



Bought

**JACKIE
ASHENDEN**

AN ARCADIA NOVEL

BOUGHT

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JACKIE ASHENDEN

*Welcome to Arcadia...where every dark fantasy can be yours.
For a price.*

Zara

It was supposed to be simple: auction off my virginity to Tennyson Fox, get into his house, and find evidence of a murder he committed years ago. He bids on virgins but doesn't use them - at least that's what the Hamiltons told me when I agreed to the job. But what I didn't count on was my body's reaction to him or that when he makes me his, I want it to be real. When he teaches me about submission, I want to give him everything. His whips and restraints make me feel more cared for than anything else ever has. Yet I'm lying to him. And once he finds out I'm afraid he'll send me away forever.

Tennyson

Everything went up in smoke the moment I saw her. I've worked hard to rise above my dark past - I started a successful business and pulled myself and my daughter up from the gutter. By day I'm a respectable CEO and father. By night, I'm a Dom who wields a firm hand in the club with my subs. I also bid on virgins trying to sell their bodies for money. I don't take them - I save them. Until her. When I see her standing there in the club, offering herself to the highest bidder, one thing is clear: she will be mine.

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About Jackie](#)

[Also by Jackie Ashenden](#)

Zara

If you think I didn't know what I was doing when I walked through that curtained doorway in Arcadia, wearing only a Red Riding Hood cloak, on the way to auction off my virginity to the highest bidder, well...

You'd be wrong. I knew exactly what I was doing.

Arcadia was one of the most exclusive clubs in Manhattan, where you had to be A-list, a Mensa member, or Midas himself before you could even get on the waiting list. Exclusive wasn't the word for it. This was another grade up from exclusive.

It had the best cocktails in the city, the best vibe, and if you wanted to get down and dirty with someone you could, whatever your fetish.

As long as it was legal, anything went in Arcadia.

Obviously, I wasn't a member since I was in no way famous or rich, or extraordinary, but once a month if you were a poor virgin down on your luck and you passed their stringent

vetting procedure, you could auction off your virginity to members for — hopefully — a large amount of money.

And yes, I was this month's poor virgin.

But that wasn't really why I was there.

Isabel Fox, my friend and work colleague, who'd come with me to Arcadia for moral support, was out in the main bar since only people who'd registered for the auction could pass through that curtained doorway, and I knew she was worried about me. But she needn't have wasted her energy.

I wasn't who she thought I was. I wasn't the party girl who went out clubbing every weekend, martinis and dancing, and a different man every night. The girl who definitely wasn't a virgin.

In reality, I was a self-taught computer hacker with massive trust issues, who didn't like men and who took on sketchy hacking jobs so I could earn enough money to get out of this hellhole of a city.

That's why I was here tonight. Money. Because it wasn't love that made the world go around, it was cold hard cash. Or at least, it was the dollars that kept my particular world spinning.

To get those dollars, I had my orders and there was only one buyer I had in my sights.

My contact had told me that the man I was here for would be in the audience, and even though he'd always avoided the auctions at Arcadia, there was no doubt he'd buy me tonight. Because I'd been chosen especially for this job. I had the right

‘look’. Vulnerable, fragile, virginal. He wouldn’t be able to resist buying me, she’d said, even though fragile and vulnerable I wasn’t.

Still, having spent the past week studying the giant file she’d given me, full of information they’d collected about him, I knew she was right.

This might have been the first virginity auction he’d attended at Arcadia, but it wasn’t his first virginity auction. He’d been at various sex clubs around the city, buying the virgin and then...letting her go. Catch and release, so to speak. My contact didn’t know why, that’s just what he did. A white knight, apparently, which was why I had to look as fragile and vulnerable as I could.

Not that I needed a knight. I wasn’t any man’s damsel in distress, and I didn’t need saving. I saved myself.

Anyway, tonight I had to convince him not only to buy me but to take me home for the night. No catch and release for me. Which was fine. He clearly didn’t buy virgins for sex so at least I wouldn’t have to deal with that.

I kept the voluminous red riding hood cloak I wore gathered tight around me as Andre, Arcadia’s handsome front-of-house manager, ushered me to the back of the small auction room. There was an alcove a little off to the side, with a comfortable armchair to sit in, where I was to wait, safely out of sight until the time came for me to display myself to all the drooling buyers.

“I’m going to get everyone in now,” he said as I sat down, giving me a reassuring smile. “First, I’ll do a brief introduction

and then I'll get you to stand up so everyone can see you. It's your choice if you want to stay clothed, but..." He eyed my cloak. "Perhaps you might want to give them a preview?"

No perhaps about it. I was naked beneath the cloak and that had been deliberate. But I didn't want to give too much away, so I only smiled enigmatically. "Perhaps."

Andre nodded as if he was well aware of what I had on underneath that cloak, then he left, heading for the main bar.

I sat back in the armchair, ignoring the clutch of anxiety in my gut, because there was nothing to be anxious about. It was fine. All I had to do was get naked in front of a bunch of rich people, who couldn't touch me, and my buyer for the night was a man who apparently didn't take what he'd paid for, so no sex was required. All I needed to do was convince him to take me back to his place and give me a bed for the night, which would allow me to search for the evidence my contact said would be there. Then, once I'd found that, I could leave.

My contact assured me that the money from the auction would go straight into my bank account, along with a nice little bonus if I completed my mission, so really, it was all good. I had nothing to lose, nothing whatsoever.

Andre was ushering people through the curtained doorway, and I relaxed, sitting unseen in my little alcove.

The room was small and intimate, the floor covered in thick, dark blue carpet and oriental rugs in rich colors. The walls were a deep red with expensive-looking artwork on them. Couches upholstered in black velvet were scattered around, along with leather armchairs. They'd all been

positioned facing the small, raised dais with a huge, ornate crystal chandelier hanging over it.

The room reeked of opulence, of money, and so did the people coming in. The buyers hoping to buy a virgin for the night. The voyeurs who wanted to watch. Rich people. Privileged people. People who'd never had to scrape to survive. People who didn't appreciate what they had.

If this went the way my contact had promised me, I'd never have to scrape again. I wouldn't have to take the jobs that Donny gave me because I couldn't afford not to. In fact, I wouldn't have to deal with Donny ever again. For the first time in my life safety was in my grasp and for that, I'd do basically anything.

I watched the crowd, looking for him, hoping he was here, but as the room filled up and there was no sign of him, my anxiety gripped a little tighter. Then he suddenly appeared, and I knew I needn't have worried. He was easy to spot, half a head taller than everyone else, coming in with his two friends, Atlas Blackwood and Caleb Cross.

The three of them were the richest, most powerful men in the city, and Arcadia was owned by Caleb. He and Atlas were both handsome and intensely charismatic, but I only had eyes for the man who'd be buying me at some point this evening if I was lucky.

I already knew what he looked like. I'd spent long nights studying the photos in the file my contact had given me. The reality, though, was a whole other thing.

He was tall in his perfectly tailored dark suit, six-four at least, and broad too. Short, ink-black hair cut close to his skull, and straight black brows. A sharp, proud nose and carved mouth. His face was all edged planes and fierce angles, beautifully put together, but so stern. An avenging angel's face. He looked as if he never smiled. He looked as if he'd made being judge, jury, and executioner his whole life's mission.

It was his eyes that did it. A deep, electric blue and so cold, a frozen gas flame. A stare full of knives with blades so sharp they could slide between your ribs before you even felt it.

Tennyson Fox. Billionaire CEO of Fox Tech. My friend Isabel's father. Enemy of one of the most powerful families in the country, and buyer of my virginity if the evening went the way I was assured it would.

I sat in the shadows, protected from the crowd, and he shouldn't have been able to see me, yet somehow his frozen blue gaze found mine all the same, sending a shiver straight down my spine, and making everything inside me tighten.

I did *not* like the sensation, whatever it was. Didn't like that it was to do with him either. Men were the worst, and I didn't let them affect me, not ever.

That included tonight. Because tonight, whether Tennyson Fox knew it or not, I was the one in charge.

My plan was to play up the air of fragility I supposedly projected, be the blushing virgin he no doubt expected, and

hook into his white knight instincts to ensure that he saved me from the slaving horde.

So really, what I should have done was to look shyly away from that intense cold stare. But the electric jolt that had gone through me the moment his eyes met mine had gotten my back up, and made me want to lift my chin, stand my ground. Fight. Because as always with men, showing weakness was a bad idea. Some men didn't like to be challenged and I had the sense that Tennyson Fox might very well be one of those men.

Donny certainly was. Donny, who wasn't a pimp because I wasn't a sex worker, but whose function was pretty much the same in that he passed on jobs to me and took a cut from my subsequent earnings as a 'finder's fee'.

He was an asshole who'd been trying to get me to sleep with him for the past couple of years I'd been working for him, and after the last time I'd refused, he'd kicked me out of the apartment he'd provided when I'd first started working for him.

I'd now stopped taking jobs from him and had been doing fill-in shifts at a bar called Stan's to get by. Jay, the bartender, who was actually *not* a creep had offered me his couch and since I had nowhere else to go, I'd taken it. But I didn't feel safe there either. Nowhere did. Which was why when I'd been contacted out of the blue by the woman who'd hired me for this job, once she'd mentioned the money, I'd taken it, no questions asked. And I'd been serious about it. I'd read everything in that file, and everything I could find online.

I knew he was the CEO of Fox Tech, a massive tech company that was making inroads globally. I knew he and Caleb Cross had grown up on the streets together and that while Cross had fallen in with a bad crowd, Fox hadn't. He'd been formally adopted by an old man called Sir George Wyndham, who'd given him a home, before leaving Fox all his money when he died.

But that was just the publicly available information.

In that massive file, I'd also discovered that he'd once loved a woman called Juliana Hamilton, a member of one of the richest, most powerful families in the country. He and Juliana had a baby together — my friend Isabel — but Juliana had died during the birth and the Hamiltons were furious about it. They held Fox responsible for the death of their princess and they wanted revenge.

It was the Hamiltons who'd hired me. They wanted me to collect a specific piece of information so they could take him down and take him down hard.

I was on board. Revenge was a motivation I could really get behind, especially after asshole Donny, and what would I give to get some revenge on him?

Fox had sat down in one of the armchairs close to the dais, while Blackwood took a couch, leaning over to speak with the pretty woman sitting next to him. Cross put a hand on Fox's shoulder and leaned down to say something, and Fox glanced away from my alcove, releasing from the tractor beam of his stare.

I took a breath and gave myself a little shake, shoving away the unsettled feeling in my stomach. So, he was way more good-looking than I'd expected. So what? So, he rescued virgins like he was some fucking saint. Who cared? He was just a man, and I knew what men were like, what *all* men were like. Nasty, brutish predators the lot of them. And money and power only made them worse, rotten to the core. He wasn't any different.

It wouldn't bother me at all to take Tennyson Fox down. In fact, I might even enjoy the hell out of it.

Out in the crowd, Cross turned and left while Fox sat in the armchair, staring at the empty dais, the look on his face unreadable.

A thread of worry twisted in my gut, no matter how hard I tried to ignore it, but this time it wasn't for me, it was for Isabel. Who was currently out in the main part of the club and who'd probably seen her father and his friends come into this little room.

They clearly hadn't seen her, which was a relief since she'd been trying to avoid Cross and her dad while attempting a night out sans the security detail that her father had put on her in a bid to keep her safe from the Hamiltons. They were trying to make contact with her, and Fox was having none of it.

Pity he didn't know about me.

Part of the Hamiltons takedown strategy for him had also involved getting close to Isabel— their granddaughter — and

so they'd somehow gotten me a position at Cross International, no idea how and I didn't ask.

Anyway, Cross was Caleb Cross's company and Isabel was interning there, and the Hamiltons had wanted ears on the inside, someone to get close to her and funnel what information I could find about her and her father back to them.

Yeah, I was their mole. Isabel had no idea who I really was and while I didn't feel great about passing information on, especially after I'd gotten to know her, this was the job I'd been hired for. Besides, the Hamiltons weren't going to hurt Isabel. She was desperate for more information about her mother's family, so it wasn't as if I'd led her to her death or anything. I might have spent the last five years getting Donny to hire me out to people who wanted my particular set of skills for various shady jobs, but I tried not to take the ones that involved hurting people who didn't deserve it. And Isabel had become a friend, which had made things problematic for me. Still, I wasn't in a position to refuse.

I needed the money.

Money would mean I could get out of this shithole of a city.

Money would mean I could get out of the entire fucking country and build a life for myself elsewhere.

Money would mean that I'd finally be safe.

All I had to do was get some billionaire nearly twenty years older than me to buy my virginity and take me home for the night.

Andre had finished seating people and then he moved over to the dais to begin his little intro, giving me a nod as he did so.

At last.

It was show time.

Tennyson

I sat back in the leather armchair as the lights in the auction room dimmed and Andre, Arcadia's front-of-house manager, stepped onto the dais in the center of the room to begin his spiel.

I wasn't listening.

Frustration gnawed in my gut, a constant, low-level burn that had been with me ever since Isabel had been born and hadn't let up even though she was now twenty-three and an adult.

This wretched auction that Caleb and Atlas, my two oldest friends, had dragged me to was supposed to be a distraction, but with Isabel's safety on the line, distracting me was an impossible task.

I never went to Arcadia's auctions anyway, and I'd always made a point of not attending. I didn't approve of them or the club itself, and I certainly didn't approve of Caleb's owning it.

Not that he cared about my opinion. He was a man who did what he wanted regardless of what anyone thought.

I still wasn't sure why I'd agreed to come here in the first place, especially when I had more important things to think about. Such as Isabel's mother's family, the Hamiltons, finally making the move I'd been dreading for years. They wanted to contact her, wanted to dig their claws into her the way they'd dug their claws into Juliana all those years ago, and I was determined to stop them.

I had to make sure they didn't destroy Isabel the way they'd nearly destroyed her mother.

I'd asked Caleb to take over watching over Isabel because the relationship I had with her was fraught and she wouldn't listen to me. Of course, there was a reason it was fraught and that was my fault, for many reasons. But the main issue Isabel had with me was the measures I'd put in place to protect her. Being my child was never going to be an easy role, not given the enemies I had. She chafed at those measures, I knew, but my job as a father meant keeping her safe and so that's what I'd do.

That's what my whole life was about.

I couldn't lose her the way I'd lost her mother.

I shifted in my chair, the frustration continuing to burn like acid inside me. It was the inability to do anything, the lack of control I had over the entire situation that was eating away at me. A special kind of hell for a man like me, a man who liked to have complete control in all things.

It wasn't that I'd done nothing. I had people at Fox Tech, my tech company, find out what they could about what the Hamiltons were planning, and I'd had Caleb take over keeping an eye on Isabel. He'd promised me he'd protect her, and I knew if anyone could keep her safe that wasn't me, it was him. I'd known him since we were both fifteen and he was like a brother to me.

Yet even knowing Caleb was protecting her didn't ease my frustration and worry.

"Relax," Atlas murmured from the couch positioned beside my chair. "She'll be fine. Think of the virgin instead."

I didn't bother replying. He had no idea what I was dealing with. Neither he nor Caleb were fathers. They didn't know what it felt like to have your heart walking about around outside your chest, under threat, and there was nothing you could do about it.

The virgin was the least of my problems.

Then again, she was the reason I was here.

I didn't approve of any part of this, not the auction, not the people avid for sex, not the virgin trying to sell herself off for money. Caleb had lectured me about his vetting process and the agency of the young women involved, but I still didn't like it. That these young women were even considering auctioning off their bodies at all rankled. It told of a society fixated on youth and beauty, where women were told that taking control of their sexuality was a power move, when in fact they were simply buying into the lies they'd been fed by that same society.

It was reprehensible. If I'd had my way, I would have stopped the auction before it had even started. But Arcadia was Caleb's baby, and he was protective of it. Besides, the young woman involved was expecting money from this farce, and I couldn't in good conscience sabotage it for her.

I was, however, going to buy that virginity of hers, the way I'd bought the virginity of many other young women. For their own good, of course.

Andre had his sales patter down. He was slick — they all were at Arcadia; Caleb only hired the best — and the audience hung on his every word.

This wasn't the first time I'd attended an auction like this. I'd been to a few in Manhattan and in other places, bidding and winning, then handing over the money to the woman selling herself off. Not claiming what I'd bought, because it wasn't about sex for me. It was about protection.

Yes, it was their choice to sell themselves, but it was a poor choice in my opinion. It was setting themselves up to be taken advantage of by unscrupulous types and I knew, if anyone, just how many unscrupulous types were out there. I knew because I'd had first-hand experience.

Up on the dais, Andre was apologizing for the lack of brochures — yes, Arcadia did brochures for their auctions. They advertised the virgins like you'd advertise a house, with pictures and lists of vital statistics, likes, and dislikes. And naturally their sexual hard limits.

There was a discreet murmur around the room as Andre announced that this particular virgin had an unrestricted

contract. Which meant she had no hard limits at all. She'd be up for everything and anything the prospective buyer wanted her to do sexually.

My lip curled in distaste. There was only one reason to have no restrictions on a contract like this and that was to get as much money as you could. The poor girl must be desperate, and clearly had no idea what she was getting herself into.

Luckily for her, I did. And the whole reason I was going to buy her was so she'd never have to find out.

If I couldn't protect my own daughter, at least tonight I could protect someone else's.

As Andre finished up his patter, I let my gaze focus beyond him, into the shadows of the alcove behind the dais where I knew the virgin of the hour waited.

What had led her here? What had made her want to sell her body to the highest bidder? Not that I didn't know the answers to those questions. It was money. It was always about money.

Atlas was now talking to the woman he was sitting next to on the couch, his voice low. He wasn't interested in the virgin. He liked his women experienced. But then his tastes edged toward the rougher end of the spectrum, whereas mine...

Juliana wouldn't recognize you.

No, she wouldn't. I wasn't that poor, stupid hotel valet who'd gawked at the gorgeous redhead handing me the keys to her car, not anymore. I was a different man now and my tastes were more...complex. Juliana would likely be horrified if she saw what I'd become.

It was a good thing she was no longer here.

You don't believe that.

Perhaps I didn't. But I wanted to. My grief for her had been blunted by the years, but there were times when the edges were so sharp they still cut as deeply as if I'd only just lost her.

I shifted in my seat once again, the frustration feeding my unfamiliar restlessness. Juliana was over twenty years dead and thinking about her was pointless, so why she was even in my thoughts now was anyone's guess.

The house lights went completely dark, but behind Andre, I could see someone move gracefully in the dimness, stepping out of her alcove and onto the dais.

Then the lights came on again, illuminating a petite figure swathed from head to foot in a voluminous red cloak, the hood up covering her hair and shadowing her face.

Seemed she had a flair for the dramatic.

Everyone was quiet now, watching her, and against my will, I found myself...interested. She wasn't doing anything, merely standing there and yet she had their attention. Their whole attention. This was a performance, clearly.

The entire room settled into a dead quiet and only then did she raise her hands to the catch at her throat, unhooking it slowly.

For a second, she stood motionless, her hands raised, hidden by the cloak, drawing out the moment with faultless timing. Then she let go and her hood fell back before the rest

of the fabric fell entirely away from her with dramatic slowness, revealing her naked body like Venus in the shell.

She was lovely, there was no denying it.

Her hair was long and straight, hanging around her shoulders in a pretty silver blonde fall, her features small and precise. A rosebud mouth, straight nose, determined chin. She had distractingly dark eyebrows that flicked up, giving her an almost otherworldly air, that was only enhanced by the slight feline tilt of her gray eyes.

Not that anyone was looking at her eyes or her face.

Not when she was entirely naked, her skin pale and glowing in the dim light, almost pearlescent. She was beautifully proportioned, with small round breasts, generous hips, curvy thighs, long, smooth legs. She kept her hands coyly over her sex, hiding it from the crowd.

She had a few tattoos, and I couldn't stop looking at the stars scattered up her right forearm, as if some part of the Milky Way had fallen from the sky and landed on her pale skin.

An approving murmur ran through the crowd, and I shifted yet again, though it wasn't due to the restlessness this time. Apparently, the very male parts of me also approved of the virgin's nakedness.

I gritted my teeth and ignored the sudden tight feeling behind the zipper of my pants. She was young, around Isabel's age if I wasn't mistaken, which instantly rendered her untouchable. I wasn't one of those older men who liked

younger women. I didn't need to relive my youth, not when my youth had been its own kind of hell.

Besides, I never did anything with the virgins I bought. I paid them, gave them a small lecture on making better choices, then sent them on their way unmolested and with their bank accounts extremely healthy.

If I wanted a woman, I went elsewhere for relief.

The young woman stood on the dais looking like she'd been dipped in silver, a virgin straight out of the stories. Her attention was down, her eyes veiled by lashes the same unexpected dark color as her eyebrows, the very picture of shy innocence.

Andre murmured something from his place beside the dais and after a moment, her hands fell away, revealing the cluster of silver blonde curls between her thighs. The flush that crept up her lovely body was visible to everyone.

Beautiful. She was beautiful.

A thread of desire wound through me, but again, I ignored it. It was purely a reflexive male response to a lovely female, nothing more. I certainly wasn't going to act on it.

I had no idea what had driven this woman to think that selling herself for a night to anyone who would buy her was a good idea, and I'd likely never know. But one thing was for certain: the humiliation of standing in front of everyone naked would be the only humiliation she'd have to endure.

I'd make sure she went home tonight with her virginity intact and a great deal of money in her bank account.

Andre said something else and slowly, she lifted her pointed chin, dark lashes lifting as she made shy eye contact with the crowd. Surely, it had to be a performance, this shyness, this pretend innocence. Why else the drama of the red cloak?

Again, I felt the tug of unwilling interest and found myself leaning forward almost, watching her. Waiting for the mask to drop. And as if the movement had caught her attention, her gaze found mine, flaring in what looked like recognition. And then with something else: challenge.

A flicker of electricity moved like static over my skin, the stirring of an old hunger. A hunger I hadn't felt in years.

No one knew about my sexual preferences, not Atlas, not even Caleb.

No one knew about the clubs I went to, the private playrooms I visited. The dominance I dealt out. I liked my submissives obedient, following my orders and never testing me. I had a reputation for strictness, and it was well-earned. I liked control.

So, there should have been no reason why that fleeting look of challenge from the virgin on the dais should hit me like a slap. A short, sharp shock of awareness, making the dominant in me growl.

Juliana had once been that kind of challenge, all red-headed passion and fire. I'd loved it. I'd loved her. But I wasn't looking for that again. Caleb liked a brat because he liked a fight, but I didn't.

I was a different man from what I'd once been. A harder man. I didn't want a challenge and I didn't want a test. I didn't have the patience for either these days, not when Isabel took up all my energy.

I liked to save women even as I liked to dominate them, opposing desires that I'd managed to accommodate in my life, but I wasn't going to be dominating this particular woman. She was far too young, and I was here to save her, nothing more.

Her gaze dropped before mine, sending a ripple of satisfaction through me, but I ignored that feeling too. It had no place here, and if the Dom in me was raising its head, it meant I needed to visit the club I'd been favoring currently. Very private, very discreet, with a sweet sub who did everything I told her with no argument. I needed a sub to settle me, not make things worse.

