she splashed water on her face to cool her cheeks. Fuck her makeup. She didn't care. Her cheeks still burned with embarrassment. Why?

What had she done? Why did she feel like such a lowlife right now? Was this somehow her fault?

A tear formed in the corner of her eye and Haley dabbed it away. I will not let a virtual stranger make me cry.

Fear that she'd somehow been unkind made Haley's heart rate increase. Never in her life had she been accused of treating anyone as any less than her equal. Hell, she'd not grown up as affluent as she was now. She knew the value of a dollar, damn it.

Somehow Nathan had ripped her to shreds in two minutes flat and left her picking up the pieces.

Fuck him. Haley straightened up to her full height and patted her unruly curls with her hands. She was not going to let Nathan ruin her vacation. The guy was a prick if he meant to insinuate that either she or Jordan were prejudiced. It wasn't true. And it was his loss if he chose to believe that to be the case.

CHAPTER 5



Jordan stood by the table, glancing around the room. He'd seen Haley follow Nathan and he'd seen her head for the restroom a few minutes later. If she'd ever emerged, he'd missed it. He was worried. It had been several minutes. He exhaled a long breath when she headed his way.

With a brief smile no one could possibly interpret as sincere, Haley took her spot at the table and spread her napkin in her lap.

Jordan would give anything in the world to wipe the look off her face. She'd even been crying.

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "What happened, love?"

"Later," she muttered.

Jordan was dying for details, but Haley couldn't very well share her conversation with the man they had slept with last night right here at the dinner table.

Instead, Jordan took her hand under the table and squeezed it in comfort. He made polite conversation with the other guests at the table and tried to cover for Haley's strange behavior, claiming she didn't feel very well.

Nathan came and went various times throughout the meal, as if nothing had transpired. He didn't make eye contact with Jordan, and Haley never lifted her face during the entire meal. Before dessert was served, Jordan excused them both, promising more friendly interaction tomorrow night.

Jordan followed Haley from the room and wrapped his arm around her in support the minute they were in the hall. He led them to their stateroom before speaking a word.

As soon as the door clicked, Haley's face contorted and tears fell freely down her face. "I'm so...sorry... You know... how much...I love you." She choked on nearly every word, coughing around her sobs.

"What?" Jordan sat her down and grabbed a towel animal from the bed. Why was there a towel folded into an animal shape on their bed?

He wiped her face and held her close. What was she sobbing about? If he didn't know better, he'd think she was about to dump him.

He smiled, not quite a complete smile, but a semi-confident one. Her words had sounded precisely like those of an it's-not-you-but-me speech.

"Haley? What do you have to be sorry about?" Now he was growing worried.

Haley grabbed the towel from Jordan's hands and scrubbed her face before she looked him in the eye. "For being all girly and slobbery on you. For caring what that damn man thinks of me and probably hurting your feelings in the process."

Jordan grew more confused than before. "What are you talking about, Hales? How are you hurting my feelings?"

Perhaps she is dumping me. Are we too far from shore for me to swim back tonight?

“I’m a blubbering fool.” Haley swatted at Jordan. “How could I love one man while crying over another? Don’t just stare at me. You should slap me or something. I’m such a bitch right now.” Haley stood and started pacing.

Jordan sat rigid, never more confused. Did she say she loved me? Twice? Was she dumping him or not? Had some conversation transpired between her and Nathan in the two minutes they’d spent together that had sent Haley into another man’s arms and left Jordan high and dry?

“Hales.” Jordan stared her down until she stopped pacing and looked at him. “You aren’t making a lick of sense. Did you just say you loved me? It seems you’re also breaking up with me in the same breath.” Jordan opened his palms on his thighs.

Haley scrunched up her face and giggled through her tears and ranting. “Of course I love you, you idiot.” She launched the towel at his head where it rebounded and fell to the floor. “What’s this nonsense about breaking up?”

She paused and tilted her head to one side as though if she could scrutinize his expression it would all be so clear. “I’m trying to apologize for allowing Nathan to get under my skin. I thought we clicked last night, the three of us. I was actually disappointed to wake up and find him not there.”