I could feel someone watching me and I glanced to the side, finding Atlas staring at me with a speculative look in his eyes.

Cal and I had met him years ago when Cal had been part of a crime network run by a man called Old Nick. The Blackwoods were old money, corrupt money, and Atlas, who'd been eighteen at the time, had been roped into it through no fault of his own.

We'd helped him get away from his family and start his construction company, which had branched into real estate and now owned half of Manhattan. He was ambitious, driven, and a playboy of epic proportions.

I disapproved of his behavior too.

I met his golden eyes, giving him back stare for stare.

He only grinned, the bastard.

Up on the dais, Andre had taken the girl's elbow and helped her off it, once again securely wrapped in her cloak. Then he came back and smiled at the audience. "As you can see, a delightful young woman who will no doubt give one of you a delightful evening. So, I'm going to start the bidding off at ten thousand."

Atlas, of course, gave Andre a nod, and I knew he'd put in a bid just to mess with me. I said nothing, letting the others in the room also add their bids. It was older men mostly, salivating at the thought of that young blonde in their beds, but there was also competition from an older couple who'd clearly taken a shine to her.

The bidding climbed up.

She was a prize, everyone wanting a piece of her, and I could see why. She was the perfect mix of beauty and innocence, exactly what you wanted if virginity was your thing.

Sadly for them, they would not be getting their hands on her.

Atlas gave me another look, raising a brow, but again, I had ignoring Atlas down to a fine art.

I'd wait until the bidding faltered and then I'd put my own bid in, ensuring she got the best price possible. Because after

all, she was doing this for a reason, and it wasn't just because she wanted to get naked in front of a crowd.

The other bidders eventually fell away until it was only the older couple and one other man, and I waited until Andre had nearly called it before I raised a finger, indicating my bid.

The others, liking the competition, began bidding again, but by that stage, I was losing patience. Thoughts of Isabel were encroaching again and even though I knew she was in good hands with Caleb, I needed more of a distraction.

I needed to win the bid on the girl, deal with the formalities, and then leave for my club. Perhaps a couple of hours in the playroom there would be exactly what I needed.

“Five hundred thousand,” I said flatly, overtopping the other bids by at least a couple hundred grand.

There was a shocked silence.

“Finish this, Andre,” I added, just in case I wasn't clear.

He smiled. “Well, indeed. Going, going, gone. Our lovely Red Riding Hood's virginity is now sold to Mr. Tennyson Fox.”

I could feel Atlas's stare and that of the rest of the crowd, could hear the low murmurs of congratulation.

I ignored them, pushing myself out of the armchair.

I'd played my part, I'd rescued the girl, and there'd be formalities to deal with, but once they were done, I could get out of here.

And lose myself in other, better, ways.

Zara

I sat in the darkness of the alcove, my heart beating far too fast.

As they'd promised, he'd come through. He'd bought me, but God.... he'd paid five hundred thousand. Five *hundred* thousand.

I swallowed, my mouth dry, trying to summon up my usual cynicism for what rich men chose to spend their money on, but I couldn't quite manage it.

The Hamiltons' contact had promised me that I'd keep all the winning bid, that it would be mine — in addition to a bonus — as long as I fulfilled the terms of the contract they'd made me sign. As long as I found the evidence they wanted.

Except right now my brain couldn't focus on things like evidence. It was fixated on the money and how I could get out of Manhattan now, get out of the country entirely. Go to wherever I wanted...

There had been a travel magazine I'd had as a kid, with pictures of far-off places, and when my deadbeat dad got home from work, drunk and pissed as he always was, breaking glasses against the walls and shattering plates, I'd stay in my room, listening to music on my headphones and leafing through that magazine. Imagining myself going to some of those places. Imagining myself living there. I'd particularly loved a picture of Santorini, all white roofs, bright sun, and blue, blue water. A paradise compared to home, the tiny, dark apartment Dad and I lived in, with the shitty wallpaper and the central heating that never worked. The view of the gray wall of another building. The ever-present threat of Dad's violence.

I'd never forgotten that picture and as soon as I was able, I'd put a couple of dollars every week into my travel fund. It wasn't much at first, not until I'd started working for Donny, and then I'd managed to amass a good amount of cash.

Cash that Donny had stolen when he'd evicted me from the apartment, yet denied he'd stolen. Yet another reason why this job was so important to me. I had no way of recouping that loss without working my ass off for another five years, but now I'd just earned five hundred thousand dollars straight up. Once the money was in my account, I was going to get myself a first-class ticket to Santorini and expense be damned.

Don't get ahead of yourself. You won't get a red cent if you don't do what you promised.

Of course. My Hamilton contact had been quite clear. I had to find evidence of a murder Fox had committed, a murder no one else knew about.

Sir George Wyndham, the old man who'd adopted him, had supposedly died of natural causes, but the Hamiltons had gotten a tip-off that Fox had murdered him and taken his money instead.

I didn't care whether Fox was a murderer or not, though it seemed like the kind of thing a man like him would do. What all men like him did. Taking advantage where they could to get ahead. And maybe I wasn't different — after all, I wanted money. Then again, I'd never hurt anyone to get it.

All I had to do tonight was make sure Fox took me back to his home and hopefully at some point, I could search his house and see what I could find.

What if he wants what he paid for?

An inexplicable shiver worked its way down my spine as Andre came to help me out of my seat.

Standing on that dais and letting fall my cloak had been easy. Showing the crowd my naked body had been easy. Acting shy and innocent, drawing them in, letting them see what they wanted to see, that too, had been easy.

But I'd made a mistake. I hadn't meant to look at him, a part of me suspecting those icy blue eyes would see right through me, yet I hadn't been able to stop myself.

He'd been in that armchair, almost directly in front of the dais, sitting back, ostensibly relaxed, his long legs outstretched in front of him. But there had been nothing relaxed about the coiling tension in every line of his powerful body. The impact

of his gaze had been almost physical, I could feel it shuddering through me like an ax hitting a tree.

He was a threat, some instinctive part of me knew it, and so I'd stared back in challenge because I didn't let men cow me.

Then, naturally, I'd remembered that I was supposed to be acting shy and innocent, so I'd had to look away again, cursing myself for forgetting.

Not that it mattered. Fox wouldn't take my virginity. He didn't want it. He hadn't wanted any of the other virgins he'd bought either. I didn't know why, but that wasn't important. What was important was that he'd probably let me go and in which case I had to convince him otherwise.

Andre escorted me out of the room via a back entrance, which was a pity because I'd wanted to know if Isabel was still out in the bar and had managed to avoid being seen. I'd have to text her later.

Will you though? Once you complete your mission, she won't matter anymore either.

The thought made me uncomfortable. Befriending Isabel had been something I'd had to do. She'd been part of my mission, but...well, I'd liked her. I'd liked her a lot. She'd become a friend and I'd never had a friend before, not even when I was a kid. Back then I'd had to keep to myself because it simply wasn't safe inviting anyone back to my place given how unpredictable Dad's rages were. And as an adult, I couldn't have any because of the sketchy jobs I took from

Donny. He was so nosy about my private life that I didn't want to put any friend I might have had on his radar.

Donny had been a necessary evil, giving me access to some lucrative under-the-table jobs and I got paid in cash. I guess I could have gotten safer jobs — stacking supermarket shelves, waitressing, cleaning offices — but the money with Donny was too good to refuse, and when you were a teenage runaway with no education, your options were limited.

If I wanted to get to Santorini, he was the evil I had to put up with.

Anyway, I hadn't liked lying to Isabel and I didn't like the thought of simply vanishing without a word either. No, I'd text her afterward and I'd tell her everything. She'd probably end up hating me, but that was fine. I'd be gone by then and anyway, she deserved the truth.

Regret tugged at me, but I ignored it as we went up some back stairs to the next floor up and down a long corridor. The deep blue carpet was a rich contrast against the red walls, and paintings lined the hallway. It felt as if I was walking through an art gallery.

Eventually, Andre stopped outside a door and opened it, gesturing at me to go in. "You have ten minutes," he murmured. "If you both agree Mr. Fox is the winner of your auction then all the paperwork will be signed, and you'll have your money. If you don't agree, then the auction is void."

This had already been explained to me. After each auction, the buyer and seller would meet, and both had the option of canceling the sale. It was a great idea and all, but if I refused

him, I wouldn't get paid, so it wasn't as if I was going to say no, not tonight. He could also potentially refuse me, which meant I had to be nice.

I took a quick, silent breath, my heart beating fast for no good reason then nodded to Andre.

No, there was a good reason. I had to convince Tennyson Fox to take me home and hopefully, that would be easy. He was a white knight, which meant all I had to do was act all fragile and vulnerable, maybe tell him that someone was after me and I didn't have anywhere to go that was safe — I mean, it was the truth after all — and if I acted scared and pathetic enough, he'd surely help me out. He rescued virgins after all, and presumably, he didn't rescue them only to then throw them to the wolves.

I stepped into the room and Andre shut the door behind me.

It was small and beautifully appointed, with thick dark, charcoal carpet and dark blue walls. Vivid splashes of color came in the form of red Persian rugs and a couple of red velvet-covered armchairs set before an empty fireplace. A small table stood near a curtained window. On the table were two glasses of champagne.

I barely registered the champagne, though, unable to do anything but stare at the very tall man standing in front of the fireplace. He was staring down into the empty grate with his hands clasped loosely behind his back, the posture highlighting the broad width of his shoulders and chest.

Tennyson Fox.

The same current of awareness that I'd felt downstairs prickled through me once again, making me want to shift uncomfortably on my feet.

Annoying. He might have bought my virginity, but he wasn't going to do anything with it, and I knew that already. There was no reason to be uncomfortable.

He glanced over his shoulder as the door shut behind me, his gaze a cold spear of sapphire pinning me to the floor where I stood. "Please," he said in a deep voice that scraped over something inside me, making me shiver. "Sit."

It didn't sound like a request, despite the please, and me being me, I instantly bridled at his tone.

After being ordered around by Donny and having to suck it up for the money, I didn't appreciate being told what to do by a man, especially a man who made me feel so.... uncomfortable. Then again, I was supposed to be playing the part of the shy virgin and calling him out for being an arrogant ass wasn't in character.

So, I did what I was told like a good girl, going over to one of the armchairs and sitting down, folding my cloak tightly around me and clasping my hands demurely in my lap.

He continued to stand facing the fire with his hands behind his back, looking like a stern headmaster about to discipline a naughty student.

That awareness prickled again as if some part of me found that idea sexy, which was just flat-out weird. I'd had stupid Donny being a rapey creep, and before that the men on the

streets where I'd had to live for a time, who'd also been rapey creeps. Then before them had been Dad. He hadn't been rapey, just an abusive asshole, and after what I'd had to put up with from him, 'discipline' was the least sexy thing in the entire world.

I'd never be into being told what to do by some random guy, no matter how hot he was.

A silence fell over the room, the air feeling strangely weighted. Then Fox said, "You can relax. I won't be taking what I paid for tonight."

I thought I had been relaxed, so I was irritated that my muscles had in fact tensed and I was sitting there stiffly. "I'm fine," I said. "But I don't understand. What won't you be taking?" I knew exactly what he wouldn't be taking, but I wanted to hear him say it.

Slowly, he turned from his study of the empty fireplace, keeping his hands loosely clasped behind his back. He looked down at me, blue eyes glittering from beneath straight black brows. "I mean, I will not be taking your virginity."

I already knew he wouldn't, yet that strange discomfort I'd felt as soon as I'd stepped into the room suddenly deepened. Widened. And it had nothing to do with his words.

I was sitting in a chair while he stood, and he was so tall, staring down at me with those cold, cold eyes. I was supposed to pretend I was vulnerable and fragile, but now, feeling dwarfed by him, there was no pretending. I *did* feel vulnerable, and I hated it.

Over the years there had been many hard lessons for me about being a woman on my own. You had to be strong, hard, and you couldn't look weak. You couldn't look like a victim, not if you didn't want people to take advantage, and so my first instinct with any guy who seemed like he wanted something from me was to fight. To show him that he better think twice about taking me on.

But here I was supposed to be playing the innocent virgin, so I swallowed the sarcastic remark I'd been going to say, gritted my teeth, and faked shock instead. "You're not?"

"No. You can have your money, but you won't need to do anything for it."

I gave him a wide-eyed look. "But...why?"

"Because I'm not in the habit of deflowering virgins." The stark lines of his face were disapproving, making him look even more like a stern headmaster. "Can I ask why you thought selling yourself was a good idea?"

Despite myself, my hackles rose. I wanted to tell him that he could spare me the lecture and take a step back with the judgment, but again, I was playing a part. Shy virgins didn't tell rich and important men to fuck right off.

"I...I needed some money for a business I want to start up," I said hesitantly, making it up as I went along. "And a friend had done the same thing, so I thought—"

"Spare me the details." His tone was icy. "But there are better ways to get business capital."

Sure, there were. If you already had money and a college education. If you were a man. But I wasn't here to argue about gender, capitalism, and society. I was here to get him to take me home with him so I could search his damn house.

I squeezed my hands together in my lap. "You're right," I said, injecting just the right amount of shame into my voice. "I know, and I'm sorry. And I...really hate to ask this, but..." I looked up at him pleadingly, big-eyed as a puppy. "I need a place to stay tonight, somewhere safe. So, I was wondering if you would mind taking me home anyway?"

His black brows drew together. "Take you home?"

I fluttered my eyelashes, which was laying it on a bit thick, but I was committed now. "Yes. I...don't have anywhere else to go tonight, and the money won't hit my account until tomorrow."

His sharp blue gaze scanned me like he was a quality control officer inspecting a product for flaws. "If you don't have anywhere to go, I'll pay for a hotel for you."

Shit. That wasn't what I was after.

I dropped my gaze to my hands, hoping to look even more pathetic. "I appreciate that, really, I do. I just.... I don't feel safe in a hotel room. There are..." I drew out the hesitation. "...bad people after me."

"Bad people?"

"I'm sorry. I kind of lied about the business. I actually have...debts. That's why I had to sell myself. But the deadline

for repayment was tonight and if I don't come up with the cash, they'll...hurt me."

His gaze sharpened, becoming pointed. "You should go to the police."

"If I do that, they'll find out and they'll come for me. It's just for tonight. Please."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he moved, so quickly I barely had time to register it before he'd taken a step toward my chair and bent, his hand coming out to take my chin in a firm grip.

Shock made me freeze – an instinct I'd thought I'd outgrown years ago – and then my flight response kicked in. I tried to jerk my chin away, but he was too strong. His fingers were warm against my skin, his grip unbreakable, and his cold blue eyes were all I could see.

"You're lying," he said.

Tennyson

Her wide eyes were the color of fog sitting on a silver sea and she'd gone white, the shock on her face real this time.

A fine tremor ran through her.

She'd been the very picture of virginal innocence sitting in the armchair, wrapped up in her overdramatic cloak, her long silvery blonde hair cascading over her shoulders. A fairy princess looking at me as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

But she'd been lying through her teeth the whole time.

I was a suspicious man — Caleb had accused me of being paranoid on more than one occasion — and maybe I was. Then again, I had good reason.

I had powerful enemies and I'd soon learned to treat everyone as if they were guilty until proven innocent. I made no apology for it, not with Isabel to protect, and since her life was more important than anyone else's feelings I didn't care who I offended with my suspicions.

This girl — and she *was* a girl — might look like a little innocent, but there had been something practiced in the way she'd looked up at me, in the way she'd fluttered her pale lashes, in the over-the-top pleading in her eyes.

She was a good liar, I'd give her that, but she was a liar all the same.

She wasn't lying now, though. Her physical reaction to me was all truth, from that burst of surprise when I'd gripped her chin, to the instinctive, dark rush of fear that had followed it. That tremor, too, was fear. Perhaps even panic.

Interesting.

I should have let her go immediately, since I wasn't in the business of frightening young women, not if they didn't want to be frightened. But I was curious now. She'd let fall that cloak in a room full of strangers, displaying her naked body to all and sundry, and there hadn't been a whiff of fear to her then. Or when she'd come into the room just now. Oh, there'd been a healthy dose of trepidation, but that had been manufactured for my benefit, I was sure.

This panic, however, was completely genuine, and I wanted to know why.

Perhaps she saw my curiosity, because abruptly her lashes lowered, hiding the expression in her eyes, and she didn't try to pull away again, merely sitting there quiet and still. Whatever had caused that panic, she'd mastered it now.

Her skin was silky and warm beneath my fingers, and she smelled of something sweet, like hot chocolate and cotton

candy.

Sweet. Quiet. Obedient. A perfect little sub.

An unexpected and very unwelcome heat flickered through me.

Perhaps you should take her after all? You don't need to go to the club, not when she's bought and paid for. She's yours for the night.

Absolutely not. She was far too young, and I was past the age of being interested in young women. That fear too was a red flag. That signaled complexity and I wasn't here for complexity. Not when it came to sex. I wanted rules and boundaries and most importantly emotional distance. Unraveling this woman's fear was not what I was here for tonight.

I was here to go through the ridiculous formalities Arcadia insisted on after the auctions, pay her the money she was owed, and then go visit my club. Where I could find an actual sub who only wanted to get off and didn't care who with, not some too-young woman who wanted to sell herself for some indeterminate reason.

"I'm not lying," she said, her clear voice very steady.

I ignored her. "Look at me."

Her lashes lifted obediently, her eyes silvery and wide. Guileless. Not a trace of fear in them now.

I should have let her go, yet for some reason I found myself reluctant. "You *are* lying," I said. "Not that it matters.

I'll pay for a security guard and a hotel room for the night, but I will not be taking you anywhere."

A silver spark glowed briefly in her wide gaze and then it was gone.

Again, interesting. First panic and fear, now anger, or at the very least annoyance. The mask of the innocent was slipping.

Her gaze had become liquid and even more silvery, tears welling up. Manufactured tears, I was positive. Did she really think crying would make me change my mind?

"Tears won't work on me," I informed her. "So don't bother. With the hotel and the guard, you'll be safe. If people are really after you, which I highly doubt."

Her lush mouth hardened, then she blinked, and the tears were gone. For a moment a cool, calculating intelligence looked back at me, the big-eyed, helpless virgin vanishing. And even though I knew it was a mistake, I felt my interest catch like a fishhook on a rock.

There was nothing but blatant challenge in that stare and it went straight to my cock as if she'd wrapped her hand around it and squeezed.

But no.

I didn't want a challenge. I didn't want a fight. I got that every day with my company and with Isabel, and what I wanted when I needed distraction was silence. Obedience. Softness and quiet to soothe the jagged edges inside me, not spirit and fire to make them even sharper.

I should have let go of her then, but I didn't. Instinct had me holding her gaze instead. Staring her down, the force of my will meeting hers and insisting on obedience.

A flush rose to her pale cheekbones, the silver spark in her eyes I'd seen before flickering into life again and abruptly blazing high.

Silly girl. Did she think she could fight me? Because if so, she was mistaken. I'd had two fiery, passionate women in my life. Both who'd matched wills with me and sometimes bested me, and both whom I loved. But I'd lost them. One had died and the other had put so much distance between us that I barely knew her these days.

I'd lost my taste for battles. There was only obedience to my will or nothing at all.

I tightened my grip, my fingers pressing against her jaw, and slowly her gaze dropped. And that's when I saw it, the telltale flush to her cheeks as her lashes lowered. So. It seemed she hadn't been entirely indifferent to our battle of wills.

And neither were you.

I didn't want it to be true, yet I could feel the rush asserting my dominance always gave me, as well as the heat I felt in response to her submission and that flush in her cheeks.

Are you sure you don't want to take her home?

No, I'd made my decision. I'd indulged myself by holding her a fraction too long and then staring her down, but that was the only fight I'd have tonight and now it was done.

She must have thought so too, because abruptly she jerked her chin out of my grip, shoved herself from the chair, and went past me, walking over to the curtained window, her cloak sweeping in a crimson wave after her.

Again, I felt my interest catch, that fishhook digging deeper into that rock.

She'd been by turns afraid, determined, challenging, and then...aroused, perhaps. A complicated woman. Another reason to send her on her way.

Still, I couldn't understand what she wanted from me. Once we'd both agreed that I was the buyer of her virginity, the money would be transferred into her account. She wouldn't have to sleep with me to get it, which was surely preferable for her. So wanting to come home with me made no sense unless it was for some nefarious purpose, which is what I had to assume it was. I had too many enemies for it to be anything else.

Not that her motivations or reasons mattered. I'd give her the money she'd earned and then I'd be gone.

"If you won't take me home," she said at last, still with her back to me. "I won't agree."

The warmth of her skin lingered annoyingly against my fingertips. I put my hands behind my back and straightened. "You won't agree to what?"

She glanced over her shoulder at me, her gaze cool and direct. "I'll exercise my right of veto and refuse you as my buyer."

There was no sign of the shy innocent that had entered the room not ten minutes earlier. The look this woman was giving me, assessing and calculating would have done a CEO in the boardroom proud.

“And what would that achieve?” I asked.

“They’ll have to run the auction again.” She gave me another of those challenging looks as if she hadn’t learned anything the first time. “Someone else will buy me.”

“I fail to see how that is my problem.”

Her lashes swept down, her hands clasped in front of her, once again the picture of innocence. “Who knows who will buy me this time? Perhaps someone who won’t be as kind as you are.”

Was she trying to manipulate me?

“If you think I’m kind, then you’re making a very big mistake,” I said coolly. “I also do not like being manipulated.”

Her lashes swept up again, her gaze glittering. “Please. This isn’t the first virginity auction you’ve attended, Mr. Fox. You can’t tell me that you buy virgins and never take what you paid for just for the hell of it. You’re rescuing them.”

This time it was my turn to be shocked. No one knew about my little catch-and-release program with the virgins I bought. No one except the virgins concerned. So how did this young woman know? Perhaps she’d talked to some of them. Perhaps she’d tracked them down to ask them about me. But if so, why?

What was it that she wanted? Money, obviously, yet I'd guaranteed her money already, so there had to be something else. Sex perhaps?

"Does it matter?" I asked. "Look if it's money you want, you have—"

"Sure, I want money," she interrupted as if I wasn't one of the most powerful businessmen in the city and had a thousand people at my beck and call every day. "But I also want to go home with you tonight. Is that so much to ask?"

Impatience gripped me. Impatience at myself and my unwilling interest in her. I didn't want to stand here arguing. There was something about her that got under my skin and had from the moment she'd stood on the dais in the auction room and met my gaze. Something confronting that I shouldn't like yet that called to the Dom in me in a way I hadn't felt for years.

I couldn't give in to it. I wouldn't.

"Coming home with me is not what's on offer," I said icily. "Sex is also not on offer. What is on offer is a hotel room with a security guard. Take it or leave it."

More silver sparks glittered in her eyes, then in another second they were gone, her expression calm. After a moment, she walked over to the small table where the glasses of champagne were sitting, condensation beading the sides of the flutes.

She picked one up, the edges of her cloak parting to reveal glimpses of pale, bare skin. The curve of a hip. A rounded

thigh. Soft, silvery curls...

Heat shifted inside me, tightening its grip.

No. Impossible. She was a lovely woman, no denying it. But she was also just a woman and I'd seen many women naked before. There was nothing special about her, nothing at all.

"Then I suppose I'll have to leave it." She lifted the glass of champagne and took a small sip, before putting back her head and draining the whole thing. Then she put the glass back down on the table with a click and looked at me. "Liquid courage. I have an unrestricted contract so who knows what someone will demand?"

She's Isabel's age. Are you really going to let someone else buy her?

The thought lodged in my head and stuck like a thorn.

I didn't care about this girl. What did it matter if she wanted to run the auction again? Or that she had an unrestricted contract? It was her choice and if she hadn't known what she was getting herself into then she shouldn't have chosen it. It had nothing whatsoever to do with me.

"Perhaps you should have thought about that when you chose that option," I said. "And if Arcadia didn't explain it adequately to you then you should take it up with the management."

"You know, you're very uptight for a man who buys virgins." She reached for the other glass of champagne. "Is that why you let them go? Because you can't get it up?"

I shouldn't have moved. I didn't care if she wanted to sell herself again while falling down drunk, nor did it matter to me what she thought of my sexual prowess. Yet I was across the room and taking the second glass of champagne from her hand before she could get it to her mouth.

"Hey!" she protested.

"They won't give you the option of a second auction if you're drunk." I put the champagne back down on the table. "Do you even know what an unrestricted contract involves?"

"Of course I do. I'm not stupid. Basically, no hard limits." She gave an overly theatrical sigh. "So I guess if someone is into golden showers, then I'll have to suck it up so to speak."

The flippant way she said it annoyed me.

Everything about her annoyed me.

Her phony innocent act, her attempts at manipulation, her lies, the calculation in those cool gray eyes, and the challenge it presented. That instinctive flicker of fear and the flush across her cheekbones. The way she kept catching my interest, making me curious. Making me want to keep picking at her, undo all her knots, unravel all her secrets.

You're bored, admit it. You need a challenge.

And that was the thing that annoyed me most of all. Because it was true. I *was* bored. I was tired of meek submissives who knew exactly what to do. Who went to their knees before I'd even given the order. Partners who never surprised me, never defied me, who knew all the lessons I had to teach. They satisfied me physically, but they were never a

puzzle to unlock or a complex equation to solve. They wanted my dominance, but that was all.

I hadn't even realized I was tired of that until now.

I should have walked out then because if I wanted more of a challenge, I was going to have to find it somewhere else.

Except I didn't walk out.

I stared at her instead. "Why do you want to go home with me so badly? And I want the truth this time."

Her mouth turned up at the corners in a secretive little smile. "Why do you think? I wasn't there for anyone else in the audience tonight, Mr. Fox. I was there for you."

Then she put her hand to the catch on her cloak and flicked it open.

Zara

The strange panic that had gripped me when he'd taken my chin in his hand was still churning in my gut and I was furious about it.

I hated how I'd frozen like prey in his grip, helpless and vulnerable. Weak. In his power. That had been my reaction when I was a kid and Dad was in one of his moods, ready to start dealing out blows, and I'd thought I'd left it behind years ago. Clearly not.

Anyway, I'd managed to handle it, but I was getting tired of standing around talking. I had to move things along somehow and getting naked seemed to be the obvious choice.

He was so adamant that he wouldn't take me home and when he'd intimated that it was because I wanted sex, the thought 'why not?' had sprung fully formed into my head. Because, sure, why not let him think that I wanted to go home with him for sex? At the very least, I could use sex to seduce him into thinking it was a good idea.

Not that I'd ever used sex to seduce anyone before, nor wanted to. I'd never met a man I'd wanted period. Never met a man who didn't think he was entitled to me in some way, shape, or form either, no matter my feelings on the subject.

Then again, this was for the money, this was for the freedom I'd have once that money was mine, and for that, I'd do anything.

Except as the cloak dropped to the ground, Fox didn't look at my naked body, not once. He simply stood there, towering over me, staring at me as if I was an insignificant insect he was about to crush under his shoe.

I had no idea why the fact that he *wasn't* looking at my body incensed me, or why the way he stared at me set something inside me shivering. A kind of fear, but not the fear of being hurt, because I knew that fear very, very well. No, this was more subtle, more complicated, and it made my skin prickle and my heart beat fast. Made me conscious of a pressure between my thighs.

You're attracted to him, you idiot.

No, that was crazy. I couldn't be attracted to a man like him, I couldn't. I didn't like tall, physically powerful men, because those kinds of guys, in my experience, liked to use their physicality to intimidate. To prove they were badasses or some such bullshit. I hated it. It reminded me too much of Dad's little power plays, looming over me to frighten me, cow me into submission. Donny had done that kind of crap too.

Now here was Tennyson Fox, doing that same thing, which made him just the same as all the rest of the assholes I'd dealt

with in my life.

That shit he'd pulled beside the fire, when he'd taken my chin in his hand so firmly that I hadn't been able to pull away and then looked at me, the force of his will as relentless and inescapable as gravity, pushing me down. That had been enraging. Enraging too that I'd basically bowed before him. I hadn't wanted to, and yet there had been an almost physical pressure in the look he'd given me. I hadn't been able to hold it.

Looking away from him had been an admission of weakness, but sometimes the only option for survival was to kneel and bare your throat and hope like hell the wolf wouldn't tear it out.

Tennyson Fox was a wolf. And maybe if I'd had any brains, I wouldn't have argued with him. I'd have let him pay me then left Arcadia five hundred thousand richer, and never gone near him again.

But I had a job to do, and I wouldn't get a cent of that fucking money unless I did it, and since he'd seen through all my lies, that left seduction as my only option.

I'd put up with Donny for five years. I could manage a night with this asshole.

"Very pretty," he said at last in that deep, cold voice of his. "But your nakedness doesn't interest me. Besides, I've already seen it."

The note of casual dismissal rubbed against my nerves like sandpaper over a wound. Which was crazy, because what did I

care if he didn't want to look at my body? I didn't give a shit about his opinions. In fact, I should be glad, shouldn't I?

Then again, if I wanted to seduce him, I had to get his interest somehow, so I slowly sauntered over to him, getting close enough that we were inches apart.

He was so tall, so broad in his beautifully tailored dark suit, the shade of his silk tie perfectly matching the blue of his eyes. He didn't move as I came closer, not a single inch. His hands were still behind his back making him seem like a wall, unbending, unyielding. And that cold, cold gaze. So sharp, laser blue.

A man to break yourself against...

The thought came out of nowhere, sliding through my mind like a snake. I ignored it. Like I'd break myself against man... Yeah, that wasn't happening.

Yet... I found myself suddenly conscious of his physical warmth, so at odds with the ice in his gaze. His scent too was confusingly warm, cedar and musk with a delicious sharp, peppery bite. Against my will, I liked it.

Another strange little shiver coursed down my spine. I was very aware of my own nakedness. Of how close he was. How all I'd need to do was take another step and my nipples would brush against his suit jacket.

All my muscles went tight as an unwelcome heat rushed through me.

This is a mistake.

Yes, it was. A very bad mistake.

Instinctively, I went to step back, but a large, warm hand closed around one of my elbows, holding me where I was, sending all the air rushing out of my lungs and taking all my confidence with it.

I froze as a strange mixture of shock, fear, and an impossible, inexplicable heat burst through me.

“You came here for me, did you?” His voice held a dark edge that made me tremble deep inside, his gaze a fierce, unrelenting pressure. “And you thought...what? That all you’d have to do is drop your cloak and I’d be panting after you like a dog? Ready to do whatever you asked?”

His grip wasn’t tight and yet I couldn’t move. I could barely breathe. I wanted to lift my chin and tell him that yes, that’s exactly what I’d thought, so he could get on his knees right now, please and thank you. Except I couldn’t find the breath to say it. What came out instead was, “N-No.”

“No?” He lifted one brow, his fingers pressing against my skin, hot as fallen embers. “Because if you did, little one, you’re going to be disappointed. It doesn’t work that way. My attention is something you must earn.”

For a second, I just stared at him in shock. Earn his attention? Seriously? Why the hell would I want to earn anyone’s attention, let alone his? All the attention I’d ever experienced from men had been unwelcome and forced on me. I hadn’t wanted any of it.

Are you sure you don’t want his? See if you can melt all that ice.

No. *Fuck* no. What I wanted was to get away, put some distance between me and the strange feelings that I didn't want churning inside me. Feelings that confused me, made me vulnerable and made me weak when I needed to be strong.

I was hard. Impregnable. A castle impossible to storm.

Yet, I knew that distance wouldn't get me what I wanted. I had to get him to take me home and to do that, I needed him to want me in some way.

I gritted my teeth, ignoring the flickering heat at the pressure of his fingers, trying to ignore my fear and grab onto my usual go-to when I needed to be strong: anger. Not Isabel's quick and fiery take-no-prisoners temper, but something colder, that burned longer.

I forced myself to look up at him, to withstand the intense pressure of his gaze. "Seems to me like you want to take me home," I said. "In fact, it seems to me as if I already have your attention."

His gaze didn't waver, not for one second. He must be a man used to having everyone bow before him, and the fact that I hadn't was surely galling. He'd no doubt be furious because when you didn't give in, when you held your ground, men were always furious. They couldn't stand any challenge to their authority.

I braced myself, waiting for his fury. Except it didn't come.

His grip on me remained, yet his focus stayed cold, no hint of anger or fury burning in it. Yet something in it changed and

sharpened as if I'd interested him, and deep in those icy depths, I thought I saw flickers of heat.

Something in me dropped away. Were those flickers of heat for me? Was I affecting him somehow?

My mouth dried, my heartbeat loud in my ears. I felt oddly shaken though I wasn't sure why. I needed him to want me, so I should have been glad about it, and yet somewhere inside me there was a sensation that felt like...anticipation. Which was weird. Men wanting me hadn't ever been a good thing, so why it should be exciting, I had no idea.

"You're afraid," he said, his blue gaze searching. "You were afraid when I took your chin, too. Why? Do you think I'll hurt you?"

No one had ever asked me if I was afraid or wanted to know the reason for it, certainly, no guy had ever asked. They hadn't cared about me one way or the other, so why did he? It hadn't seemed to interest him before, so why now? Especially when he'd made it so clear he wasn't about to take me anywhere, let alone home with him.

Whatever, he could suck it. He wouldn't be getting any answers from me.

Shaking off his hand, I stepped in closer, despite the way my heart was beating, despite the warnings my brain kept shouting about how getting close to a man like this was dangerous. "I'm not afraid of you, Mr. Fox." I hoped he didn't hear the lie this time. "That's not why I took my cloak off. And I don't want you to rescue me." I looked up at him from beneath my lashes and put a hand on his chest, my palm flat to

the wool of his jacket. He felt warm and very, *very* hard. “I want you to fuck me.”

He didn't move and his expression didn't change, and I had the distinct impression that he knew exactly what words were going to come out of my mouth before I'd even said them. “Do you?” His tone was impossible to read. “If you want something, little one, it is customary to ask nicely. With a please and thank you.”

Anger coiled inside me. Why was he being so resistant? I was naked and almost pressed against him, practically begging him to fuck me, and he was refusing? Telling me to ask him nicely?

Did you ever think that he might not be like other boys?

Not at all. All boys were the same, especially powerful boys. Boys who thought that because they were bigger and stronger than you, they were entitled to have whatever they wanted from you. And if you didn't want to give it to them, they'd take it, they didn't give a shit.

I'd learned that lesson and I'd learned it the hard way.

So no, I wasn't fucking begging, and I certainly wasn't going to say please.

“Really?” I murmured. “I don't think we need that, do we? Not when you're going to pay me five hundred thousand for the privilege.” I ran my hand down the front of his jacket to the waistband of his pants and then down further, over the front of his fly.

Or at least, I tried to. But his fingers closed around my wrist before I could get below his belt, his grip like iron.

“No.” The word was flat and heavy, with no room for argument or protest. “You don’t get to take what you want whenever you want it.”

My breath caught hard. He *didn’t* want me to touch him? Seriously? *I* was the one taking what I wanted?

All I could do was stare at him, open-mouthed, his fingers around my wrist very strong and very warm. I wouldn’t be able to just shake his hand away.

“If you can’t keep your hands to yourself, I will have to tie them.” Before I had a chance to move or do anything else, he took my other hand in that same hard grip. “Is that what you want?” Slowly, his strength inexorable, he forced my wrists behind my back and held them there. “Would you like to be restrained?”

Panic coursed through me in an icy wave and for a second, I was blinded by it, the animal urge to get free almost choking me. But I fought it back. I couldn’t afford to fuck this up by giving in to fear.

His gaze pierced me. I couldn’t hear anything over the thunder of my own heart. For some reason, I didn’t understand, the deep blue of his eyes felt like a lifeline, a way out of the fear that had me by the throat. I couldn’t look away.

Then the panic began to recede, and I became conscious that the way he was holding me was forcing my back to arch, pressing my chest to his jacket, and that my nipples were

brushing against the soft charcoal wool. I was breathing fast and now the fear had gone, something else was taking its place. Something hot and electric. A pressure.

You want him.

As soon as the thought occurred to me, I found myself struggling in his grip, every part of me tense with denial.

He released me instantly, watching with that same cold focus as I stumbled back a few steps, my heart pounding, my breath coming in hard, fast gasps.

What are you doing? You let fear win and now you've fucked it up completely. He's never going to want to take you home now.

A rush of shame swept over me. I hadn't broken like that since I was a kid. How fucking humiliating. And he really wouldn't take me home, unless he was one of those sick assholes who liked naked and terrified women. Then again, he'd certainly let me go fast enough when I struggled.

That was reassuring yet it only hammered home how badly I'd miscalculated. I'd screwed up and now I was so badly rattled I couldn't even think of a good lie to cover the moment.

I turned away, unable to face him and hating myself for my weakness. I reached for the cloak I'd dropped onto the floor so at least I could cover my nakedness, but he got in first.

Smoothly, he bent to pick up the pool of red fabric, shaking it out, and without comment, he proceeded to put it around my shoulders, fastening it deftly at my throat.

I was still trembling as he twitched the fabric into place, his expression remote, the sharp intensity of his gaze easing. “You will not be running the auction again,” he said, calm and cool and certain. “You will accept me as the buyer of your virginity.” He paused a moment, studying me. “And then, you will come home with me tonight.”

Tennyson

It hadn't been the clumsy seduction attempts that had made me change my mind, but the terror I'd seen in her eyes when I'd restrained her.

She hadn't liked that one bit.

Curious. Especially after being so sexually confident, approaching me, laying a hand on me, asking me to fuck her. She'd only spooked when I'd put her hands behind her back and held them there.

I'd done that on purpose, hoping to frighten her off, yet the moment I'd seen her panic I'd started turning the smooth surface of her fear over in my head, trying to find a way in.

It might have been a reflex. She was young, like Isabel, and she'd made a bad choice, and I was here to protect her from the consequences of that choice. Just like all the other young women I'd protected by intervening with my checkbook. And not only with virginity auctions but with the various charities I'd set up and funneled money into. Charities

for families, for children, for women in danger. Medical charities for those who couldn't afford the healthcare they needed.

It was part of the contract I'd made with myself after Sir George had gone, a balancing of the scales. His money would help me make more and then I'd give most of it back to people who needed it.

It wasn't enough. Nothing ever would be. But it was something.

Taking her home was something. Likely it was a mistake, but I couldn't allow her to stay here and run her auction again, not when she'd been so terrified and certainly not with an unrestricted contract.

She'd said she wanted to come home with me because she wanted me, but she'd been lying about that too, or at least, mostly lying. Because just before I'd taken her wrists and the terror had hit her, I'd seen arousal flare in her gaze.

Whether she knew it or not, she was attracted to me.

That didn't concern me. What did was my response to her. She'd been all bare, silky skin, with that little scattering of stars on her arm. Pretty, pink nipples and pale curls between her thighs. Smelling of candy floss and something musky and feminine...delicious.

It hadn't mattered that she was Isabel's age. That she was more complicated than she looked and nothing at all that I wanted to deal with right now, not when my entire life was complicated enough as it was. No, my cock was undiscerning.

It thought she was beautiful and wanted her, and when she'd touched me without permission, I'd had to act.

She shouldn't have gotten to me the way she had. I wasn't a teenage boy at the mercy of his desires, and she wasn't my beautiful red-headed Juliana. I was a forty-two-year-old man, and she was a woman my daughter's age, whose name I didn't even know, and shouldn't have even been remotely interested. Yet I was.

Then again, physical control was something I'd perfected over the years, and while she could tell me all she liked that she wanted me, I still wasn't going to do anything about it.

She didn't protest, staying silent as I pulled the door of the small room open to find Andre waiting on the other side of it.

"We agreed," I said shortly. "We'll sign the papers now."

Five minutes later, the papers signed and the money on its way to Red Riding Hood's bank account, I walked with her down Arcadia's sweeping staircase to the front door.

She didn't say anything as we went out into the night, her cloak flowing dramatically behind her as she went down the steps outside. The car I'd ordered five minutes earlier was idling at the curb, and I held the door open for her myself.

She didn't look at me as she demurely folded her cloak around herself and got in, her expression betraying nothing.

Well, that wasn't happening. If she was coming back to my home, I needed to know everything about her. Her name, her background, her personal situation. What she was really doing

in Arcadia and why it was me, in particular, she wanted when it was obvious she was afraid of me.

“Home, please,” I told my driver and then glanced at her.

She sat in the exact middle of the seat beside me, not the farthest away, but not as close as she could get either. Almost as if she was determined to prove that she wasn’t going to let my presence affect her in any way, very much at odds with her professed desire for me.

Everything about her seemed to be the opposite of what she said, which again tugged at my curiosity, making me want to know why.

The car pulled away and I leaned forward, pressing a button so the partition between the driver and the backseat was raised.

“My driver is trustworthy,” I said into the heavy silence. “But I’m assuming you’d like some privacy.”

She glanced at me, her face shadowed by the red hood. “Why would I want some privacy?” There was a slight note of apprehension in her voice though it sounded as if she was trying to hide it.

So. Still afraid. Well, she probably wouldn’t like this next bit either, but I wasn’t taking a stranger into my home. I wanted answers and I was going to get them. And if that scared her, she’d have to handle it.

I met her gaze and held it. “Because you’re going to tell me all about yourself. Every single thing.”

She gave a soft laugh. “Am I now?”

It sounded natural that laugh, but it wasn't. I could hear the note of force she had to put into it.

“Yes,” I said calmly, coldly. “You will. Now, I won't hurt you. I have a daughter your age and I do not hurt women. But I will use your fear to get what I want, make no mistake. I don't allow strangers into my home, which means that at the end of this journey, if you still want to come in, you can't be a stranger, understand?”

She shifted, rearranging the folds of her cloak with casual movements of her hands. Obviously trying to prove to me how comfortable and unworried she was. “I'm not afraid of you.”

She'd already told me that in Arcadia, but she'd been lying then, and she was lying now.

I decided to ignore it for the meantime. “Do you understand?” I repeated.

She sighed. “Fine. Ask me anything you want.”

“Look at me, please.”

She turned her head in an exaggerated fashion, her gaze meeting mine. Her expression was very calm, but beneath it, I could see steel. And despite everything I'd told myself, the Dom in me stirred.

Challenging me was a mistake.

“Your name,” I said. “What is it?”

“Catherine.” She gave me a sunny smile. “But you can call me Cathy.”

I smiled back, though there was no sun in mine. It was all threat. “The truth, little one, please.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Oh, okay. In that case, it’s Elizabeth. But I prefer Lizzie. And please don’t call me little one. It’s patronizing as hell.”

My dominant side stirred again, enjoying this challenge to its authority, which was odd given that I didn’t like brats.

“So,” I murmured. “Is that really the way you want to play it?”

She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’m not lying.”

But she was. The little witch was lying through her teeth.

A hot thread of anticipation wound through me, though I ignored it. She didn’t know what these challenges were doing to me, she had no idea, and I wasn’t going to tell her. There were too many reasons why this couldn’t be sexual, too many very good reasons, starting with the fact that not only was she a virgin, but also, she was a very young virgin. I was nearly twenty years older than her both in years and in experience, and not only that, beneath that fragile facade of confidence lay fear. And I wasn’t touching that. It was too complicated.

Given that, she probably wouldn’t be into BDSM, and besides, I wanted subs who knew the rules, knew what to do, and to whom I didn’t have to explain protocol.

But weren’t you thinking just before about how bored you were?

Perhaps. But if I wanted to branch out, it wasn't going to be with her, end of story.

Still, she was allowed a warning. Just one.

“Let me be very clear,” I said softly. “I’m a suspicious man. A man who has many enemies, which is why you won’t be getting anywhere near my home unless I know you. So, you *will* tell me about yourself. And if you continue to lie then I will take measures to ensure that you give me the truth. If you still choose to lie, then I will stop this car and put you out on the street, and you will not be going anywhere at all with me.”

She didn't move, only watched me as I laid down the law, her expression giving nothing away.

“Do you understand?” I prompted.

“Oh, I understand.” She said it as if she wasn't scared of me or of anything I'd said. “But again, like I told you, my name is Lizzie.”

I knew what she was doing, even though she might not have been aware of it herself. She was pushing me, testing me, wanting to see where my boundaries lay, wanting to see what I would do. All subs did it at some point.

How do you even know she's a sub?

I didn't and I shouldn't keep thinking about her that way. Then again, that didn't mean I couldn't use my powers of observation on her. Reading people was a particular skill of mine.

I didn't do anything immediately, letting the silence sit, because silence was uncomfortable. Letting it take on

substance, become heavy, a weight pressing down.

Isabel could never stand that silence, yet this girl gave no sign of discomfort. She merely looked at me with those guileless gray eyes.

Slowly, I reached up and began to undo my tie. I took my time, and I didn't say a word, letting her watch, letting her form all sorts of theories about why I was undoing it, whether I was just loosening it or taking it off completely. And what I might do with it afterward.

Psychology was a potent weapon in the right hands, and I knew how to use it to give the most pleasure, or the most pain, depending on the sub and what they wanted. The context was different here, but the principle was the same in that I would let her imagine all kinds of scenarios, building her own fear more effectively than any threats would.

With luck, she'd scare herself so much that she'd tell me everything I wanted to know before I'd even managed to get my tie off.

Except she didn't.

It seemed this little one was made of stronger stuff because she remained silent as I pulled open the knot at my throat and then slid the fabric from under my collar. As I wound the blue silk around both fists and pulled it tight.

She glanced down at the tie and then back up at me. "Is that...a threat or something? I mean, you said you didn't hurt women so presumably you're not going to strangle me with it." There was a flippant note in her voice, that I suspected was

a defense mechanism, and indeed, when I looked into her eyes, beneath her calm expression, I saw that fear again.

Was it me? Or the situation? And if it was either or both, why did she not simply tell me to let her go? I'd given her the choice several times, yet she'd been committed to coming with me.

Why? Was she being forced into this? Was someone holding something over her?

Well, if so, it was even more important I find out what was going on.

"No," I said levelly. "I am not going to strangle you with it."

"Good to know. So what are you going to do with it?"

I held her gaze. "Hold out your hands."

Zara

Neon from the night outside filled the interior of the car, lighting up the stark, beautiful lines of his face, and making those deep blue eyes of his glow.