Jordan nodded. That had been true for him too. The three of them had fitted together like a puzzle. The disappointment had not been one-sided. Jordan had been distracted all day thinking what-ifs. He just hadn’t voiced his thoughts or worn them on his face.

“What did Nathan say?”

“He told me in too few words to take my rich ass back to my table and enjoy my affluent vacation. Not to bother him. He needed this job. No, wanted this job.” She sucked in a breath. “Okay, maybe he didn’t say quite all of that, but it was in his eyes. He thinks we’re snooty rich folks who wouldn’t be caught dead with the likes of him or anyone in his position.”

Haley looked toward the floor. “I’m sorry I let that bother me. It’s insensitive to you and I don’t deserve your love while I’m blubbering over the words a waiter said to me in the dining hall.”

Jordan stood and took Haley in his arms, wrapping her in his strong embrace. “That’s crap and you know it. I love you, Haley.” He tucked her head against his chest and held her there. “I’ve loved you for a long time.” Until now, they’d never spoken the words out loud.

Deep exhales slowed his racing heart. “I felt the same thing you did last night. Just because I didn’t voice my thoughts doesn’t mean they don’t exist. I was at least as disappointed as you to find Nathan gone this morning. In fact, when the man came up behind us and I heard his voice asking for our drink orders, my cock grew twice as thick just from his tone alone.

“I’m sorry he made you cry. You are not a snooty rich woman. He had no right to imply that. I’m sure a confusion of emotions were warring in his head and he had no way to process them that quickly. When you blindsided him at the bar, he hadn’t had a chance to even take a breath. Imagine being in his shoes and finding us at his table this evening.”

Jordan began to rock back and forth, almost dancing to imaginary music. “It’s gonna be okay. You’ll see. Let him cool

off. Tomorrow night, he'll be more amiable. I'm sure. Hell, maybe by the end of the week, he'll even cave and give us his number," Jordan teased.

"Doubt it." Haley lifted her face. "You should have seen the fury in his eyes. That was not a man I'd expect to spend one more minute thinking about us. I'd be more worried he'd spit in our food every day."

"Well, on the plus side, we've already swapped spit with the man, so who cares?" Jordan smiled and tipped Haley's chin up farther. He kissed her gently.

"Funny."

"Let's pop open this nice bottle of wine," Jordan nodded toward the desk area, "and relax on the balcony for a while. The breeze will feel fantastic and we can drown our sorrow over Nathan's loss."

Haley smiled falteringly. It was a start. He needed to drag her out of this slump as soon as possible so they could enjoy their vacation. Tomorrow afternoon he vowed to himself to go change their dining table to the other side of the room.

CHAPTER 6



Nathan stood at the door to their cabin with his hand poised to knock. Still in uniform, he wasn't suspicious-looking to anyone passing by, assuming he didn't stand there all night warring with himself over the decision to leave these people alone or enter their world.

He'd watched Haley head for the restroom earlier. He'd even seen her return after far too long. His gut clenched thinking about her face, red, splotchy...hurt.

The woman had been bubbly, vivacious, and utterly gorgeous the night before. The look she'd had at dinner was one he'd put there all by himself. He could blame no one for the tone he'd taken or the words he'd spoken to her next to the bar.

To add insult to injury, Nathan had treated his two lovers like virtual strangers all evening, straining desperately to ignore them. On the one hand, he'd needed to keep their liaison a secret. It wouldn't do for the table of eight to know their waiter had fucked two of the people at the table the night before and sneaked out of their bed in the early morning hours to get on this ship and serve them all with a smile for seven days.

On the other hand, Nathan's cock ached just having Jordan and Haley nearby. They both smelled so good every time he got close enough to set a dish on the table or remove a plate. He'd shaken with the desire to snap everyone else out of the room, swipe the table clean of the clutter, and fuck his lovers again with raw abandon right there in the restaurant.

It was unbelievable he'd managed to complete dinner without mixing up orders and dropping stacks of dishes in the process. He'd never been so distracted in his life.