I knew what he wanted to do with that tie and a cold thread of fear wound through me. The same fear I'd felt the moment he'd grabbed my wrists and put them behind my back in Arcadia.

My mouth dried.

The blue silk was stretched between his strong hands, and I was aware that this night had the potential to end very badly for me. Men were so fucking unpredictable and while I knew a lot about this particular man, he was still a stranger to me.

But I wasn't going to give into that goddamn fear, not again. I'd spent my childhood being terrified, but that time was long gone. I'd spent eight years armoring myself, carving out a life from basically nothing. Getting myself stronger,

harder, so I could get out of this shithole of a city and find myself something better.

Now I was so close to my goal — the money — I couldn't let my own weakness get in the way. Seriously. All I had to do was hold out my hands because it was obvious, he was going to tie them. It wasn't a big deal.

Yet the air in the car had vanished somewhere and I could barely breathe.

I really thought I'd screwed up that big seduction scene back at Arcadia, but apparently, I hadn't. In fact, somehow it had gotten me exactly what I'd wanted.

I'd been so surprised that he'd changed his mind and decided to take me home after all, that I hadn't said a word as we'd signed the papers Andre had given us. Or as Fox had ushered me into the long, black limo that waited at the curb. I sat in the car, gathering myself. Hardly able to believe that I'd managed to pull it off.

I should have known it wouldn't be that easy.

Naturally, he wouldn't welcome me into his home just like that. He wanted information from me — they *always* wanted something from me — and I had no doubt he'd try to get it out of me if I refused to tell him.

To be fair to him, he'd warned me of what he'd do if I refused to give him that information, but the real problem was that I couldn't. I didn't even want to give him my name in case he'd heard of me from Isabel. As he'd already told me, he was a suspicious man, and he might decide to question how a

friend of Isabel's would end up at Arcadia, selling off her virginity to him. And why that friend would be so insistent on going home with him. He likely wouldn't guess what I was after, but he'd know I was after something. Also, it might rebound on Isabel in some way, and I didn't want that.

He might not draw any links between me and the Hamiltons, but he wouldn't like any link between Isabel and me, that was for sure.

So no, I couldn't give him my name, yet I also couldn't allow him to put me on the street.

Shit.

He showed no sign of impatience as he waited for me to obey him, but I could feel the force of his will. It filled the entire car with an intense, crackling pressure that made my skin tighten and prickle.

I ignored the cold feeling that sat in my gut, forcing my brain into gear, because what to tell him? How could I convince him that I was harmless? That he could trust me without giving away any part of myself or my actual mission?

"I won't ask again," he murmured.

Do it. You've no other choice.

Steeling myself, I held out my hands, and as expected, he wrapped the blue silk deftly around my wrists and pulled it tight.

I swallowed, fighting the fear that dug its claws into me, that made me want to jerk my wrists away, smash the car

windows, get out, get out any way I could, and run and run and run.

You're helpless. He could hurt you very badly and you wouldn't be able to protect yourself.

I'd promised myself after Dad that I wouldn't let a man make me afraid again and now in the space of a month, two men had me running scared and I was furious about it.

I wasn't going to let it win tonight.

Fox's gaze was on me, watching me with those cold eyes.

Isabel had complained about the security detail he'd put on her, constantly following her around, and how he wouldn't let her go out or do anything without them. While I appreciated the safety aspect, I wasn't exactly full of confidence about him, because that read controlling asshole to me. Then again, all his buying of virgins without taking what he paid for was a point in his favor. I also knew, in the research they'd given me about him, that Fox Tech was involved in a number of charitable organizations and donated large sums to various causes.

Then again, Donny had started off telling me his operation was like Robin Hood and all he wanted to do was help people, and like the stupid idiot I was, I'd believed him.

I wasn't going to do that again.

Grabbing onto my anger, I stared right back at Fox. "Um, is that it? Do you think that tying my wrists together is going to make me spill my guts somehow? Not sure how that works, friend, but it sure as hell isn't going to work on me."

He didn't move and though the car was large, somehow it felt as if his broad, powerful body was taking up all the space, the warm cedar and musk of his scent taking up all the air.

One of his straight black brows lifted. "Will it not?"

Heat crept into my cheeks. It was as if he could see my fear plain as day.

I hated that. Hated that I was so transparent to him. Hated how he'd seen through me right from the first moment I'd walked through the door to meet him back in Arcadia. Hated how he'd seen my fear.

I didn't look away. "Call me Red Riding Hood. In fact, call me Red."

His gaze flickered, something that wasn't that icy calm for a change shifting in it, but it was gone so fast, I couldn't tell what it was. "That isn't your name."

"No shit, Sherlock." I let my hands lie still in my lap, even though every part of me wanted to claw at the silk to get free. "How about my name is whatever you want it to be."

He leaned forward and picked up my bound wrists by the silk, moving unhurriedly and with purpose, slowly but surely dragging me closer until his piercing blue gaze was mere inches from mine.

My heartbeat was like a hammer in my head, fear crawling under my skin. All my muscles had locked, the reaction I so hated kicking in, where I froze like a prey animal helpless before the wolf.

“Shall I put you out on the street now?” His voice was rimmed with frost. “Is that what you want, little one?”

I tried to find my fury, desperately wanting to throw it in his face, to scream at him that he could stop with the stupid threats and his patronizing terminology, that I wasn’t going to give him what he wanted. Yet, I knew if I did that, he’d stop the car and out I’d go.

I had to pull myself together. I *had* to.

He was so close. His powerful body inches away, his aftershave clouding my senses. I’d never been this close to a man, apart from that moment in the room in Arcadia, and I’d never wanted to be. So I wasn’t sure now why everything about him seemed to consume me, especially with him radiating threat so strongly. He made my heart beat fast, my skin prickle with heat, a subtle pressure start up between my legs, and I had no idea why.

“No.” I tried to sound as if I didn’t even know the word fear. “I don’t want you to put me out on the street.”

His gaze bored steadily into mine. “But you’re afraid of me.”

“Seriously?” I fought not to rip my hands from his grip and put some distance between us. Fought not to betray even the slightest hint of fear. “As if.”

“You are. You’re desperate for me to release you.”

“I am not.” I attempted a laugh. “I couldn’t give a shit what you do.”

He didn't even blink. "Do you think I'm going to hurt you? Is that why you're afraid? I told you I wouldn't."

A cold sensation was spreading through me. I tried to sneer. "People say that all the time. Why would you be any different?"

"What people?"

Oh no, I wasn't going to talk about me. "It doesn't matter."

"It does." His grip tightened on the silk, intensifying the feeling of restriction. "In my case it's true. I never say anything I don't mean. So you'll have to trust me."

Panic had begun to build inside me, but I wasn't going to give in to it. I fucking well wasn't. "Trust you? Are you crazy? Why should I?"

He just stared at me, his grip on my wrists strong, apparently impervious to the fear gathering in my throat that surely, he could see. "Because you either trust me, or I put you out on the street. So. What's it to be?"

I hated him suddenly. Hated how he was holding me, using my fear against me. Hated how delicious he smelled and how I was inexplicably drawn to the strength of his body and the force of presence, at the same time as I was repelled by it.

I hated myself too, for the way I responded to him. For how confused I was by him. And for how the fear that I thought I'd left behind years ago was still there, sitting like ice in my gut.

I had to give him some truth, I knew. I couldn't afford for him to put me out on the street. This job was too important.

“I can’t tell you my name,” I said. “I’m sorry but I can’t. There will be...repercussions if I do. Just know that I wasn’t lying when I said that I was at Arcadia tonight for you. And that I wanted you to buy me and no one else.”

His gaze pinned me, a steady, cold light. “Where do you come from?”

“Nowhere.”

“Everyone comes from somewhere.”

Damn him. Why did he have to keep asking questions? Why did he tell me he wouldn’t hurt me and yet have no qualms at all about frightening me?

He’s ruthless, remember?

Like I didn’t know that already. Like I hadn’t read all those articles about him and watched all those interviews with him. Like I hadn’t learned everything I could about him.

I knew he was ruthless. You didn’t build a multi-billion-dollar company from nothing within the space of a few years by being shy and retiring and kind to everyone you met.

But what he didn’t know was that I was ruthless too. I was a survivor. I’d survived a mother who’d thrown me to the wolves, a father who’d nearly killed me, the men on the streets who’d tried to take what they could from me, and the shady asshole I took jobs from who also didn’t give a shit whether I lived or died. I’d survive Tennyson Fox too.

I just wanted my fucking money.

There was barely any distance between us, and his hard mouth was right there. So I didn't hesitate. I leaned forward and did the only thing I could that would rattle him and hopefully make him forget all his dumb questions.

I kissed him.

I didn't know what I expected. I'd never kissed a man before and never wanted to, and I'd thought that perhaps it might be a bit like kissing a statue. All smooth, hard, cold marble.

But kissing Tennyson Fox wasn't like kissing a statue at all.

His lips were firm and very warm, much warmer than I'd expected. He didn't move, not a muscle. I shivered as a thread of heat wound its way through me and pulled tight.

God. He looked so hard and stern and yet his mouth felt soft, and he smelled...oh....*so* good. The thread pulled even tighter, making me feel hot and achy. Did he feel this, too? Or was it all me?

I hadn't realized kissing someone would feel dangerous, that I'd like that danger. I hadn't realized how hungry it would make me either. A hunger I hadn't realized was there. For physical contact, for touch. I couldn't remember the last time someone had touched me, let alone kissed me, and I just kind of forgot how afraid I was. Forgot that he was holding my wrists and I couldn't get free. Forgot that I was helpless. All I could think about was getting closer to him, finding out how he tasted. Take some of his unexpected warmth for myself because I was so cold.

I leaned in further, only for his fingers to close in my hair, jerking my head back. I gasped, pain prickling across my scalp because his grip wasn't gentle.

His gaze was inches from mine and yet this time all the ice in it had melted, leaving behind a fire that stole my breath.

“What did I say about taking what wasn't on offer?” His voice was still icy and yet there was a faint roughness to it now.

That was a dumb move.

A flush of heat that had more to do with embarrassment than anything else burned in my cheeks. Though really, why should I be embarrassed about taking a kiss he didn't want to give from him? I was the helpless one here.

You've made him angry now, though.

Yeah, well, wasn't that my default? I seemed to make a lot of men angry. My dad because I wasn't my mom and all the others for refusing to sleep with them.

Fox was just one more.

I forgot about my mission and my money and grabbed for the anger that was my armor. A cold anger to match his. A determination not to give in. Not to lower my gaze or let his arrogant ass push me around.

I was expecting him to let me go, stop the car, open the door, and push me out.

Except he didn't do any of those things.

His grip tightened on my hair and the blue silk tie around my wrists, and he held me in place as this time he leaned forward and kissed me instead.

Tennyson

I hadn't meant to touch her, let alone kiss her, but her refusal to back down had changed the rules.

Her kiss had changed the rules.

As soon as I'd brought her closer, pressing her to answer my questions, her expression had hardened, becoming determined, and I knew she was preparing to do something surprising. Something that would test me.

There had been such a complicated mix of emotions shifting her gaze, fear and fury both fully directed at me.

She hadn't liked me pulling her close or questioning her, yet she'd also been unhappy with the threat of being put out on the sidewalk, so something had to give.

I suspected that she'd been honest with her confession that she couldn't tell me her name, but I still hadn't been happy with her answers. They told me nothing and I remained unconvinced that she was inviting herself into my house for

completely innocent purposes. Her reluctance to answer hadn't helped either.

I'd been going to tell her so, then she'd abruptly leaned forward, and her mouth had found mine.

I didn't kiss lovers. A kiss was intimate, it brought people close, and I didn't want closeness, and if I'd had any hint of what this young woman was about to do, I'd have avoided it.

But she hadn't given me a hint and a kiss was the last thing I'd expected, especially when it had been obvious that she was afraid of me.

I had very firm rules with the subs I indulged myself with, a protocol they had to adhere to at all times, and only rarely did a sub break them. I'd become used to total obedience. I'd become used to expecting certain things and having those expectations met.

Kisses were not part of my protocol, they'd always been off the table, and I should have been left cold by the kiss she gave me.

Except I wasn't left cold. It was the opposite, a rush of heat flooding through me the moment her lips pressed against mine. They'd felt so soft and warm, the sweet scent of her body surrounding me.

The last time someone had kissed me, it had been fifteen years ago, when I'd tried to move on from Juliana, and all it had done had been to remind me of what I'd lost, so since then I hadn't bothered.

Yet now...it wasn't what I'd lost that I was conscious of but what I'd missed.

And how long it had been since anyone had surprised me so completely.

That kiss stirred something hot inside me, another reminder yet again, of how bored I was with my current crop of playmates. How no matter what I told myself, a part of me needed more, needed something different. A challenge. The opportunity to break someone new, someone who hadn't spent years in the lifestyle knowing all there was to know about it, someone whose limits were yet to be tested and who wanted to test them.

Someone I could teach and introduce new pleasure to. Show them something about themselves that they didn't know.

It couldn't be her though. It *shouldn't* be her. So I'd pulled her hood back, buried my fingers in her hair, and jerked her head away before she could make yet another mistake. Only to have her stare back, fury burning in her silver eyes.

A mistake. If she'd known what was good for her, she'd have lowered her gaze before mine, but she hadn't. Which was another of my rules broken. The dominant in me didn't like that one bit, even though this wasn't a scene we were playing, and before I knew what I was doing, I'd leaned forward and taken that sulky mouth of hers in return, to teach her a lesson in who was in charge.

She was supposed to be untouchable, yet my fingers were buried in the soft silk of her hair and I could smell candy floss

and sweet feminine musk, and a long, lazy hunger unfurled inside me.

I could think of a thousand ways to take this beautiful mouth. A thousand things I wanted to do to it, a thousand things I wanted to do with it. Things she'd enjoy, that we'd both enjoy.

She'd gone still, her shock palpable, and if I hadn't been so surprised at my own actions, I would have let her go. But I didn't. And there was a second where her mouth softened slightly and I prepared to take advantage, taste her fully.

Then her teeth closed on my lower lip, and she bit me. Hard.

For a second, I froze because the little witch had taken me by surprise *again*. Then even that thought was lost beneath the heat rushing up inside me, the dominant growling in pleasure at the sexual challenge and wanting more. Demanding it. Determined to have her obedience. Determined to break her so that she'd offer me the sweetest gift of all: her submission.

It had been too long, far too long since I'd had more than the practiced obedience of experienced subs and it was clearly time I acknowledged that. But if I wanted that particular challenge, I'd have to find it elsewhere. It couldn't be with this little one, no matter how tempting she was proving to be.

She was too young, too inexperienced, and too afraid. I'd been using that fear for my own ends, hoping to break her, but now I found myself reconsidering my tactics. They hadn't worked so far on her and now I was losing my taste for it.

I needed to change my plan.

The temptation to deepen the kiss, to ravage her mouth, was strong, but I shoved it aside. Instead, pulling my head away, I gripped the silk binding her wrists and jerked her out of her seat and into my lap. She gasped as I settled her facing me, astride my thighs, her hands held securely between us. Her cloak had fallen open to reveal her naked body, all pretty curves and pale skin and silvery curls. A beautiful young woman.

But I didn't look. I met the blazing silver of her stare instead, seeing through her fury to the fear that lay beneath it.

She was trembling and trying to hide it, and like a cornered kitten she was biting and clawing at anyone who approached her, including me.

I couldn't have that.

Gripping the silk around her bound wrists with one hand in case she tried to lash out, I rearranged the fabric of her cloak with the other, so it covered her, hopefully making her feel less vulnerable.

“No biting,” I ordered. “Now. Tell me who hurt you.”

She was breathing very fast, and I could feel that tremble shaking her. Yet she only stared at me with dogged fury. “No one.”

“Are we really going to do this yet again? You're terrified of me and I'm tired of your denials. Tell me.”

“I'm not fucking terrified.” Her stubborn little chin lifted even higher. “And why should I tell you anyway? I don't owe

you anything.”

“Oh, but you do. I paid five hundred thousand dollars for your virginity so an answer to a question is the least of what you owe me.”

The line of her beautiful mouth compressed, her gaze glittering. “Why do you want to know? What does it matter to you?”

“Because I don’t like it when young women are afraid of me no matter how many times I tell them I won’t hurt them. Especially when those young women are insistent on coming home with me.”

Her eyes narrowed, a ghost of that cool intelligence looking out at me despite the fear. “You paid for my virginity, not my life story.”

Stubborn woman.

“I’m not taking a woman afraid for her life back to my home.” I kept my tone hard, letting her know that there would be no argument. Taking a firm line was always best in these situations, so everyone knew where they stood. “Even a woman who keeps on insisting that she wants to, despite how obviously terrified of me she is.”

She let out a breath. “This is getting boring. I’m assuming you’re taking me home to have sex, so do you want it or not?” She shifted on me in a deliberate way, the softness of her ass pressing against my thighs, her warmth distracting. “We don’t need to have endless discussions about it.”

I ignored the tightness behind my zipper, my cock liking the feel of her in my lap far too much. “Sex is out of the question. You’re too young, too inexperienced, and too afraid.”

The fear in her gaze had faded now, to be replaced by pure temper. “I haven’t been sexually assaulted if that’s what you’re worried about. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but I didn’t ask.”

“Well, you can have that for free.” Defiance shone in her eyes. “And if you want to know, yes, someone did hurt me. A man. But it was years and years ago and I’m fine now. And no, you don’t need to know who it was.”

I was surprised she answered my question, but I wasn’t surprised at her answer. That fear and subsequent defensiveness had to come from somewhere and it was usually due to some unpleasant experience. I wasn’t a stranger to physical violence myself — my uncle, who’d brought me up after my parents had died, had been casual with his fists — so I was familiar.

The thought that someone had hurt her in a similar way, sent all my protective impulses into overdrive. I wanted to ask her more questions, push for more answers, but I shouldn’t be getting interested so I ignored the urge. She was right, she didn’t owe me her life story, and I didn’t want it anyway. I was already too curious, and I didn’t need any more temptation.

“Fine,” I said. “I don’t need the details. But this won’t work if you’re afraid I’m going to hurt you, and don’t trust my word that I won’t.”

Her gaze took on a steely glint. “I’m fine. I can handle myself.”

She certainly looked like she could, but she wasn’t as fine as she made out. Which made it even more imperative that nothing happen sexually between us.

I was dominant and in charge, and I liked restraints. I liked obedience. I liked giving out punishments. And perhaps I liked a sub to match wills with me more than I’d thought, but she was not the sub I should be doing that with. She might not even be a sub at all. There had been signs of arousal in her in response to me, it was true, and I suspected she might like a taste of more. But I wasn’t the man to teach a vulnerable young woman about her desires, even if she pretended she was harder than she looked.

She needed patience and time and I had neither to spare.

So why is she currently sitting naked in your lap with her hands bound?

Because I hadn’t finished with her.

“I’m sure you can,” I said. “But here is my difficulty. You say that you want me, yet you tense up every time I touch you. And I can see fear in your eyes. I’ve given you every opportunity to leave, yet you won’t, which leads me to believe that someone is forcing you into coming home with me tonight.”

It was the most reasonable explanation for her behavior, yet she only snorted. “You’re paranoid. No one is forcing me into going home with you tonight. Sure, I’m a bit nervous

around you, it's true. But that's because you're..." She gestured at me with her bound hands. "Tennyson Fox. You're famous and really hot. Plus, I don't have a lot of experience with men what with being a virgin and all."

I searched her face, but she wasn't lying, not this time. "Nothing will be happening between us, little one. So there is no need for you to be nervous."

Cool silver glinted in her eyes. "And why will nothing be happening between us?"

"What were you saying about boring conversations? We've had this discussion and I told you why."

"Yet despite making a big deal of not having sex with me, you're taking me home anyway."

She was sharp, I'd give her that.

So why not take her home? Do you really have to know everything about her and her motivations before you do? How could this little one even harm you?

A good point. The only thing she had with her was the small purse she'd brought from Arcadia. My driver had checked it and it contained nothing but a cheap phone, a tube of lip balm, and a small change wallet full of a pathetic amount of cash. There had been no cards or ID, nothing with her name on it, and no weapons of any kind.

She wouldn't be able to harm me physically and if I kept an eye on her, she wouldn't be able to do anything else, either.

"Yes," I said. "But not for sex."

“Then why? Do you feel sorry for me? Is that it? I mean, if you really didn’t want me coming home with you, you’d have stopped the car and left me on the sidewalk by now. Yet you haven’t.” She tilted her head. “Unless you’re a man who makes empty threats and I don’t think you are.”

I met her cool stare, feeling the Dom in me shift restlessly as she held it. I wanted to take her chin in my hand, feel her warm skin beneath my thumb, and get her attention with my authority. Then use my will to make her stop pushing me, because she would not like it if I took control, not one bit.

But I crushed the urge. I couldn’t give in to it. Later, after this night was over, I’d find another playmate, not one of the club subs, but someone different. Someone who wasn’t totally new to the scene, but who was new to me. Someone I could get rid of this restlessness with.

Now, though, it was time to end this.

She needed to learn that none of my threats were empty ones.

“My reasons are none of your concern,” I said. “But given your continual refusal to answer my questions, I’ve decided that you can go to a hotel instead.”

Surprise flickered through her gaze and then the silver sparks of her temper leapt. She was *not* pleased with that. Too bad. I’d made my decision. I wasn’t going to take her home and I shouldn’t even have been contemplating it.

She was a beautiful creature, but her youth and inexperience were too much of a barrier to the kind of sex I

preferred, regardless of how much she engaged my curiosity. And I didn't want her in my house if she wasn't going to answer my questions.

I was too suspicious and paranoid, no matter how harmless she was.

“But you said—”

“I asked you some questions and you didn't answer them. I told you what would happen if you didn't.” I gripped her hips and slid her unceremoniously from my lap.

“You're kidding?” She stared at me, outraged. “You're really going to turn down a night of sex with me just because of some stupid questions?”

“I never said I was going to have a night of sex with you.” I unwrapped the tie from around her wrists. “What I said was that I'd take you home. Now, I've decided otherwise.”

“But,” she began hotly.

“End of the discussion,” I said.

Zara

He had to be kidding. He *had* to be.

I stared at him, my wrists still stinging from the silk that had bound them, the warmth of his powerful body lingering against my skin. He coiled the tie and put it into his pocket, then leaned forward, pressing the button on the intercom, and speaking to his driver, giving an address I didn't recognize.

I was free yet I barely even noticed. Fury burned inside me.

What the fuck was this about? Why had he changed his mind? It had been the bite, hadn't it? That had been his line and I'd pushed him over it. For the second time tonight, I'd let my fear get the better of me, sending my anger out of control, and so he'd changed his mind. And I was going to pay for it.

You fucking idiot.

I couldn't believe my stupidity. I could tell him the truth, give him the answers he wanted, right now even. But he'd

never let me get anywhere near him if he knew I was working for the Hamiltons. He'd probably pull the car over, push me out and not even bother with the hotel.

And I wouldn't get a cent of all that money.