For a moment, Nathan rested his forehead against the door to the cabin. It was late. No one was in the hallway. Just feet away, only a thin layer of wood separating them, were the two people in the world he'd felt the most connected to in his twenty-eight years.

Straightening to his full height, Nathan decided to man up and let his hand rap three times. It wasn't his fault he couldn't stop the synapses from firing to his knuckles.

Nathan held his breath for three seconds. Maybe they wouldn't even answer. If they looked through the peephole, they might opt not to and then he'd feel like a fool. Or maybe they hadn't heard his knock. They could be enjoying the night air on the balcony or be sound asleep. Then he'd never know if they'd turned him down or not.

As Nathan let his hand fall to his side and drew in a lungful of air, the door creaked open.

Jordan stood in the entryway, dressed only in boxers and looking so hot he sucked the air out of the hall. His face was grim at first, his eyes narrowed, his mouth a straight line.

Then he smiled. "Bout time you showed up."

Nathan released the breath he was holding and nodded toward the inside of the cabin, his suggestion just registering on Jordan's face.

"Right. Sorry. Come in." Jordan opened the door farther and Nathan slipped inside, hoping no one in the hall was the wiser. He needed to talk to Haley and Jordan. At the very least apologize for his behavior at dinner. But he also needed to keep his liaison with them a secret. It wouldn't be a good plan for anyone on this ship, staff or otherwise, to catch wind of last night's threesome. He'd lose his job if he were caught in this cabin. It was strictly forbidden.

Clasping his hands together to keep from shaking, Nathan glanced up and found Haley standing on the other side of the bed. Her long sexy curls were tussled about. Had she been sleeping? Having sex? Or just lounging around?

His gaze landed on her face, pink with shock, eyes wide, mouth open, and then he took in the rest of her. His breath hitched. She wore nothing but tiny white lace panties and a matching tight lace tank top. The clothing, if you could call it that, looked expensive...and sexy as hell.

Nathan cleared his throat. "I wanted to apologize for earlier. I was rude. It wasn't necessary. And I'm sorry." He looked directly at Haley, trying to stick to her eyes and not the sexy firm body standing just feet away across only the expanse of the mattress. The urge to dive over the bed and clutch her in his arms made his hands twitch.

Jordan set a hand on Nathan's shoulder. "Sit. Let me pour you a drink. You look like you could use one."

Stiff, as though he were made of cardboard, Nathan perched on the edge of the bed and turned his gaze to Jordan,

watching the man's fine ass. Jordan filled a few glasses on the tiny desk.

Nathan licked his lips. This wasn't going as planned. Instead of apologizing and slinking back out the door to let Jordan and Haley get back to their vacation, Nathan was salivating over both his lovers, wishing he could fuck them to oblivion again right this second. He'd thought of many different scenarios concerning how this might play out, but in none of them had he considered Haley and Jordan would be in such a state of undress.

Nathan considered slapping his own forehead. Duh. It's like one in the morning. He should be more surprised they were even awake.

Jordan handed Nathan a drink. He passed a second one to Haley who seemed reluctant to sit and still stood across the room. She had notably not, however, seemed to grow aware of her state of undress as she held the glass tumbler of wine up to her lips with shaky fingers. Her hip cocked to one side and she rested her weight on one leg.

As Jordan went to her side, Nathan glanced at the man's impressive bulge and smiled. He was hard. Achingly so if the evidence through his boxers were any indication.

Nathan took a long gulp. He'd needed that. Something stronger would have been nice too, but the wine would have to do.

Haley set her glass down on the nightstand. "I know you were startled. I get that. So were we. But I don't understand why you needed to be so cruel. It wasn't as though we planned this. Hell, we didn't even know your last name. We had no idea you were on this cruise."

“That’s just it, Haley. I’m not on this cruise. I work here.”

“So?”

Nathan glanced at his lap. Had he been wrong? He knew he’d had no right to be rude and insulting about things, but had he been actually incorrect in his assumptions also?

Jordan spoke. “It must have been quite a shock, finding us sitting at your table. What are the odds? But I want you to know that my gut reaction was lust. I didn’t voice my thoughts to Haley very well this morning, but I was awfully disappointed to find you had slipped out in the night. I thought we had a connection.” His voice grew softer as he spoke.