I'd be back at square one, like when I'd finally run away from home after Dad had kicked me one too many times. Sleeping on the streets and then in shelters where I could, working for a pittance stacking shelves in the supermarket since I couldn't get any other kind of job. Living in constant fear that Dad would discover where I was and come find me. He'd told me the last time I saw him that if I left, he'd hunt me down and kill me, and I'd seen the certainty in his eyes. My mother had had the gall to leave, he'd said, and he wouldn't stand for me doing the same.

I'd had to learn how to save myself back then and those skills had stood me in good stead. Now I was going to have to save myself again, because sure as shit, no one else would. The only way to fix the situation was to finish this job for the Hamiltons, and then I'd finally be free.

Then I could have Santorini.

My brain tumbled over and over, trying to find a way out of this mess and into his house.

That bite... I'd done it to show him I wasn't powerless or weak, and when he'd jerked my head back, I'd expected his anger. Intellectually, I knew he wouldn't hurt me, yet my body had gone cold with fear all the same. A terror of male rage that I'd learned from my father and had been reinforced by my years on the streets.

Except Fox hadn't been angry. What had been in his eyes was a heat of a different kind.

I shivered.

He wanted me, I knew he did. I'd seen desire in men's eyes before and it had never boded well. Except...Fox hadn't acted on it, which was strange, because usually they did. In fact, if I wasn't much mistaken, he'd seemed almost annoyed by it.

But perhaps I could use his desire against him. Use sex to provoke him. Because what if I pushed harder? It was risky to make a man lose control, especially a man so much bigger and stronger than I was. Then again, he told me he wouldn't hurt me, and I was starting to think he actually meant it.

I leaned back in my seat and studied him from beneath my hood.

He had his phone out and was looking down at it, those hard features set, his profile stern as he focused on the screen.

Everything about him was precise and exact. From his immaculate black hair to his snowy white shirt, all crisp and smooth, with no creases to speak of. No creases in his suit either.

A man all about icy control, as if at some point in his life he'd swallowed an ice cube and had let it freeze him solid from the inside out.

Even when I'd pushed him, kissed him, bitten him, all he'd done was to take me in an iron grip, the force of his will the only burning thing about him. Unlike Donny who got vicious.

Unlike Dad whose rage was a simmering volcano that would erupt without warning and seemingly without provocation.

Dad, with his stained shirts and crumpled ties, and the filth in the apartment that he refused to clean up because that had always been Mom's job and now she was gone, he wouldn't stoop to it.

No, Tennyson Fox was nothing like either Donny or Dad.

He was threatening but not in the way I usually thought of it, and his authority was absolute. Innate. As if he had no need to prove himself, not to anyone. Not that it made him any less dangerous, of course, but he *had* given me multiple opportunities to leave and had told me he'd rather get me a hotel than take me home if I was afraid of him. And apart from that kiss — which I'd initiated — he hadn't acted on his desire for me, despite me being totally naked. That had to count for something.

So yeah, it was risky to contemplate pushing him so far that he'd break, but it was the only option I had left that I hadn't tried.

I hadn't expected to have sex tonight, still less with him, but if I wanted him to take me home, then I'd have to risk it.

Providing I could get him to lose that rigid control of his.

He didn't speak, the silence getting heavier as the minutes ticked by, so I said nothing either, my mind working overtime thinking of various ways I could get to him, seduce him.

If we were going to a hotel, that would give me more scope than in a car with a driver. In a hotel room, we could be

alone — if I could get him to go with me to the room, that was, and not just dump me outside the hotel entrance.

I still didn't have much of a plan by the time we pulled up outside another elegant brownstone with a discreet gold plaque on the wall outside. So, a small boutique hotel rather than a massive chain. That seemed very on-brand for someone like Fox.

I gathered my cloak around me, my heart thumping hard as I sorted through various spurious reasons why he'd have to come with me into the hotel, only to find that I needn't have worried.

As soon as the car stopped, Fox got out and then held the door open for me. I stepped onto the sidewalk and went to reach for my purse, only to have him grab it before I did, holding it negligently in one hand.

“This way, please.” He settled the other hand beneath my elbow and gripped me, steering me through the big glass doors and into the hotel.

Inside, it was very quiet, the same kind of quiet Arcadia had, that spoke of money and power and exclusivity. The lobby was spacious and full of old-world charm, with lots of dark velvet sofas and silk rugs, wood paneling, and lush greenery.

The man behind the big oak counter looked up and greeted Fox warmly. There was a brief discussion and then he handed Fox a card. Fox hadn't let go my elbow once, as if he was afraid I'd run away, and he didn't let go now as he took the card, then urged me over to an old-fashioned cage elevator.

Pulling open the door, he steered me inside, and then, to my surprise, he stepped inside too, and closed the door. He pressed a button and the elevator jerked once before beginning to rise smoothly.

“So, you’re going to show me to my room, now?” I didn’t mean it to sound sharp, it just came out that way.

He glanced down at me. “I want to make sure you arrive there safely.”

“What do you think I’m going to do? Get mugged in this five-star hotel? Run away screaming from all this luxury?”

He didn’t answer.

The elevator jerked to a stop, and we got out, him leading the way down a plushly carpeted hallway to the door at the end of it. He waved the card the hotel concierge had given him over the card reader, then opened the door, gesturing me inside.

It was a big room, as full of old-world luxury and charm as the lobby had been. The same thick, dark carpet on the floor with silk rugs spread over the top. A big four-poster bed held pride of place in the center of the room, piled high with a thick white comforter and pillows, and a velvet quilt on the top.

I took a few steps inside, trying to calm my racing heartbeat, then turned around.

Fox had come in after me and had let the door shut behind him. He stood in front of it, his arms crossed over his broad chest, stern gaze on mine.

Carefully, allowing no hint of my nerves to show, I sat down on the bed, letting my cloak fall open a little. Giving him a glimpse of me but not too much. “You look like you’re about to deliver a lecture.” I leaned back slowly on my hands. “What’s it about? The dangers of riding in limos with strange billionaires?”

“I want your word you won’t go off selling your virginity anywhere else.” His gaze didn’t drop to the gap in my cloak, not once. Clearly, if I wanted to seduce him, I was going to have to do more than show him my naked body.

My palms were sweaty. I had to get it together and figure out a plan because this was now or never. If I let him walk out that door, I’d never see him again, that was certain.

Touching him had been the catalyst the last couple of times his rigid control had broken, and I didn’t think it was because he didn’t want to be touched. It was because I tested that control. Because he’d liked it, I’d seen the flare of desire glowing hot beneath the ice in his eyes.

Perhaps I should do that now, push him physically even as I pushed against that iron will of his.

“So, if I give you my word that I won’t, what will you give me?” I asked.

“I’ve already given you five hundred thousand dollars. What more could you possibly want?”

I slid off the bed and took a couple of slow steps toward him. He watched me approach, not moving an inch. “Oh, lots of things,” I murmured. “But there’s really only one way you

can ensure that I won't go off selling my virginity anywhere else." I came to a stop in front of him and stared up at his face from beneath my lashes. "And you won't need to trust my word for it."

"Is that right?" His icy gaze bored steadily into mine. "And what way is that?"

I took another step, getting as close to him as I had back in Arcadia, only inches away, the heat of his body and the warm spice of his scent surrounding me. His eyes were so clear and deep. The kind of blue that haunted your dreams. The kind of blue you could drown in. Though in his case you'd probably freeze to death before you could drown.

"Well," I said huskily. "If you took it yourself, I wouldn't have to sell it, would I?"

His gaze flickered. "I thought I made my position on that clear."

"Oh, you did, and you were very clear." I took yet another step, getting even closer. "So, I have to ask myself, why did you follow me up into this room? And why are you still standing here?"

A muscle in his hard jaw flexed. "You haven't earned the right to ask me those questions."

A thrill pulsed through me, a strange, almost excited edge to my fear. If I hadn't interested him, he would have left, yet he hadn't. He had no reason to still be here, none at all, so why was he?

You know why.

This close he was so tall, a solid wall of male muscle, and he didn't move. I should have been terrified and I was, and yet I couldn't stop looking at him. He was beautiful, his features stern, the cold force of his will a steady pressure. I could see white at his temples, and a few lines around his eyes and mouth the only signs of his age.

It was me. I was holding him here. He was powerful, rich beyond my wildest imaginings. A man who did whatever he wanted and certainly nothing he didn't. Yet even though he'd made it clear he was going to get rid of me, he hadn't. And he hadn't walked away, either.

“What do I have to do to earn the right?” I asked.

There was that flicker in his eyes again, as if the question had triggered some kind of response, though what I had no idea. “Nothing you'd be comfortable with.”

“Are you sure?” The strangest urge to touch him filled me. I wanted to put my hands on his broad chest and press against it, feel how hard he was. In fact, it was weird how badly I wanted to given how he scared me. “I had an unrestricted contract remember. I'm comfortable with a lot of things.” None of which I'd expected to have to do, of course, but he didn't know that.

He remained still, watching me with those piercing blue eyes. “What are you doing, little one?”

Did he really not know? He must, surely. I wasn't being shy about the way I was looking at him.

I let him see the heat in my eyes and then, mustering all my courage, I lifted my hand and put it directly over the zipper of his pants. “This,” I said.

Tennyson

I should have moved before she touched me. I should definitely have left the room. I should have left her to find her own way up in the elevator, perhaps even let the concierge give her the room key.

I shouldn't have accompanied her.

I shouldn't have walked into this room and let the door shut behind me.

I shouldn't have let her come close, moving slowly, that cloak swirling around her, revealing then hiding her pale skin and luscious curves.

Except, I'd done all those things. Firstly, because I'd wanted to make sure she wasn't going to wait until I'd left before finding some other place to auction off her virginity for the second time — if money was her main motivation for doing any of this, that was.

I'd wanted her word that she would stay here and keep herself safe.

Backing away when she'd started to walk toward me would have been the sensible thing to do, to keep the distance between us. But the dominant in me refused. I couldn't give ground to a little one like her, it would be to acknowledge her as a threat to my control and that I couldn't allow.

She might test me, but she wouldn't best me. I wouldn't let her.

Then she'd put her hand on me.

She'd tried it before in Arcadia, but I'd stopped her then, and I should have stopped her now. But that would have been to admit my control wasn't equal to the task, and again, I couldn't allow that.

However, letting her touch me was a mistake.

Her palm was warm, the feeling of slight pressure against my cock sending a crackle of electricity through me, making me harden. She was very close, looking up at me through pale lashes, her clear gray eyes dark.

I knew why they were dark. Despite her fear of me, it was clear that she also wanted me.

So why not take her?

Because I'd told myself I wouldn't. Because she'd been hurt in the past by a man, which complicated anything I wanted to do with her. Because I didn't trust her, and I certainly didn't trust this little seduction attempt.

She wanted something from me, and I knew it.

What does it matter?

I forced the thought away. I wasn't going to change my mind, no matter how she pushed.

Yet, my dominant side was shifting restlessly, incensed that she was touching me without permission. Touch was a privilege she had to earn, and she needed to be taught that.

Yet, I didn't move, letting her palm rest on my zipper.

Her gaze flared as she felt my physical reaction. "You're hard."

"You're a naked woman and you have your hand on my cock," I said coolly. "What did you expect?"

She swallowed and behind the obvious arousal in her gaze, I saw the spark of challenge. And I should have moved then, too, but I didn't.

So she squeezed me a little harder.

Another sharp jolt of electricity shot through me, and this time my patience began to slip. She was persistent, this little one. Constantly kicking back at me, constantly challenging me.

It's almost as if she knows what you are. Almost as if she craves it. And you want to give it to her, that's why you're still here.

The thought was insidious, a trap I couldn't fall into. Because of course she wouldn't know my preferences, no one did. And as for her craving it... That was up for debate, especially when I suspected she was too inexperienced to really understand the complexities of desire and submission.

She was a virgin and her first time with a man should not be on her knees.

You could give her a taste of it. Frighten her off.

Or I could simply turn and walk out the door.

I took her wrist in a tight grip, and pulled her palm away, intending to let her go and then leave.

Except like that moment back in Arcadia, I didn't.

Her gaze had darkened into deep charcoal, and there was a flush across her cheekbones, and she was looking at me as if she was waiting for something.

“If you really knew what you were getting yourself into,” I said softly. “You would not be doing that.”

She must not have heard the warning in my voice, because she made no move to pull her hand away. “So, what am I getting myself into then? Come on, show me.”

She'd told me in the car that I didn't seem like a man who made empty threats and yet that's all I'd been doing from the moment she'd walked through the door in Arcadia, all steel and silver sparks. Threatening various things yet not following through.

No wonder she thought she could push me, and no wonder she continued to push me. She wasn't getting any consequences for her actions.

She's not yours to teach.

That was true. So why I kept thinking I needed to, I had no idea. She might have been Isabel's age, but she didn't need me

going into overprotective father mode, just as I didn't need another rebellious daughter to fight.

Still, I found I couldn't walk away.

She was pushing me hard, and perhaps one day she'd push the wrong person and get consequences that would hurt her. I couldn't stand the thought of that. Someone had to teach her a lesson. Someone had to show her that if she continued to reach for a flame, she'd get her fingers burned.

You can't keep giving ground either.

No. I had to retain my authority and she needed to know that her behavior was unacceptable, and that I wasn't having it.

I moved before I could think better of it, grabbing her other hand and crossing both her wrists, holding them firmly between us. Then with my free hand, I gripped her chin between my fingers and tilted her head back. "I'm not a man you can play with, little one," I said. "And I am not the man to take your virginity."

Her breathing had quickened, and her eyes had gone wide as they looked up into mine. Fear was stark in them and yet also defiance. She didn't pull away. "Why not?" she asked. "Why aren't you that man?"

"Because I like control. Absolute and total control, do you understand?"

She took a little breath. "No."

Maybe she did, maybe she didn't, I wasn't sure. Either way, it wouldn't do her any harm to know. In fact, it was

probably better that she did, because maybe then she'd stop pushing me.

"I'm a dominant," I said. "So, when it comes to sex, I want a submissive. One who is obedient, and does whatever I tell her when I tell her. One who doesn't argue. Who accepts my word as law and doesn't challenge me. Who accepts her punishments without protest and then bears them without a sound. One who willingly gives me her body as my property to do with as I see fit."

Her eyes got rounder and rounder as I went on, and there was no denying the shock in them now. Or the fear. Yet still, she made no move to pull away and there was something else in the depths of her eyes, something I didn't want to see.

Interest.

She's curious so why not show her?

That wasn't going to happen and not with her. I'd made it clear what I was and what I required when it came to sex, and that was nothing she'd want, I was certain.

"Oh," she said finally, her voice breathless. "Not a total shock, I have to say. You're kind of an uptight asshole and you really like tying up or holding onto my hands."

"Because you keep putting them where they're not supposed to be." I adjusted my grip on her wrists, placing my fingers along her pulse so I could gauge it. It was fast and getting faster. "I presume you understand now?"

"Yes, I get it. You like being in charge and you want me to do what you say, right?"

It was more complicated than that, but I wasn't going into the complexities now. "I don't want you to do anything. I will not be doing anything with you let alone taking your virginity, no matter how much you push me."

Her nose wrinkled. "But what if I'm interested? What if I wanted to be your submissive?"

I almost laughed. "You? You've been doing nothing but fight me ever since you walked through the door in Arcadia. You wouldn't follow my orders and you certainly wouldn't accept all the punishments you'd get for not doing so. Also, you're afraid of me."

Instantly, defiance sparked in her gaze again. "You don't know what I would do or what I wouldn't. You don't know anything about me."

"I know you don't like being told what to do, because you're already talking back to me," I pointed out. "And I know you're afraid because I know what fear looks like and I can see it in you right now. You don't like me restraining you and since I enjoy restraining a submissive, I don't think you'd take to it."

More sparks glittered in her eyes, and she tried to jerk her chin from my grip, but I held on, keeping her still. "There," I murmured. "See? You're already trying to get away from me."

Suddenly that cool, assessing intelligence was back, a certain piercing knowledge in her gaze "And you like that, don't you?"

Surprise rippled through me. Firstly, that she'd been able to see that yes, I'd been enjoying the little challenges she kept throwing my way, even as they infuriated me, and secondly, that I'd somehow given myself away.

"I don't—"

"Yes, you do," she interrupted as if interrupting me was permissible. As if I'd allow it. "You might see fear in me, but I can see desire in you. You say you want obedience, but I'm not sure you do."

Something twisted inside me, self-protective and savage, and before I could stop myself, I'd put her hands behind her and pinned them at the small of her back, forcing her against me from breast to hip, the way I'd done in Arcadia.

Back then, her eyes had widened with shock and then she'd pulled away.

She didn't now.

Her eyes were still wide, and all the breath went out of her, but this time her pupils were fully dilated and there was a hot flush in her cheeks. Her pulse beneath my fingers at her wrists beat fast and hard, and in her gaze, there was a flicker of apprehension. But not the fear that had been there before. "Is that all you've got?" she asked huskily. "We've done this before, remember?"

So, she was fully committed to pushing me, was she? Silly girl.

A voice inside me warned that this wasn't what I'd told myself I was going to do, but I wasn't listening. I was tired of

her pushing and now the Dom wanted to push back.

“Is this what you want?” I demanded. “You want a taste of submission? Submission to me?”

“Sure. Why not?” Her breasts pressed harder against my chest as she took a shuddering breath. “Sounds like I might enjoy it. And clearly your dick would too.”

I shouldn't be doing this. I should have been walking away. And yet I'd come to the end of my patience, and I couldn't allow such a defeat.

“In that case...” I turned her in my arms, so her spine was up against my front, keeping her wrists pinned firmly in the small of her back with one hand. Then I encircled her throat with the other, letting her know who held her, who controlled her. Who was in charge.

“Kneel for your master,” I ordered.

Zara

The words went through me like a sword. His strong fingers were around my wrists, holding them tight, and his palm was pressed to my throat. The pressure was enough to make my breath catch.

He'd moved so fast, spinning me around in his arms and drawing me up against him before I'd even had a chance to breathe.

He'd shocked me. I'd been certain that I wouldn't be able to make him stay. He'd resisted me touching him, me questioning him. Me, pushing and pushing at him. He'd seemed so utterly sure of himself and of his decision.

I'd hated that surety. I'd hated having my inexperience and my youth, and Dad's physical abuse thrown in my face. Making me feel small and weak, like the victim I'd spent years putting behind me.

But I knew that if I wanted to continue on this path I'd chosen, I'd have to confront the reality of what Fox was. A

sexual dominant. It hadn't come as a shock, you only had to look at the man. Yet what *had* come as a shock was my own response to it.

“I want a submissive. One who is obedient, and does whatever I tell her when I tell her. One who doesn't argue. Who accepts my word as law and doesn't challenge me. Who accepts her punishments without protest and then bears them without a sound. One who willingly gives me her body as my property, to do with as I see fit...”

Those words should have filled me fear, should have made me jerk my hands from his grip and put some distance between us. Because there was no way in hell I was going to be any man's property.

And yet...what he'd said had touched something deep inside me, setting off an echo that I hadn't been able to ignore.

I'd been on my own since I was thirteen when Mom had left. Her family was all on the west coast so nowhere near me and Dad had no family. It was only him and me and he didn't count. I had no friends, no support network, and when I'd run away, it had been really hard. I'd had no one to rely on but myself and while I'd survived, it got exhausting knowing there was no safety net. That there was no one around who cared whether I lived or died.

It had been lonely, and it was still lonely, and there was a part of me that wanted desperately to belong to someone. To have someone else make all the decisions for a change, to take care of me, to keep me safe, because I was tired of doing it all myself.

Not that I thought that someone was Tennyson Fox, but maybe I did want a taste of what he could offer. A taste of what belonging to him would feel like, even just for a night. And apart from anything else, it would be a great opportunity to test myself. To face my fear, challenge it, and hopefully win this time.

I was tired of it being there, a constant I couldn't seem to outrun.

I shivered. His body was a furnace at my back, his fingers around my throat a subtle threat that had me panting with terror. And yet...it wasn't a terror based entirely on fear for my life or of being hurt. It was more complicated than that.

I knew he wouldn't hurt me. But he might do something else. He might do something worse. He might make me like it. He might make me trust him.

Kneel for your master.

His words had been full of a dark authority I couldn't resist. But I wanted to resist. I could feel the urge to relax into the force of his will and let it carry me, yet I fought it. He couldn't know that. I didn't want him to have that kind of power over me.

What I wanted was to hook him so completely that he'd take me back to his house without a second's thought, and I couldn't believe I was in danger of falling under his spell myself.

"Kneel?" I had to force the word out as I trembled in his grip, fighting that horrifying sense of vulnerability. "You've

got to be kidding me.”

His fingers flexed around my throat, more a light caress than anything else, and it made goosebumps rise all over my skin. I should have been panicking and yet for some reason, it was almost as if I was less afraid with this hand on my throat than when it wasn't. As if the strength of him behind me was holding me up. “No?” His warm breath was against my ear. “You can't say no to your master, little one. Don't you realize that?”

You have no idea what you're getting yourself into.

No, I didn't. Yet an odd anticipation was gathering inside me, a kind of rush, as if I'd pushed myself off a cliff with no guarantee that anyone would catch me and now, I was falling. Perhaps to my death.

Or perhaps you'll fly instead.

I swallowed, my mouth dry, conscious of the strength of his grip on my wrists, the warmth of his palm against my throat. The heat of his iron-hard body at my back. It would be so easy to let myself fall back against it, fall into it, but I couldn't give in, not yet.

“I can say no,” I said shakily. “Or at least a safe word, right?” I didn't know much of anything about BDSM, but I did know that safe words were part of the deal.

His fingers tightened a little. “Does that mean you want more?”

“Yes.” My voice was hoarse, but I meant it. I needed him to take me home.

“I don’t believe you.”

“But I—”

“It’s about more than doing what I say, little one. You have to want me, too.”

Want me...

The words echoed in my head. I’d never wanted anyone before, not a single person, not sexually. I’d always been too afraid and too wary and wanting someone felt like giving up what little power I did have. Also, sexual desire was now inextricably linked with all the creepy men who’d made passes and groped me over the years. And it was never about me as a person. It was never about my choice or what I wanted.

But Fox wanted me and yet he was possibly the first man I’d ever met who wasn’t taking anything from me. It was the opposite. Right here, right now, he was giving me a choice. I could choose for myself. I could have what *I* wanted.

And you want him.

Realization flooded through me in a hot rush and suddenly everything made sense. The prickling of my skin and my intense awareness of him. The way his presence felt dangerous and yet despite that I wanted to get closer. The hunger inside me that I’d felt ignite when I’d kissed him...

Stupid to be so blind, to be so unaware of my own responses that I didn’t know what I was feeling. Then again, I’d never felt it before so how would I know? It was attraction, wasn’t it?

I knew now, I could feel it now, and my heartbeat was picking up speed, my skin drawing tight at the feel of him behind me, heat surging in my veins.

This was my choice, and I felt the power of it.

“Yes,” I said huskily. “I want you.”

I must have sounded convincing because he said without hesitation, “In that case your safe word will be blue. Say it back to me.”

Blue. For his eyes.

“Blue,” I repeated in a scratchy voice.

“Good. Say it when you’re uncomfortable and we’ll pause things.” His fingers flexed again. “Remember though, this is just a taste.”

“And if I want more?”

“That will be my decision, not yours.”

The pressure of his hand around my throat was possessive and the feel of it made me ache. Made me want to relax into his hold and be claimed. Be held and not let go of. A bizarre thing to want when one squeeze of his hand and I’d be choking. I wouldn’t be able to stop him, he was too strong.

He won’t though. You can feel how leashed all that strength is.

I could. That hard body behind mine was rigid with the force of his will, every part of him under his strict command.

He wouldn’t lash out in a fit of rage like Dad did.

He wouldn't let anything get the better of him, including me.

Sexy. It was sexy.

"You know what to do." The warmth of his breath against the side of my neck made me shudder. "I won't ask again."

But I still couldn't kneel, not yet. I wanted to prove that I was just as strong as he was. "And if I don't?"

"I think you know that already. You'll be punished."

A thread of cold snaked down my spine. I didn't like the sound of punishment, not at all. "What kind of punishment?"

"I've been patient." His voice got impossibly deeper, darker. "Very patient with your questions, little one. And I've been giving you leeway because this is new for you. But now it's time to do as you're told."

It was a thrill to keep pushing him, to keep getting a reaction, and I was definitely getting a reaction. I could feel the evidence of it pressing against my ass, and holy hell, he was big.

My heart thudded and I knew I couldn't keep pushing forever, because who knew where his line in the sand was? He might even lose patience and leave, and I couldn't afford that.

I didn't have enough breath to speak so I only nodded and began to lower myself, wondering how I was going to do that while he was holding my wrists and had his hand around my throat. But he kept me steady, using his grip to ease me down the length of his body so that I slowly dropped to the carpet in front of him, the silk rug soft beneath my knees.

He remained behind me, keeping hold of my wrists and letting go of my throat. But only to shift his grip to the back of my neck, taking me by the scruff like cat with a kitten. His hold was firm and possessive, an anchor.

I took a breath, my heart thumping even harder.

His heat was at my back and then his mouth was against my ear as he bent over me. “Here are my rules,” he murmured. “You will do what I tell you, when I tell you and you will do so promptly. You will not argue. You will not talk back. You will not speak unless spoken to. The only exception is your safe word. If you break any of these rules, you will be punished.”

“But I—”

“Quiet.” His hand tightened on the back of my neck. “The punishments will be ones I deem appropriate for you. And one more thing. I don’t like brats, so behave yourself.”

My pulse raced, the cold thread winding tighter. I knew what punishments were about. Dad taking off his belt and using it to strike me because I hadn’t washed a knife well enough. Dad casually backhanding me because I hadn’t swept the floor properly.

“Useless. Just like ya fuckin’ mother.”

“Don’t be afraid.” Fox must have picked up on my fear because voice softened slightly. “Many a sub has grown to love the punishments I give out.”

My muscles relaxed then, as if my body had decided that he was okay, and I could trust him. And why not? He’d given

me rules, he'd told me consequences. There were no eggshells to walk on here, no sense that the world was shaky under my feet. He was in charge completely and utterly.

And you want him to be.

The burst of insight took what little breath I had left.

He was a man who commanded the space he was in, and who took control effortlessly. Who radiated strength and competence and cool intelligence. There would never be uncertainty with him. You would always know where you stood, *exactly* where you stood.

I wanted that certainty. I wanted *his* certainty. I wanted his strength, and I wanted his control too. I wanted a moment to fall apart, to be vulnerable, and have someone else pick up the pieces of me.

It was crazy, I'd only known him a couple of hours if that, and yet there was something about him, despite his cold eyes and his invulnerable will, that instilled trust.

He was Isabel's father, and he was fanatical about her safety.

He wouldn't hurt me.

A hot ball of nervous excitement sat in my gut as if I was afraid of what he'd do next and yet wanting it at the same time. Wanting to break every single one of his rules, too, despite the threat of punishment.

I stared at the rug beneath my knees, shivering in anticipation. "I'm not afraid. Only, you're going to be disappointed because being a brat is kind of my thing."

His grip shifted. “Disobedient and so quickly. What did I say about not speaking until you’re spoken to?”

The press of his fingers against my skin was warm, strong, his grip so firm. “Do I answer that? Or is that a rhetorical question?”

He said nothing, a powerful presence behind me.

“I think you’re wrong,” I said, unable to stop myself, nerves making me babble. “I think you do like a brat. You like it when I disobey you.”

He ignored me and when he spoke, his voice was cold. “First punishment will be restraint.”

I heard him shift and the hold on my wrists slackened. Only to tighten once again as I felt him wrap something around them — that silk tie again.

Here was my first test and while reflexive fear prickled through me as he pulled the binding tight, I shoved it aside. Then his fingers were at my throat as he undid the catch of my cloak and pulled the whole thing away, leaving me naked and kneeling on the carpet.

Goosebumps rose all over my skin. This was different from when I’d stood naked in front of him in that room in Arcadia. Then, I hadn’t known what to expect and I’d been afraid and confused at how deeply he’d affected me. But I wasn’t confused now. I knew why my skin felt tight, why there was a heat inside me, an ache, a hunger.

It was him. It was all him.

I could feel him standing at my back and I knew he was looking down at me. The pressure of his gaze was an almost physical force.

He began to walk in a slow circle around me.

My mouth dried. The way he looked at me was so intense, as if he was examining every part, and I shivered at the thought of what he might find.

I'd never wanted to be beautiful or desirable to anyone because beauty was dangerous. It drew notice and it certainly seemed to draw the notice of all the creeps.

But for the first time since I could remember, I wanted to be beautiful. I wanted to be desirable to him.

Are you though? Are you anything at all? You know you could disappear, and no one would know, no one would care.

But that was a hateful thought, the doubts that would come at me in the dark sometimes when I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want it in my head.

Isabel would care. She was my friend.

And what will she think of you now? Naked and on your knees for her father?

I shoved the thought away, suddenly aware once more of my own vulnerability. I *didn't* want to be anything to anyone, and I certainly didn't want his judgment to be important to me. I didn't care about his opinion one way or another.

I lifted my chin and looked up at him.

His beautiful face was set in hard lines, icy blue eyes blazing. He'd stopped in front of me and folded his arms. "Did I say you could meet my gaze?"

"No. But you didn't say I couldn't either."

He didn't reply, merely tilting his head and giving my body a slow, deliberate scan, his expression impenetrable.

Yet more heat prickled through me, the subtle pressure between my thighs telling me that I was a liar, that I did care what he thought.

"So, is that it?" I demanded, unable to stay quiet. "Or is your obsession with tying my wrists all you've got?"

He said nothing for a long moment. Then he stepped forward, reaching down and taking my chin in a firm grip. "There's no need to be so desperate," he said coolly. "You already have my attention."

I tried to laugh. "I'm not desperate, I'm—"

His thumb pressed down over my mouth, silencing me. "Settle. As I said, you have my attention. And now you'll be getting a second punishment too."

Every inch of my skin tightened. His grip on my chin, his thumb pressing against my lips, the sheer power of him towering above me, made my feelings tangle around each other and knot tight. Excitement and fear and anger and desire... I couldn't sort them all out.

"Your second punishment will be denial," he went on in the same cool tone. "I am going to examine what I bought for five hundred thousand tonight and I'm going to examine it

thoroughly. But you will not be able to touch me or touch yourself.”

Examine what he bought? Did that mean me? And as far as punishments went, wasn't that kind of weak? I didn't want to touch him, not really.

Don't you?

I ignored that thought. One thing was certain though, I wouldn't be touching myself, not if he was watching.

He still had his thumb on my mouth, so I lifted a shoulder, trying to act as if that was no big deal.

“If you speak out of turn again,” he said. “Your third punishment will be a gag.”

I went cold, swallowing down the retort on my tongue and settling on a nod instead to show him I'd heard.

He stared at me for a moment longer then let go of my chin. He took a step back then came around behind me and took hold of my bound wrists. “On your feet, little one.”

I did as I was told and again, he steadied me as I awkwardly got off my knees.

“Now,” he murmured. “Go over to the bed and lie down.”

I did as I was told, the combination of fear and anticipation, and desire continuing to tangle and knot inside me.

The bed was very soft, the white cover on the comforter crisp as I lay down on it on my back, again awkwardly since my hands were bound. The linen was cool against my hot skin,

that only got hotter as Fox followed me to stand beside the bed, his arms still folded, his gaze full of authority.

There was a building ache between my thighs, that only got worse under the pressure of his gaze. It felt as if he could see right inside my head.

He'll see how flawed you are. He'll see why your mother left you behind and your dad hated you so much he beat you.

Cold seeped through me. But again, I ignored it, shoving the thoughts out of my head and staring at him instead. Five hundred thousand he paid for me and if he didn't like what he saw he could stick it up his uptight ass.

Yet staring at Fox was like having a staring competition with the sun, the sheer force of his will making it impossible to hold.

"I could give you a blindfold," he said. "To remind you to keep your gaze down."

Shit. I didn't want a blindfold either.

Perhaps the best thing would be to close my eyes, which was technically following the rules, yet it was also deliberately shutting him out. That stare of his was too much, and my feelings were rubbed raw, and also, he'd probably hate it.

He said nothing as I closed my eyes, and I soon realized my mistake — because it *was* a mistake. I couldn't see him; I couldn't see what he was doing and it made me even more aware of him than I was already.

"So," he murmured, his voice somehow much closer than it had been before. "Let's see what five hundred thousand

dollars buys me.”

Tennyson

She'd closed her eyes deliberately and I knew it. A silent rebellion yes, but also so I wouldn't see the vulnerability and confusion in her eyes. Yet I'd seen it.

Vulnerability at being at my mercy and examined with such intense focus. Confusion because she liked it. And oh yes, she *did* like it. She'd told me she wanted me, and she hadn't been lying. I hadn't missed the frantic rush of her pulse beneath my hand as I'd gripped her throat.

What she didn't like was obeying me, that was clear, her willful, stubborn nature making her fight and question. A backbone of pure steel, this one. Yet there was also a fragility to her as if her strength was brittle and one well-placed blow would shatter it.

Intriguing. I hadn't seen fragility like that in a sub in a long time.

Because you never looked.

It was true. I paid attention but only to their physical responses, not their emotional ones. I kept myself apart and I didn't get involved. Only physical pleasure was important, nothing more. Which was fine for practiced subs who knew what they were doing, but for this little one...

This was all new to her, kneeling and obeying my orders, receiving punishments. She was afraid of it and yet she wanted it, I'd seen the arousal in her eyes, so yes, she would be confused. Especially considering what she'd said about her past.

I could feel the spark of interest inside me catch alight, the dominant wanting more, wanting to peel her apart and study her, find out where exactly her vulnerabilities lay and why. Explore them. Crack that armor of hers and show her how to build it again into something stronger and more flexible. Less brittle.

Then teach her that she didn't have to be afraid, that she could explore her desires, and that I would show her just how much pleasure that beautiful body of hers was capable of. It was a rush doing that for a sub and it had been a long time since I'd felt it.

You were supposed to give her a taste of what being yours would be like in the hope of scaring her off.

Except while she'd been scared, she hadn't run. I'd treated her the way I treated all my subs, by demanding absolute obedience, though I'd allowed her some leeway to give her time to adjust, and still she'd given me sass.

The threat of punishment had frightened her, yet that hadn't stopped her from disobeying me. She wanted my attention, that was obvious, even though she was afraid of it.

Interesting little sub.

I was hooked, I couldn't deny it, and in a way I hadn't been in far too long.

If it had been a different night and I hadn't been so worried about my daughter, I would have ended things immediately. But it wasn't a different night. I needed a distraction and this little one with her combination of vulnerability, bravery, and fire was perfect.

So I stood by the bed and took my time, looking at her, listening to the sounds of her breathing, because eventually, she'd realize that shutting her eyes was a mistake. That she should have kept them open to make sure she knew where I was at all times and so she could see what I was doing. But she hadn't and so now all she had was her brain feeding her all sorts of wild fantasies. She could open her eyes, of course, but I knew she wouldn't, not when that would be giving in.

Satisfaction shifted inside me. A satisfaction I hadn't felt in far too long. I loved using a sub's own brain to tangle them up since it made everything so much more intense for them.

I didn't move and didn't speak, giving her no clue as to where I was, taking my time to examine her.

A pretty, feminine little sub, with generous breasts and rounded hips and thighs. Her pale skin was flushed with desire

now and her pink nipples had hardened; she was aroused by me looking at her.

I wasn't a fan of tattoos, but hers in no way detracted from her loveliness. They were pretty — those stars falling down one forearm, a delicate flower on her side, a little black cat curled up on the inside of her wrists. I wanted to know what they meant.

This is a taste for her, not you, remember?

Oh, I wouldn't forget. I wasn't going to let her get under my skin.

I bent over her, putting my palms carefully down on either side of her head and leaning on them. Letting her feel the pressure of my gaze. Her pale lashes fluttered, but she didn't open her eyes.

I remained still, staring at her face, noting the dusting of pale freckles across her nose and her silvery brows. Her straight nose and her lush, kissable mouth. She was very lovely.

The pulse at the base of her throat was racing and as I watched, her white teeth sunk into her bottom lip. She knew I was there; she knew I was looking at her, and she was getting off on it.

That pleased me. That pleased me very much.

I lifted a hand and touched that pulse, pressing my fingertips lightly to the warm skin of her throat, hearing her gasp aloud and watching her whole body tighten with reaction.

She was *very* aware of me.

I ran my finger down from her throat to between her breasts, goosebumps rising on her skin. “Responsive,” I murmured approvingly. “That’s good.”

Taking my finger away, I gently cupped one breast in my palm, weighing it with care. She gave another delicate shudder, a sound escaping her. “Your breast fills my hand perfectly,” I told her. “Very satisfactory.”

Given the way she was biting her lip, I could see she wanted to say something yet was holding herself back. She was obeying me, which pleased me, but not so much if she was holding back from saying her safe word.

“Did you want to say something?” I asked, to be certain. “Your safe word, perhaps? You don’t have to wait for me to speak to you if so.”

She shook her head, yet her muscles were tense. Not discomfort then. Or maybe there was discomfort, but also desire.

Her nipples had hardened still further, so I brushed my thumb over one. It was only a light touch, not even a pinch, yet she shifted restlessly beneath my hand.

Good. That was very good. I liked how responsive to me she was.

I took my hand from her breast and trailed my fingers down her stomach, feeling the muscles beneath her skin tense, her breathing getting shaky. She shifted again.

“No,” I murmured. “Don’t move.”

She stilled, but a tremor ran through her. Her skin had gone rosy, and her delicious cotton candy scent had intensified, along with the sweet musk of feminine arousal.

She hadn't liked me pointing out how desperate she was for my attention, nevertheless, it was true. Her physical reaction told me all I needed to know about how much she craved it.

You're enjoying paying attention to her, too.

I was hard and the thought of having the whole night to undo her, teach her, show her what else she might enjoy was very, very tempting.

You're not frightening her away, though, are you? All you're doing is proving to her and to yourself that you both want more.

Not necessarily. This was enough for me, certainly. And I hadn't finished what I had planned for her. I hadn't pushed her, hadn't tested her, and she might change her mind after that.

"Now," I said. "Spread your legs for me. Let me see what I paid for."

She hesitated and I waited, watching her face. Watching the emotions chase over her lovely features. Reluctance, anger, defiance, desire. Such an expressive little sub. What were those conflicts inside her? Those warring desires that had her wanting to obey and yet fight? Why she was so coolly self-possessed one moment and vulnerable the next?

I almost wanted her to disobey me, so I could then push us both into something more intense. But this was still too new

for her, and she was afraid, and that fear of hers required time and careful handling, neither of which I had to give. And apart from anything else, I didn't want intense with a woman I had no intention of taking home.

The thought of the gag punishment must have been too much for her, though, because slowly, her thigh eased apart.

I moved soundlessly to the end of the bed, then I reached for her ankles, pulling her down the mattress so her hips were almost at the end. She gave another gasp, shifting in my grip, but then I let go, urging her knees to bend before sliding my hands to her inner thighs and pushing them apart, holding them open with my palms.

Yet another sound escaped her, half a gasp, half a cry, her body tensing.

"Relax," I said. "I told you I needed to examine you thoroughly."

Her breathing was very fast, and her eyes were still tightly shut and that was a problem. Her face was expressive, but to truly know what she was feeling, I needed to see those silvery gray eyes.

"Look at me," I ordered.

Reluctance flickered across her features, but obedience won because, after a long moment, she did as she was told. Her pupils were dilated, and she was shaking slightly.

"You want to use your safe word?" I asked her.

She'd gone scarlet, but I could tell by the stubborn cast of her chin that she was going to refuse. "No," she said hoarsely.

So, she was trying to prove something, was she? Some subs did that, trying to take control by refusing to use their safe word when they should, a dangerous practice I didn't approve of.

In which case you should stop this now.

But the heat inside me was building, the urge to push her harder growing. Her skin was warm and silky beneath my palms, and the scent of her arousal was making my cock ache. The hunger was surprisingly insistent and difficult to ignore, which wasn't something I'd experienced with any of the other subs I played with. Normally, I had no issues with keeping myself in check, but apparently, this little one was different.

There were many things I wanted to do to her...

But no, not tonight. This was about giving her a taste of submission and hopefully proving to her that she wouldn't want it.

But she's into this and it seems you're proving the opposite.

Maybe, but the night wasn't done yet.

"Watch me," I said, then looked down very deliberately between her thighs, at the silver-blond curls and slickness of her delectable little pussy. I could hear her breathing, fast and loud, and I knew she was watching me.

Keeping one hand on her left thigh, I ran an experimental finger through her slick folds. She gasped and jerked in my grip. "Very good," I murmured, making my approval clear. "Wet and slippery, just the way a sub's pussy should be." I

held up my finger so she could see then licked her wetness from it, all salt and musk and sweetness “Delicious,” I added.

Her eyes had gone wide, the defiance gone, leaving only open hunger on her face.

I should stop now. I’d shown her a little of what submission was and allowed myself a taste of her — quite literally — and now that was over.

I should walk away, leave her alone for the night.

But I didn’t.

“Five hundred thousand is a lot of money.” My voice was rougher than I wanted it to be. “From a cursory inspection, it appears you’re worth the price physically. But now I need to see you perform.”

“P-Perform?” she echoed, breaking another rule.

I dropped my hands from her thighs and moved over to the nightstand. She watched me, wide-eyed, but I didn’t explain. It appeared I wasn’t done with her after all.

Pulling open the drawer I looked inside and indeed, there were a few supplies that I made sure this room was always stocked with since I used it on the odd occasion. Not the ball gag I would have preferred, but a length of soft cloth that was more suited to her anyway.

I took it out of the drawer and turned to the bed.

Her gaze dropped to the cloth and widened. “Is that...a gag?”

“You spoke out of turn.” I lifted the cloth and pulled it tight between my hands in front of her. “And you need something to help you stop breaking the rules.”

I lifted a brow, giving her a moment to use her safe word, but she only stared at the cloth then looked up at me, defiance blazing. She didn’t like it and there was fear beneath that defiance, yet she wasn’t going to give in either.

“Not saying your safe word when you need to will earn another punishment,” I reminded her. “Just so you’re aware.”

But there was nothing but silver sparks in her eyes as she shook her head in an adamant no.

Brave little sub. Silly little sub.

If this was her way of pushing back at me, she’d soon learn it wasn’t a good idea. In the meantime, I’d keep an eye on her and if she was too far out of her comfort zone, I’d stop.

“Open your mouth,” I ordered.

She was panting slightly, her pupils fully dilated, but she did as she was told, though not before baring her teeth at me.

“Brat,” I murmured as I eased the cloth between her teeth. “You won’t be able to tell me if you’re uncomfortable, so I want you to shake your head if it’s too much.”

She shrugged as if she didn’t care, but she was biting down hard on that gag, and I could see apprehension in her eyes. But I could live with that, so I tied the gag behind her head and then stepped back, surveying her.

What I wanted next from her would be confronting, but maybe it was for the best. If she didn't want it, then I'd end our little scene and that would be that.

Reluctance stirred inside me, but I ignored it.

Putting a hand on her shoulder, I turned her into her side and tugged open the tie around her wrists, unbinding them. Then I put her on her back again.

"I want to see if everything works as it should," I said at her wide-eyed look. "So, in order to fully determine your sexual responsiveness, I'll need to watch you come. I know I told you that you weren't to touch yourself, but since you haven't earned my touch yet, you will have to."

A wave of red washed over her skin, and I studied her face in case her apprehension had deepened into fear, but there was nothing in her eyes but silver sparks. She might not want to do this, but it was clear she wasn't going to let her own reluctance stop her.

A shot of heat went through me, my cock aching against my zipper, but I ignored it. She was a strong, brave sub who deserved to know that I approved.

"Good," I said. "You have pleased me. So now you can please me again." I folded my arms. "Proceed."

Zara

Oh, God, he couldn't be serious, could he? He couldn't want me to touch myself while he watched? Yet there was no escaping that icy blue gaze.

Yes, that's exactly what he wanted me to do.

I quivered in embarrassment and yet bizarrely, the pressure between my thighs become more demanding. As if I hadn't thought not five minutes ago that I certainly wouldn't be touching myself while he was around, let alone with him watching.

As if there was nothing I'd rather do.

How was this even happening?

Closing my eyes had been a mistake. The instant I'd done so all my awareness had zeroed in on him. The sound of his voice, the warmth of his presence. Then the brush of his finger at my throat, the heat of his palm against my breast, and the slide of his finger between my thighs. Little electric shocks, every inch of skin hyper-sensitized.

Then he'd told me to look at him and I hadn't wanted to, but something in me wouldn't let me refuse. Something in me wanted to obey, wanted to please him, because the approval in his voice when he'd examined me...

God, part of me had ached. As if all this time I'd been craving his approval and hadn't known it till now. Craving his sharp, focused attention as he'd looked at every inch of my body. Then when he'd said 'good' and 'delicious' and 'satisfactory', each word had been like warm bursts of sunlight, setting me aglow. As if I'd been a plant stuck in a dark corner for years and had now been put on a shelf and exposed to the light.

I was worth the money, that's what he'd said. He'd stood at the foot of the bed after he'd licked my wetness off his finger, and there had been blue fire in his eyes.

Of course, then he'd gagged me, which I hadn't liked one bit, but he'd also freed my hands, which helped. Not that I'd let something as trivial as a piece of cloth between my teeth get to me, and he'd needed to know that.

Except I wasn't thinking of that gag now. Now what bothered me was him standing at the foot of the bed, his arms folded across his broad chest, his whole attention focused on me, expecting me to touch myself until I came. While he watched.

And the really messed up thing was that I wanted to.

I wanted to desperately. I wanted to be all those things he'd said, responsive and delicious, and worth the money,

even as another piece of me was furious at how weak I was that I needed a man's validation.

I didn't have to do what he said. I could give him my safe word, but that would be wimping out. And I didn't want to wimp out.

Do you really need to prove anything to him?

Maybe it wasn't him I was proving myself to. Maybe it was to myself. Maybe I needed to do it so I knew what I was capable of, that there was nothing I wouldn't do to get the money I was owed and change my life.