“You’re right. We did have something special.” Nathan lifted his gaze. “It was...spectacular. The best sex of my life. I guess I left so I wouldn’t have to face you two in the morning and find you hadn’t felt the same. I ran. It was easier than being rejected.”

“What did we do to make you think we felt any less than you last night?” Haley sat gingerly on the bed, one sexy leg bent so her heel rested in the V of her crotch. It was hard to concentrate with her sex exposed like that.

“Nothing. But you’re a couple. You made it clear you sometimes took a third, but you never kept them. You were on vacation. I was a willing fling. When I awoke, it was easier to run than risk embarrassing myself by thinking we could do it again.”

“True. I can see where you’d be a bit outnumbered and think that way.” Haley reached across the bed now and grabbed Nathan’s arm with her dainty fingers. “Nathan,” she whispered, “we aren’t the people you imagined us to be. Sure, we have good jobs and a little extra cash to vacation with, but

we aren't stuck up, nor do we set ourselves on a higher pedestal than you."

Nathan lifted his gaze to Haley's. "I'm sorry. I've never said such awful things to a woman in my life." He furrowed his brow in all seriousness. He'd only thought to apologize to them. He'd not considered their reactions fully. His words had been so hateful, he'd hoped only to alleviate his conscience. He hadn't expected such acceptance and even a possible proposition.

But here he was and Haley was on her knees in front of him unbuttoning his shirt before he could even clear his head.

"Can we start over?" She smiled at him, eyebrows raised.

"Fuck no, we can't start over," he began.

Haley startled and sucked in a breath.

"I wouldn't give last night up for all the world. It was the best night of my life. Don't erase it. But, if you're going to so graciously accept my apology, I'd be happy to forgo the incident in the dining room and pick up where we left off before I snuck out of your hotel room with my tail between my legs."

Jordan came around the bed and wrapped his arms around Nathan from behind. He'd noticed it was the man's signature move. He did that often with Haley and her eyes always lit up like a princess when he surrounded her like that.

Now Nathan knew the feeling. He was several inches taller than Jordan. He'd never get that arrangement from Jordan standing, but, sitting on the bed, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of having Jordan's firm grip around his chest while Haley popped the button on his pants.

"You are decidedly overdressed," she mumbled.

“I was thinking you two were decidedly underdressed when I came in the room. It’s downright distracting trying to talk to you people while wearing boxers and whatever you call that scrap of material that does nothing to hide your tight pink nipples.”

Nathan stared at Haley’s chest and salivated. Her tits heaved at his language. He wanted to rip the white lace confining them to shreds and suck her breasts into his mouth until she begged him for mercy.

Jordan pulled Nathan’s shirt over his shoulders and tossed it aside. Nathan stood when prompted and let Jordan remove the rest of his clothes as well. “I don’t know how this is going to work.”

Haley laughed. “We’re all going to get naked and make each other writhe with multiple mind-numbing orgasms. It’s simple.”

Nathan narrowed his gaze at her. “Ha ha. You know that’s not what I meant. I am strictly forbidden from engaging in any sort of personal relationship with guests on this ship. How will I stay away from you for seven days while you lounge around teasing me with your near nudity?” He smiled at Jordan behind him. “Man, you have to do something about that. It’s distracting.” He pointed at the man’s cock. The head had escaped from the top of his boxers and a drop of pre-come sat on the tip, tempting Nathan to lick it away.

“You’re here now.” Haley leaned forward and flicked her tongue over one of Nathan’s nipples.

Now that Nathan stood in front of Jordan, the man couldn’t wrap his arms around him in the same way, but that didn’t stop him from trying. Jordan reached from behind and took

Nathan's cock in his hand, grazing his palm from bottom to top and making Nathan's legs feel like gelatin.

"How did I go from being the most clothed to the least?" Nathan moaned and stretched one hand toward Haley. Barely touching her, he skipped his fingertips over her breasts until he grazed her nipples. With one flick, she arched into him.

Haley gripped Nathan's arms, her eyes clouded over with lust, and she groaned...way too loudly.