Just lie back and think of Santorini?

Except, I couldn't concentrate on Santorini, not with him standing there, staring at me, the stern headmaster vibes out of control.

I only ever touched myself in the darkest part of the night when I could claim a few moments of physical pleasure. I'd certainly never done it with anyone watching. I hadn't even fantasized about it.

Yet, I was panting, my body trembling. I could still feel the lingering electricity of his touch at my throat, my breasts, and between my thighs, all adding to the pressure in my sex.

He'd told me not to meet his gaze, but I went ahead and met it anyway, searching that cold blue stare. Would he like to watch me? Would it crack all that ice? Would it affect him as badly as it was affecting me?

He didn't warn me to lower my eyes, he simply lifted one black brow. "Well? You know I don't like asking twice."

A rush of defiance filled me. He thought I wasn't going to. He thought I was going to safe word out of this.

Hell. No.

I lifted a shaking hand to my stomach and a flare of heat and approval shifted in his eyes, making a traitorous warmth bloom somewhere behind my breastbone. I wanted more of that approval. I wanted to please him.

Before I could second-guess myself, I slid my hand further down, my fingertips grazing my damp curls.

His gaze sharpened, the ice in it melting, and my breath caught. I *was* affecting him. He was getting off on watching me. Me, the virgin with nothing to her name but a bit of meager ambition was making the much older, powerful, and experienced billionaire hot.

A rush of heady power filled me, and I slid my hand down further, his stare on mine as I brushed over my aching clit, a shockwave of pleasure sweeping over me. I shuddered, gasping.

His gaze dropped to my hand. "Stroke your clit," he ordered. "Nice and slow."

And I did, the way he studied what I was doing so intently adding to the sensation as I brushed my finger over my slick flesh, watching his face even as he watched my hand. It was such a beautiful face, the carved lines so stark and pure. Straight nose, high cheekbones, hard mouth. A stern face, like an angel of judgment who let nothing touch him. Yet I could see the glint of fire in his eyes. He couldn't hide it from me.

Pleasure licked up my spine in response, a white-hot wave, shocking me with its intensity. I'd never thought I'd enjoy a man's desire for me, but his was different. It was hidden, controlled, only something he showed when he chose to, and for some reason that made me want it. That made me crave it.

I stroked my clit again, shuddering, and he looked up from my hand suddenly and met my gaze. There it was, that blue fire. Burning bright. He was showing it to me, giving it to me. It was *for* me.

“Put your finger in your cunt.” His voice was still dark and cold as he said the word, making it sound unbelievably dirty. “Do it slowly and then add another finger. Fuck yourself until you come.”

The words wound their way through me, dark and dirty and raw, and I couldn't look away from the fierce blaze in his eyes. I bit down on the gag, shaking as I slid one finger through my wet sex, finding the entrance to my body and pushing inside. I was so slick, there was no resistance.

I moaned against the cotton, unable to stop myself, as another burst of pleasure licked up inside me again. His gaze dropped to my hand once more and then he moved, taking a step forward to the bed. He put his hands on my spread thighs, pressing them wider and holding them open, watching my hand, watching my sex as if he'd never seen anything so fascinating in all his life.

I hadn't thought this would be hot. I hadn't thought that him merely looking at me would make me so desperate, but

the weight of his hands on my thighs and the heat of his palms on my bare skin, set off a fire in me that I couldn't stop.

I was so hungry, starved. Physical pleasure was something I hadn't had much of in my life, not when that life had mostly revolved around survival and keeping myself safe. This was as if I'd only ever had stale bread and Fox had just shown me that chocolate cake existed.

It was too much. It was not enough.

I shuddered, groaning against the gag as I added another finger, sliding both deep inside me, my hips lifting against the movement, needing the friction. I slid them out and back in again, liquid pleasure spiraling through me. I was embarrassingly wet, and my breathing was humiliatingly fast, and yet all I was aware of was his gaze between my legs. It was almost as if he was touching me.

He lifted his head, the fire in his eyes leaping high. "Come for me," he ordered, the force of his authority irresistible. "Come for me now."

I wouldn't have thought it was possible to do so on command, not in a million years, yet I felt the orgasm crash over me in a hot, brutal wave, a blaze of pleasure so intense I screamed against the gag, my sex pulsing around my fingers.

He didn't take his eyes off me as he reached down and took my hand from between my thighs. Then he put my fingers in his mouth and licked my orgasm from them. The feel of his hot mouth made me shudder and shake, made me pant, and then his tongue wrapped around each finger, licking each fingertip, his gaze boring into mine as he did so.

Then he pulled my fingers out of his mouth. “Your orgasm tastes delicious. Definitely worth the five hundred thousand I paid.” He laid my hand back on my stomach. “But a taste is all it will be. You’re beautiful, little one. But I’m not taking you home tonight.”

Cold shock chased away the warm, lazy feeling that had been curling through me, and for some reason, my first thought wasn’t about the success or failure of my mission, it was that he couldn’t leave me after that. He couldn’t give me a glimpse of pleasure, of heat, of what it was like to have his attention, to be his whole focus, and then snatch it away. It was as if I’d been sleeping in the snow and he’d opened the door into a beautiful warm house and invited me inside, only to then slam the door in my face.

I sat bolt upright and jerked the gag off. “You bastard. So, what was that? A demonstration? You using me give yourself a little thrill?”

He stiffened. “You wanted to know what being a sub was like, so I showed you.”

“You did.” I flung the gag over the side of the bed. “And I want more.”

His gaze narrowed. “That’s not your decision.”

Frustration coiled inside me. “You got off on that, don’t tell me you didn’t.”

“Then it’s a good thing I don’t let my cock do my thinking for me, isn’t it?” The fire that had been in his eyes slowly began to freeze over. “You’re too young for me and you’re

also too inexperienced. I'm not in the business of teaching new subs how to behave."

Oh, so he was going to be an asshole about this, was he?

I slid down the bed and then knelt upright on the mattress at the end of it, right in front of where he stood, not caring that I was naked. "But what if I want you to? You can't just give me a taste of...of that and then leave.

"Yes, I can." His arms were folded across his chest, blue eyes icy. "You think that was it? That obeying a few orders, having your hands tied, and being gagged is as intense as it gets? Because if so, you're wrong. I haven't even begun teaching you how to submit, little one, don't you understand? I can turn you inside out. I can make you give up every one of your secrets and you'll be glad to. You'll be begging to."

I didn't even think about why that would be a terrible idea. All I knew was that I couldn't let him walk away. "So? That sounds great to me."

But the look on his face shut down. "No."

My heartbeat raced. For the first time in my life, I wanted something that wasn't just safety and survival, that wasn't Santorini and completely out of my reach. I wanted him. His touch, his attention. The pleasure he gave me and the heat of it. And it was a glory to know what I wanted and to be able to choose it.

I wanted him to show me more. I wanted him to show me *everything*.

“Fine,” I snapped heedlessly. “Then I’ll find another man who can do this for me. I know there are clubs. I’ll find one. I’ll go right in and let them do whatever they want to—”

His hand shot out and took my throat in a firm grip, silencing me. His eyes blazed with a dark fire. “No,” he said with deadly menace. “You will not.”

My fear leaped high at the way he held me, at the strength of his hand, but I only stared back. “So, stop me.”

Tennyson

I'd tried to do the right thing, tried to put her at a distance, tried to tell her no. I'd even told myself I'd be fine with her wandering the fetish clubs of Manhattan, trying to find someone to give her what I had.

But something had woken in me, something possessive that had been asleep a long time, and she was the one who'd woken it.

I'd already been hard before her exquisite little performance and now I was even harder, and the thought of another man taking what I'd bought and paid for was...not happening.

You weren't supposed to let her get under your skin.

I wasn't and yet somehow it had happened anyway. Distance was the way I usually played it, and that was why I'd avoided getting to know the subs I played with. Why I only played with the club subs, never getting too close, never getting in too deep. The power exchange was limited in my

case. A sub would give me their submission for a night and in return, I would give them the pleasure they craved. We both got something out of it. But I never hit Dom space the way a sub could go into subspace. I never got that high, the rush that some Doms got.

Yet just before, watching this little one fuck herself with her fingers as she obeyed my commands to the letter, her silvery eyes darkening as she came...

I was aware of nothing but her. The whole world, Caleb, Fox Tech, the Hamiltons, and even my worries for Isabel had fallen away. All there was, was this fascinating little sub and the pleasure I'd given her glowing bright in her eyes. And how I wanted to show her more, what deeper pleasure there was to be had under my control.

It was dangerous to feel this way about her — it was dangerous to feel anything at all — but one thing I knew: I couldn't let her go searching for this from someone else. She was too new and wouldn't know which clubs were decent or which Doms were good. She was also too vulnerable for an inexperienced Dom.

You can make it about saving her all you want, but the simple fact is you want her because you've made her yours.

I shoved the thought away, staring into her eyes, her pulse fast against my palm. She was very warm and smelled of sweetness and sex. The scattering of stars on her forearm was stark against her pale skin, and I suddenly wanted to know why stars? Why a little cat? Why that delicate flower on her side beneath her arm?

“Please,” she said, the fury dying out of her gaze and leaving behind it that sweet and unexpected vulnerability. “I’ve never belonged to anyone before and just for tonight I...I want to belong to you.”

A weight in my chest shifted at the bare honesty in her voice. This was the truth. This was a little piece of herself she was giving me, and I could already tell what a gift it was, especially considering she was so guarded and defensive.

You can't refuse that, not when you want it, too.

I wasn't a good man. I never had been. And while I certainly pretended, I was — I was nothing if not a hypocrite after all — I couldn't pretend that I didn't want her on her knees at my feet. That I didn't want her to belong to me just as she wanted to belong, even if it was only for a night.

She'd done well tonight so far and leaving her alone would be a poor way to reward her.

I firmed my grip on her throat and held her gaze with mine. “You will be afraid, little one,” I said softly. “And I will use that fear. I will turn you inside out. It will all be mine in the end, all your secrets, all your passions. Everything that you are.”

She swallowed, her throat moving against my palm. “Only if I give it all to you. And I might not.”

She's got your number.

Oh, she might think she did, but she didn't, and the anticipation of the battle of wills to come was already making adrenaline flood through me in a hot rush.

She would be the distraction I needed tonight, the perfect focus. And perhaps if I had tonight, I'd be better able to deal with the question of Isabel and the danger to her from the Hamiltons.

So, I stared hard at the little sub kneeling on the bed in front of me, beautifully naked and still flushed from that orgasm she'd given herself under my direction. Her pulse raced beneath my palm.

She was still far too young, but better I show her what she really wanted than some other Dom who didn't know what they were doing, especially young men who thought domination was all about them and what they wanted.

I stroked the side of her silky neck with my thumb, watching heat flicker in her eyes in response. "Some rules," I said. "You will do what I say at all times. You will not speak unless spoken to. You will follow every order I give you and you will not protest. Talking back, speaking out of turn, any kind of disobedience will result in punishment and some of those punishments may be physical." I stroked her again. "Are you sure you're ready for that?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yes. Yes, I'm ready."

I searched her face to be sure, but there was no doubt in her eyes, so I took my hand from her throat and turned, going over to where her cloak lay on the floor. I picked it up, plus the purse that sat next to it, and brought both back to the bed. "Come here." I pointed to the floor in front of me.

She slipped off the bed and stood where I'd indicated. I wrapped the cloak around her shoulders and fastened it at her

throat, handed her the purse, then I took her chin between my fingers and tilted her head back, so she was looking straight up at me. “You will address me as ‘Sir’. Since you refuse to give me your name, I will continue to address you as ‘little one’. If you want another name, you’ll have to earn one, understand?”

She flushed as if embarrassed, but only nodded.

Satisfied, I gripped her arm and escorted her from the room.

My driver was still waiting outside the hotel, so I bundled her into the car and issued the order to take us home.

I didn’t speak during the journey, and she remained silent, her hands clasped in her lap, obedient for a change. I took out my phone to check my texts and had to restrain myself from texting Caleb to ask him what was happening with Isabel. I’d given care of her safety over to him and I had to trust that he’d make it his priority, but I still wanted to know what was happening.

He called me a control freak and he wasn’t wrong. I had a few small issues with trust. Then again, Caleb was like a brother to me — or at least, what I’d always imagined a brother to be like since I didn’t have any siblings of my own — and I’d known him since we were both fifteen and alone on the streets together.

He’d looked after Isabel a lot when she was a kid, because I didn’t trust Sir George, and he’d never let me down. He wouldn’t now.

So, I texted Atlas instead. *I won't be back to Arcadia tonight. You and Caleb can do whatever you like.*

There was a pause, then Atlas replied: *Caleb isn't here. Fuck knows where he is.*

Anger flexed inside me, and I almost dialed Caleb's number. But no, he'd told me that if I wanted Isabel kept safe, I had to let him do it his way.

I didn't like it though.

Fine, I texted back. *I presume he's looking after Isabel.*

I'd love to chat about this more, Atlas responded. *But I have a situation here. Text you later.*

I frowned at the screen. It was unlike Atlas to be so terse. Then again, if the 'situation' he was dealing with was what I thought it was — a woman, or maybe more than one — then no wonder he wasn't interested in chatting.

Atlas was a playboy through and through and he didn't care who knew it.

I found his lifestyle distasteful — a playboy in their twenties is very different from a playboy in their early forties — but then he found me judgmental, so I suppose that made us even.

He was a good man, though. He'd had my back during one of the hardest times of my life, as had Caleb, and while I knew I was a difficult person to be friends with, I valued having both men in my corner.

Beside me, the little one shifted and abruptly I forgot all about my friends as her scent, sweetness and delicate musk wove around me, reminding me of the sight of her fingers moving in her pussy and her hips shifting, of the sound of her moans through the cotton of her gag. The way she'd come exactly when I'd instructed her to do so, the orgasm lighting her up like a flame to dry tinder.

My cock pressed uncomfortably against the zipper of my pants, and I found myself debating the merits of pulling her into my lap and fucking her right here in the car. But that was a loss of control I'd never allow myself, plus my driver was present. I kept my predilections private for several reasons, and public scenes had never been my thing anyway. I didn't want to be distracted by onlookers and I didn't want my sub being distracted either.

So, I kept my hunger under a tight leash until we finally got home.

My TriBeCa house had cost me a cool thirty million when I'd bought it years ago and I'd spent a few million more on turning it into a fortress. On three levels, it was full of state-of-the-art smart home technology that I'd built Fox Tech on, and no one got in if I didn't want them to.

My driver took us into the underground parking garage beneath the building and from there, I ushered her into the elevator that took us into the house.

She said nothing the whole way, though when we finally stepped out of the elevator into the first-floor hallway, she stared around as if she'd never been in a house before.

I preferred uncluttered, clean lines in my living areas, so the hall was white, the floor polished dark wood. I liked the same in my artwork so most of the art on the walls was black and white, though there were a couple of bright bursts of color too, in the form of some abstracts. Juliana's favorite.

I took the sub's elbow and urged her down the hallway toward the living area. It was one of my favorite places — massive and open, with windows down one end. There was a huge, white sectional sofa that faced the windows, and white rugs on the dark carpet of the floor. Discreet white shelves lined the white walls and were filled with neatly shelved books and the odd piece of elegant artwork, as well as the sleek, silver slabs of my AV system. A low coffee table sat before the sofa, nothing on it but a plain glass vase with one delicate orchid placed with artistic precision. The orchid was from my housekeeper, who always felt as if my house could do with some 'life'.

The little one was looking around, her eyes wide. Obviously, she wasn't used to a place like this. It made me wonder where she'd come from, what the truth about her was, and what her motives for being here were. She wanted me and she wanted to explore her submissive side, but there was more to it than that, I was certain. Perhaps tonight, I'd find out.

"Kneel," I ordered, pointing to the carpet in front of me.

Her attention came back to me, and I could see familiar sparks glow in her eyes again. I felt the dominant in me shift at her response, all my focus zeroing in on her.

Pretty sub. Disobedient sub. Was she going to test me? I hoped so.

“Drop your gaze,” I said softly. “And kneel. Do not make me say it again.”

A flush rose to her cheeks and this time she did as she was told, lowering her gaze, and then going gracefully to her knees on the carpet in front of me.

I looked down at her, kneeling so beautifully, attention straight ahead, and my cock became insistent. “You wanted to get rid of your virginity, little one,” I said. “In which case, I’ll take it now.”

Zara

Finally, I was here, in his house, and I should have been thinking about my mission. But I couldn't. All I could think about was that this was what I'd asked for, this was what I'd wanted.

Him.

I shivered, my heartbeat raging in the cage of my ribs.

Had I made the right choice in pleading the way I had back in the hotel? It had been a risk to be that honest, to show him a piece of my soul, but I hadn't been able to think of another way to convince him.

'You will be afraid. I'm going to turn you inside out.... It will all be mine in the end. All your secrets. All your passions. Everything that you are...'

What he'd said to me earlier echoed in my head, along with the darkness in his voice. A warning and maybe a promise as well, though it was too late for second thoughts. I'd made my decision.

I was scared, it was true, no point in pretending I wasn't. But I hadn't lied to him. I'd wanted to be his for tonight. I'd wanted all the pleasure he could give because I hadn't realized what I was missing out on until he'd shown me back in that hotel room.

And there was also that aching part of me that wanted to know what it felt like to belong to someone because I never had. And if it was going to be anyone, it had to be him. He'd kept his word and hadn't hurt me. He'd given me only what I'd asked for and nothing I hadn't. And at every stage, he'd given me a chance to refuse, to get out if I wanted.

It wasn't his fault I hadn't taken any of those chances.

He reached down to the catch of my cloak and undid it, sliding the fabric away. Then he gathered it up carefully over one arm and took it to the long, low white leather sectional sofa and laid it down on the cushions.

The air was cool against my heated skin, but not uncomfortably so.

It was a nice room, very restful with its white walls, dark carpet, and sleek shelving, though I found it slightly clinical. There were no photos anywhere and nothing that looked in any way personal, and I probably should have paid more attention since the whole reason I was here was to find evidence that he'd murdered his mentor, but I couldn't concentrate. He'd returned to where I knelt, standing in front of me and all my focus was on him.

He could be a murderer. You realize that don't you?

I didn't know why the thought hadn't occurred to me before and even now, it didn't make much of an impression. Because while Tennyson Fox was cold and distant, the man who'd told me he didn't hurt women, who'd steadied me with his hands as he helped me to my feet, who'd given me all the chances in the world to say no, couldn't have taken someone's life.

You don't know that.

I shoved the thought away hard.

"You're pretty naked, sub," he said. "Therefore, you will always be naked in this house. Clothes are not acceptable. However, if you're cold, I expect you to tell me so I can adjust the temperature for your comfort."

Always be naked...

I'd been ogled by men many times, but it had never been admiring. It had always been predatory. They saw a pretty, fragile-looking blonde woman. Someone naive they could easily manipulate and failing that, easily overpower. They didn't care about me, because it wasn't actually me they wanted. What they wanted was to feel like a big man, a powerful man, in charge and in control.

I hated it and yet I already knew it wouldn't be like that with Fox. The way he looked at me was intense and hot, and it was clear he liked what he saw. But because he had nothing to prove, it didn't feel predatory in the same way.

Also, I *wanted* him to look at me. I wanted him to want me.

Pathetic. Your daddy issues are going to get you into trouble.

But I wasn't going to fucking listen to those thoughts, to those doubts. Tonight, I'd allow myself to have him and the pleasure he gave me. It still felt strange that I liked him being so dominating, and maybe that made me fucked up, but I wasn't going to second-guess it. Life hadn't given me much in the way of bright days, so why shouldn't I take one when the opportunity came?

That didn't make me weak or pathetic, it didn't.

"You say 'yes sir' when I give you an instruction," he said. "Repeat it for me, please."

I swallowed. "Yes...S-sir."

"Very good."

The satisfaction in his voice made warmth glow in my chest.

Slowly he circled me again, coming to stand behind me. He was very close. I could feel his heat and smell the warm spice and faint pepper of his aftershave. My skin prickled and tightened. I wanted to turn to see what he was doing because I was getting nervous. But then I heard him move, felt him as he dropped to his knees on the carpet behind me, so close and yet not enough to touch.

I caught my breath, every part of me focused on the man at my back.

He said nothing, but his fingertips brushed over my shoulders and down, following the line of my spine, a

featherlight touch that made me tremble all over. Then his fingers moved to my hips and up my side, tracing the line of my body, making the prickling sensation worse.

Then abruptly his palms flattened against my skin as he gripped me by the hips, pulling me back against him. I couldn't stop the sharp breath that escaped as I felt the muscled strength of him behind me, his body rock-hard beneath the layers of cotton and wool of his clothes, and so hot. As was the length of his cock pressed against my ass.

I flushed helplessly, pleased that I'd affected him so badly and yet nervous as hell because what I'd felt back in the hotel hadn't been my mistake. He really was that large.

His hands slid from my hips to my stomach and then he stroked up, cupping my breasts in his palms. His touch was hot, burning against my bare skin and I shuddered with pleasure, unable to help it. The feeling of him at my back, so strong and powerful didn't feel like a threat, even though it should. Even though having a man behind me so much bigger than I was, a man who was essentially a stranger, should terrify me.

Yet my fear didn't feel cold this time and there was an element of excitement to it that I didn't understand. I didn't know why having him behind me, holding me, should make me feel safe either, but it did.

"I need as much information about your responses as possible," he murmured in my ear. "So, you'll tell me what you're feeling when I ask, understand?"

I could barely speak, the touch of his hands driving every thought from my head. Perhaps this safety was an illusion. I was giving in too easily, trusting too quickly. Perhaps I needed to fight him, but then he'd punish me and what would the punishment be?

“W-what if I don't want to?” I forced out.

“No,” he chided, the warmth of his breath brushing the side of my neck, just below my ear. “Don't spoil it now. If you want to come when I fuck you for the first time, then do as you're told.” With another abrupt movement, he dropped his hands from my breasts and pushed me forward onto my hands and knees.

I took another sharp breath. He was behind me, looking down at me, making me feel so exposed. Yet that somehow added to my excitement, to the beating pulse between my thighs.

I was *his* tonight and there was a freedom in that, I realized. I didn't have to make any decisions or pay any attention to my constant nagging fear. Tonight, I was safe. Tonight, pleasure was mine if I wanted to take it and I did, so much.

So, I wasn't going to fuck this up. Even if that meant following his orders and not kicking back.

Seriously? Not even one refusal? How weak does that make you?

For once, I didn't care how weak it made me. If it got me pleasure and one of those amazing orgasms again, if it meant I

could forget about my entire fucking life for one night, who cared?

And your mission? What about that?

But I didn't want to think about my goddamn mission, not now, so I shoved the thought away. And then everything in my head blasted apart as his hands settled on my hips, squeezing, before trailing down over my butt to my thighs, stroking lightly, and back up again.

I shuddered, the heavy, pulsing ache between my legs getting stronger.

“Put your head down,” he ordered. “Ass in the air, cheek on the carpet.”