"These walls are thinner than last night's. I don't think your neighbors are going to appreciate a screaming threesome next door. Especially if we're going to do this without getting caught."

Jordan chuckled. "It would be embarrassing if a staff member had to come to the room and found one of the waiters naked on the bed with another man's cock in his mouth."

Nathan swatted Jordan's thigh, reaching back and squeezing the man's fine ass in the process. "That is so not funny. Did you bring the black bag of tricks? I think we're going to need that ball gag." He glanced pointedly at Haley.

The coy goddess raised one eyebrow as if to say who me? He nearly laughed. When she reached under Jordan's hands and took Nathan's balls in her palms, he flinched. "I hope you have the handcuffs too, because your woman can't seem to keep her hands to herself."

"I don't think she's so much my own personal woman anymore." Jordan whispered the words directly into Nathan's ear and then flicked his tongue over the lobe. "After last night and then this evening, I'd say her feelings for you run a bit deeper than a quick romp in between the sheets."

Nathan twisted in Jordan's arms until he faced the man head on. He stared him down for several seconds and then kissed him on the lips, tender and slow. "And how do you feel?"

"I have to agree with Haley. You make a perfect addition to our relationship. I think we should give it a try. See what happens." Jordan reached around and squeezed Nathan's ass. "We didn't cover nearly as many positions last night as I've had torturing my every waking thought today. Surely we can discreetly enjoy each other's company this week without getting caught. If everything goes as well as last night, we'll be inseparable by next Saturday."

There was one more tiny matter of inconvenience. "Where do you two live?" Nathan held his breath. Hundreds of miles would not make for a very reasonable arrangement.

"Chicago. We have a condo near the city. Don't tell me you live in Alaska or something."

Nathan chuckled. "Are you fucking kidding?"

"No." Haley smoothed her soft palms over Nathan's back and kissed his skin, nibbling a path to his neck.

"I live in Elgin. That's like forty minutes away."

"No." This time when she said the word it came out with a completely different tone. She'd gone from playful to shocked in two-point-five seconds. A smile lit her face when she leaned around his shoulder to kiss his cheek. "See, it was meant to be. Now, before you sneak out of here in the pre-dawn hours, please leave your last name and a cell phone number so we don't have to spend another day like today."

Nathan turned around to face Haley. He took her cheeks in his hands and gazed into her green eyes. "This is a ship, love. I

don't think I'll be able to escape too far this time. I can swim, but not that well. You're stuck with me in your lives for seven nights." Nathan claimed her mouth, angling his head to one side to get the best access and hopefully knocking her off balance in the process.

When her knees went weak and she slumped against him, he laid her down on the bed and lined his body up along one side. Jordan trailed to the other side and lay down also, his hand grazing down Nathan's back then ass before he tugged Nathan's top leg over Haley, opening Nathan up and effectively pinning Haley in place.

Haley moaned again, even louder. Her eyes popped open when she heard her voice and she broke the kiss to bite her lip.

Nathan glanced over at Jordan. He smiled. It was going to be okay. Hell, everything was going to be more than okay—it was fantastic. Nathan's chest swelled. His cock did too. Everything he'd ever dreamed of was right here in this tiny room as though it had been here all along for his entire life. Just waiting for the stars to align until all the pieces fell together.

"Where was that gag?" he asked Jordan.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you've enjoyed this collection of novellas. I know I enjoyed writing each and every one of them. I appreciate my fans more than words can express. Thank you for taking the time to read my books.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Becca Jameson is a USA Today best-selling author of over 100 books. She is well-known for her Wolf Masters series, her Fight Club series, and her Surrender series. She currently lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband and her Goldendoodle. Two grown kids pop in every once in a while too! She is loving this journey and has dabbled in a variety of genres, including paranormal, sports romance, military, and BDSM.

A total night owl, Becca writes late at night, sequestering herself in her office with a glass of red wine and a bar of dark chocolate, her fingers flying across the keyboard as her characters weave their own stories.

During the day—which never starts before ten in the morning!—she can be found jogging, running errands, or reading in her favorite hammock chair!

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