All the fight had gone out of me, along with the million questions thrown at me from my continually racing brain. The only thing I wanted was his strong hands on my hips and his orders, so I didn't have to question myself all the time. Because I was tired of it. Tired of trying to figure out how I felt and why and whether those feelings were even ones I should feel. Tired of trying to pretend I was strong and that I didn't need validation.

I wanted someone to tell me it was okay, that everything would be fine. I wanted someone to take care of me because no one ever had.

So, I didn't protest. I put my head down and pressed my cheek to the carpet. It exposed me even more, especially when he used his knees to press mine wider apart, but it was also the most incredible turn-on, making me feel dirty in a good way.

“I need to check how wet you are.” His voice was all ice, which made what he was saying sound even filthier. “And I want you to keep still while I do so. What do you say?”

Oh, God, that was a prompt, wasn't it? What was I supposed to say again?

My brain spun frantically. “I...um....y-yes Sir.”

That must have been right, because his hand slipped between my thighs, his fingers beginning to explore the slick folds of my pussy. I shut my eyes, a soundless gasp escaping me as pleasure wrapped me in a fine, electric net and pulled tight.

His touch was delicate, almost frustratingly so, at least until he found my clit, stroking it in little circles and making me tremble. Then he pinched it, sending a white-hot burst of pleasure/pain straight through me. I cried out in surprise because I wasn't expecting it, and he did it again, making my whole body jerk with shocked pleasure.

“No.” His hand came down on my ass in a hard swat that made me go rigid with yet more shock. “I told you to keep still. If you move again, I'll spank you.”

For a second, I didn't know what to do or what to think, or even how to feel, because it had hurt. And I'd been hurt—

“Stop thinking.” His icy voice cut through my thoughts like a knife. “Pain might bring back bad memories, but you're not with whoever hurt you now. You're with me. And every touch I choose to give you is for your pleasure.” He didn't wait to let me think about that either, one finger finding the

entrance to my body and sliding inside, and everything was lost another wild burst of sensation that pulled the net of ecstasy tighter.

I couldn't resist it. I didn't want to resist it. I didn't want those bad memories in my head, so I closed my eyes and let the pleasure take me, a soft moan escaping as he eased his finger out and then back in again, setting up a rhythm that had me panting. He added a second and I made another sound, groaning at the delicious burn of my sex stretching around his fingers. They were big fingers and long and I shivered, because even those felt like too much. How the hell was I going to handle anything more?

"You're nice and slick." Approval warmed the ice in his voice, making me ache. "Very good, little one. But you could always do with more." He took his fingers away and before I had a chance to protest, his hands gripped my thighs and then his tongue was pushing through the folds of my sex, licking me from behind like I was an ice cream cone he couldn't get enough of.

I jerked as that wicked tongue of his flicked my clit in a way that had me trembling. "Oh my God," I whispered into the carpet. "Oh my God." Then I realized I'd spoken out of turn and that he might stop and punish me. I couldn't bear it if he stopped, so I put my hands over my mouth to stifle the sounds he brought from me.

His tongue pushed into me, hard and deep, his hands on my thighs holding me steady as I trembled and jerked in his grip.

There were lights behind my eyes, a building pressure between my thighs.

His tongue flicked and licked, and pushed in again, penetrating me, making me sob with pleasure into my hands. Then without warning it was gone and his fingers pinched my clit once more, and the orgasm exploded inside me like a bomb going off.

I screamed into my hands as pleasure ripped through me in a shockwave, and I shook and shook. I was barely aware of him moving behind me, or of the sound of his belt buckle being undone, his zipper pulled down, the rustle of a foil packet. There was only the roar of my heartbeat, my heaving breaths, and the short, sharp electrical pulses of the aftershocks.

“Use your hands,” he ordered, his warmth at my back. “Hold your pussy open for me.”

I was still shuddering through the effects of the orgasm and my hands were shaking, but I reached down, my breathing erratic as I found the folds of my wet sex and spread them apart.

Once again, I was exposed and open to him, and everything tightened inside me, knowing he was kneeling there, watching me, the force of his gaze like a hand stroking over my skin.

Did he like what he saw? Was he getting off on this too? Not being able to see him was driving me mad, but maybe that was the point. Maybe I just had to trust that he was.

Silence fell in the room, broken only by my ragged breathing. He didn't move or speak, and God, the anticipation was killing me. I had to bite my tongue to stop from speaking.

“What do you say?” he asked at last. “I think you forgot, sub.”

Oh fuck. “Y-yes, Sir,” I forced out.

“Good girl.” Fabric rustled behind me. “You look pretty like this, with your cunt all wet and open for me. I might take a photo later, for my own private collection. But first...” One hand landed on my hip, gripping it and then I felt the blunt head of his cock against my sensitive flesh, pushing in, stretching me wider than his fingers had. I shivered.

“This might hurt.” There was a rough note now in his cool voice. “But that should ease after a few moments.” Then before I could catch my breath, he thrust deep inside me.

The bright flash of pain made me whimper. He felt huge, stretching sensitive tissues, and I couldn't do anything but pant, tears prickling behind my lids.

“Take me.” The rough note was more pronounced now, shaving all the ice from his voice and thrilling the part of me that was aware enough to hear it. “Take all of me, sub.” He pushed even deeper, and I panted, gasping against the carpet, breathing through the pain as it turned into something darker, something hungrier and more demanding.

I didn't think it was possible to be building toward yet another orgasm so soon, yet I was.

“Good,” he murmured. “Good, little one.” He flexed his hips, his cock sliding out before pushing back in, his rhythm steady and slow, making me want to move with him. Making me want to be good for him. Making me want to do anything for him if only he would go faster, make this incredible pleasure even more intense.

I almost begged but remembered at the last minute that I wasn't supposed to speak out of turn. All I could do was moan as he gripped me in his strong hands, his thrusts finally getting faster. “This pussy is mine now,” he said, soft and dark. “I paid a lot of money for it and it's tight and wet, and hot, just the way I like it.” He gave another deep thrust, then paused deep inside me. “Hands behind your back.”

“Yes, S-Sir.” I did as I was told, putting my shaking hands behind me.

He gripped my wrists in one hand, the other braced on my hip, and then he began to fuck me again, harder this time. “You're mine too, sub. Tonight, you belong to me and no one else, understand?”

I gasped and shuddered, the words moving through me, binding me as tightly as any restraints. As tight as his grip on me.

But this time there was no fear. I belonged to him. Tonight, I was his.

Me, who'd never belonged to anyone. Who'd been left by my mother, treated like dirt by my father and as an object by everyone else.

Now, I was his and my heart ached and ached.

He went hard and deep and if my hands had been free, I would have been clawing at the carpet. But he held onto them and all I could do was moan helplessly as the orgasm coiled like a snake deep inside me. He reached around at the end to give my clit another pinch and then I was screaming once again as the orgasm swept over me, making lights burst behind my eyes and my cries of release echo around his expensive, white room.

Dimly, I felt him pull out and the moment his hands left my hips, my knees didn't want to work, and I curled up on the carpet, my eyes closed as the aftershocks of the orgasm pulsed through me, leaving behind them the most delicious warm lassitude.

Maybe I fell asleep for a moment there because the next thing I knew strong arms were lifting me and I was settled against a hard, hot chest. I could smell him, warm spice, cedar and pepper, and something in me that had been tense for too many years to count relaxed.

As if now he held me, I didn't have to be afraid of anything ever again. I was safe.

I rested my head against his shoulder and turned my face into his shirt, and shut my eyes, breathing him in, content to think of nothing and just feel him holding me. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had. Mom maybe? Back when I was little, before she'd left. Certainly no one had held me since. No one had hugged me. The only physical contact had been Dad, kicking me in the guts.

But I didn't to think too deeply about that because it was painful and what I wanted now was warmth and him holding me against his chest.

Too soon, though, I was being laid on something soft. I kept my eyes closed, too sleepy to move, even when he eased my thighs apart and stroked over my sex with what felt like a warm cloth, easing the burn. Then cool sheets were pulled over me and I snuggled down into the pillow.

I had the vague sense that I should be doing something, but before I could figure out what it was, I fell asleep.

Tennyson

I sat in my office, my chair turned to the view through the windows behind my desk, the lights turned off.

It had been an hour since I'd put the little sub to sleep the guest bedroom and my head was still full of her. My cock, too, was insisting that I wake her up and continue with our scene in the living room, because I'd had some plans. Plans that included the bag of tricks I kept in the closet in my bedroom.

I didn't have a playroom here — I preferred to conduct my scenes in the clubs I went to — but I'd collected a few pieces of my favorite equipment, and I'd been very much looking forward to using them on her.

Except I'd gathered her up in my arms and put her to bed instead.

I was supposed to have a night, that's what I'd allowed myself, that's what I'd paid for, and yet after seeing her curl up on my carpet, naked and trembling, dark circles under her eyes, all I'd been conscious of was a fierce protectiveness.

It was late and she looked exhausted, and my dominant instincts were telling me that initiating another scene with her would be a mistake. She was new to submission, new to all the intense feelings that came with it, and she needed some quiet time.

After care wasn't something I enjoyed. I provided physical care, such as blankets and warm cloths, but if a sub wanted touch and emotional reassurance, they would have to find another Dom. I didn't have that in me to give.

But this little sub had chosen me, had given herself to me, and she was vulnerable. She was my responsibility, and I couldn't leave her shivering on the carpet alone.

So, I'd picked her up in my arms, holding her warmth nestled against my chest, her weight in my arms strangely right in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then she'd turned her face into my shirt, and I'd realized something at that moment, something that should have been clear to me since she'd knelt on the bed in that hotel room.

This was trust. She was naked in my arms, her silver blonde hair spread over my shoulder, her body lax and sleepy and sated from the orgasms I'd given her. And she'd turned her face into my chest because she felt safe. Because she felt protected. Because she trusted me.

It was a gift that trust and a precious one. And she'd given it to me.

If she knew what you did, she wouldn't.

My chest tightened painfully. No, she wouldn't, even though what I'd done was over fifteen years in the past and I'd done it to protect Isabel.

Nothing could change the fact that I'd killed a man, though. And no one except Atlas, not even Caleb, the man I called brother, knew about it. Ridiculous not to tell my oldest friend, the man who'd once run New York's biggest crime empire, because he out of anyone would have understood. But at the time Caleb had needed a conscience, a friend who'd remained untouched by things he'd been immersed in, and I was that friend. I had to be above it all. And it wasn't that I thought I was better — I knew I wasn't — I only wanted him to have some hope. Hope that he, too, could get out.

Except you got in just as deep as he was and the difference between the two of you is that at least he never hid what he was.

Caleb had always been upfront about his past and the kind of man he was, while I kept all the flawed parts of me, all the parts I didn't want anyone to know about, secret. Some parts I was ashamed of, while others I didn't want Isabel to have to bear the burden of — I didn't want *anyone* to have to bear the burden of — so it was better that they didn't know.

My life was a series of rooms, each with a door that stayed closed and locked, and only I had the key. Only I could move between them. It was a system that had worked well for me so far, and yet I couldn't shake the sense that some of the rooms were not as separate as I wanted them to be. That they were more interconnected than I thought.

Disquiet ran through me, and after a moment, I shoved back my chair and went over to the shelving unit that stood against the wall, opening one of the cupboards where I kept my scotch. I poured myself a dram of my favorite — an old and rare Macallen — then I took the tumbler back to my desk, sat down, and took a large swallow. The alcohol went down far too easily, settling warmly in my gut, though it did nothing to ease the disquiet.

I shouldn't be thinking of the little sub, and I shouldn't be thinking of the past, what I should be thinking about was the Hamiltons and the question of why they'd started moving against me *now*.

For years they'd been quiet, and I'd wondered if they were finally going to leave Isabel and me alone. Then I'd heard through some sources that their interest had once again shifted in my direction, though why I had no idea.

I hadn't done anything to attract their notice, though Fox Tech had been doing extremely well lately. Perhaps it had been the rumors of me naming Isabel as my successor — at least Caleb certainly seemed to think it was that. He thought they'd move on her, somehow get her on their side and ultimately get their hands on Fox Tech as some kind of revenge against me.

Me, for killing their daughter.

You kind of did.

Juliana had died of a hemorrhage when Isabel was born, and yes, I suppose if you looked at it like that, if I hadn't gotten her pregnant, she wouldn't have died.

An old grief twisted inside me, the kind of grief that never leaves you, that sinks its teeth deep into your heart. A grief that was parts loneliness and despair, loss and rage, and a guilt that wouldn't leave me alone.

Guilt that loving me had led to her death.

Guilt that I hadn't been able to save her.

Guilt that my grief for her had damaged my relationship with Isabel, perhaps irreparably.

I lifted my tumbler and took another sip, rubbing absently at my chest with the other, the place where the grief had settled in and taken hold.

Thinking about Juliana was futile. That was an old path and well worn, and it led nowhere good. Better to think of the little sub and all the pleasure she'd given me tonight, and it had been *such* pleasure.

The moment I'd knelt behind her on the floor and pulled her against me, the heat and softness of her body, the scent of her arousal, had ignited my intense hunger from earlier, in that hotel room.

I wasn't a man who lost control — as a Dom staying in control was the whole point. But if anyone had interrupted us right in that moment, I would have punched them in the face.

There had been nothing in the world except the curve of her hips, the roundness of her ass, the soft, slick folds of her pussy waiting for me. I hadn't wanted to hurt her when I took her — I knew for some women it was painful — so I'd wanted to get her good and wet for my cock. I hadn't intended to taste

her the way I had, though. Oral I gave out only when a sub was extra good, but I'd had a taste of her back in the hotel, and I couldn't resist another. She'd been delicious too, salty/sweet, and hot, squirming in my grip. So perfect that I'd given her another orgasm for the sheer pleasure of listening to her scream against the carpet, her body trembling.

She'd been so responsive, so good for me, and then when I'd pushed inside her, felt her pussy squeeze around me, tight and slick, something had come loose inside me. Something possessive.

A dangerous sign because I never got possessive of a sub. Never ever. Yet there was something about her that had gotten under my skin and stayed there. Perhaps it had been the glimpse of pain in her eyes back in that hotel room, when she'd told me she'd never belonged to anyone. It might have been a manipulation — she'd been so desperate to get back to my place after all — but I didn't think in that moment she'd been trying to manipulate me. In that moment she'd seen something in me that had made her give me a little piece of her soul.

I'd fractured many relationships in my time, burned too many bridges to count. I had Caleb and Atlas, though I had no idea why they continued to put up with me, and then there was Isabel. The most precious relationship of all and I'd broken it, probably beyond repair.

But the little sub had trusted me, and it had been a long time since I'd earned anyone's trust. And now I had hers, I

didn't want to give it up. It felt like hope, and it had been a long time since I'd had hope too.

I shifted restlessly in my chair and took another swallow, the tight feeling in my chest and the warmth of her resting against me lingering, the way she'd turned her cheek against my shirt...

Why had she never belonged to anyone? Who wouldn't have wanted her? She was beautiful and passionate and brave, and also, I suspected, very smart. I literally couldn't think of a single reason why anyone wouldn't want a woman like her. The whole thing spoke of abandonment, and I didn't like that thought, not one bit. Because I knew what that felt like. I knew what it was to be alone. And despite Caleb and Atlas's presence in my life, I'd stayed alone ever since Juliana's death.

It was a choice. I'd never open myself up to that kind of loss ever again.

She's still a risk. You should get rid of her come morning.

Yet that possessiveness inside me growled at the thought. I wasn't done yet. There was too much about her I didn't know, too much I wanted to find out. She was a mystery, a pretty little puzzle and I wanted to unlock her. I wanted to unravel her.

After I'd put her to bed, I'd programmed the lock on her door to stay locked until six am the next morning, just in case she decided to do any late night wandering around — while I might believe she'd probably sleep until morning, I couldn't take any risks, especially when I still suspected her motives

about wanting to be here— so she was safe there for the meantime.

And in the morning...

Lifting the glass again, I took another warming sip, thinking.

I shouldn't keep her. I shouldn't be indulging my curiosity with her. I shouldn't be responding to the dark, possessive thing inside me, the hungry part of me that I'd thought had died with Juliana.

Then again, there was nothing wrong with indulging my curiosity, either emotional or sexual. It didn't mean anything.

I could keep her for the weekend at least if that's what she wanted too. I'd had plans to go into the office for the weekend since I had some R&D reports to go over, but I could cancel that. It had been a while since I'd let myself have a weekend, after all, so why not?

I never played with a sub for more than a night and always at a club. I'd never wanted any of them to be mine. But I couldn't deny that there was a hunger inside me. A hunger for more than a night, for a little sub of my own. An untouched little sub who'd never been anyone else's but mine.

And she *was* mine. I'd bought and paid for her. I'd taken her virginity. I'd given her, her first taste of submission, and that made her mine completely.

An intense satisfaction gathered inside me.

She wanted to be mine, too. She'd told me so. And I didn't think she'd say no to the idea of staying the entire weekend. I

could sweeten the deal, too, with another five hundred perhaps. After all, spending time with the little sub was much better than worrying away at the problem of Isabel. She was under Caleb's protection, and he wouldn't let anything happen to her.

If I had this weekend doing nothing but indulging myself, then maybe I'd be in a better mood to be dealing with Isabel and the issue of the Hamiltons next week. Caleb was always telling me that I was far too uptight and needed to get laid. Perhaps it was time I took his advice.

I finished the scotch, staring out the windows into the neon-soaked Manhattan night, anticipation and hunger already beginning to build inside me at the prospect of a weekend with a sub of my own.

I hadn't felt either of those things in too many years to count and perhaps it was mistake to allow myself to feel them now. Then again, it was only a weekend. I'd satisfy myself and let her go back to her life after that.

Zara

I woke up quite suddenly, conscious that I wasn't on Jay's uncomfortable couch with the springs digging into my back. This was an actual mattress, and it was soft, also there seemed to be a lot of pillows, and instead of blankets there was a thick comforter.

All was silent, and I was warm and very comfortable, so for a moment I lay there in the blissful quiet with my eyes closed, utterly relaxed for the first time in years, trying to remember the lovely dream I'd been having. I'd been in a castle of some kind, in the most beautiful room. I'd been wearing a gorgeous gown and I felt warm and safe and cared for. There had been a wonderful feeling of excitement sitting inside me, as if someone I loved was coming to visit me and I couldn't wait to see them—

Wait. If I wasn't on Jay's couch, then where was I?

I was in a large room with white walls and dark charcoal carpet. The bed I was in was pushed up against one wall and

facing large windows covered by sweeping white curtains. There was nothing else in the room but a large dresser and a couple of nightstands on either side of the bed.

It was as featureless as a hotel room. No, the hotel room I'd been in last night had had more character, so where the hell was this?

Then all the air left my lungs as the memories from the night before caught up with me. The auction, the room after it, the limo, the hotel. Losing my virginity on the living room floor. And...*him*.

Tennyson Fox. Cold blue eyes, powerful hands, control and strength and absolute authority. So. Fucking. Sexy.

A sweeping wave of heat washed through me, and I put my hands over my face, for a second overwhelmed. God, the orders he'd given me and the things he'd said, the things he'd made me do...and I'd done them without protest. No, more than that. I'd loved doing them. I'd *wanted* to do them.

Touching myself to orgasm in front of him. Bending over and letting him eat me out then fuck me from behind. And no fear, no fear at all...

Falling asleep on the carpet like a fool.

Belatedly, a chill crept over my skin. Dangerous to be so out of it with a man who was essentially a stranger to me, then again, there had been that inexplicable feeling of safety with his powerful body behind me. Perhaps I'd been sex drunk or something. All I remembered was being so tired and kind of overwhelmed.

You were naked, in a place you didn't know, with a fucking stranger, and you went to sleep.

Yeah, and that should be freaking me out. But it wasn't.

I remembered him picking me up and holding me against his chest, and that safe feeling had magnified. His arms were strong, and he was so warm, and I'd known nothing could touch me in that moment.

I didn't want to be a damsel in distress. I didn't want to need a man's protection, but sometimes it was hard having to protect yourself all the time, to be on your guard constantly. Sometimes all you wanted was to relax, to know that you were safe, that someone had your back.

I'd done more than relax, though. I'd fallen asleep the moment he'd put me to bed.

I'd trusted him.

I lay there for a moment as the reality of that sank in, and then realized something else. He'd said one night and apart from the sex in the living room, that's all we'd done. He hadn't woken me up and judging from the light coming around the edges of the curtains it was day already, so now our night was over.

An odd sense of deflation hit me. Had he not wanted more? Was that why he'd let me sleep? Because he didn't strike me as being the kind of man who'd be too concerned about my sleep if he wanted more sex. Or maybe he didn't want more sex. Maybe me collapsing like an idiot after he'd fucked me had been a complete turn off.

He preferred you strong and fighting him, not acting like a victim.

A lump rose in my throat, pain collecting inside me, though why I cared so very much I had no idea. I'd only met him the day before and sure, he'd taken my virginity, but it wasn't as if he'd been kind. He'd been cold and distant and controlling, so why did it matter if he didn't want more? I didn't care.

You still haven't got the evidence the Hamiltons want either.

I groaned softly. Fuck. I hadn't even thought about that. I'd gotten here and he'd put me on my knees, and all thought about the stupid evidence I was supposed to find had gone completely out of my head. And now the night was over, and I still didn't have it.

You won't get your money now.

No, fuck that. I wanted that money. I needed it. It was my ticket out of my shitty life, and I wasn't going to let stupid Tennyson Fox sidetrack me. I was still here, which meant I still had time to look for whatever evidence the Hamiltons thought was here. Time to stop lying around in bed and mooning over the dumb hot billionaire.

I shoved myself up and sat on the bed for a moment, listening. It was very quiet. I couldn't even hear the city outside. Then again, the bedroom door was closed and there was probably some expensive soundproofing all through the house. He might be having a massive party out there and I still wouldn't hear anything.

Too bad. Now, while he wasn't here, was the perfect time to start searching.

I slipped out of bed and took a cursory look around for some clothes, before remembering that of course I didn't have any. Damn. Since there wasn't much to be done about that and since I didn't want to go prowling around Fox's house naked, I settled for wrapping a sheet around me before going to the door and opening it.

Outside was a long hallway with various doors leading off it. Right at the end was a big window that gave a view out across the rooftops of buildings nearby and through which light poured.

I still couldn't hear anyone moving around. Was I alone? Or was Fox still somewhere in the house? I'd need to be careful and quiet if so.

Cautiously, I moved down the hallway. There were several doorways, a couple with the doors standing open. They were rooms like the one I'd woken up in, so I was thinking they were guest rooms. One had a door closed and when I tentatively opened it, I found a bathroom behind it.

There was one last door at the end of the hallway, also closed. I gave that a try too, figuring that if Fox caught me, I could just tell him I was trying to find my way to the kitchen or something. It opened into another bedroom, this one obviously the master bedroom since it was huge. Large, floor to ceiling windows opened onto a rooftop terrace and the sun was pouring through them onto the dark carpet.

A huge bed stood against the wall opposite the windows. It was covered in a thick white comforter and there were piles of soft-looking pillows. It didn't look as if it had been slept in, so if this was Fox's room then he'd made the bed the moment he'd gotten up.

I took a couple of steps inside, looking around, scanning for anything personal that would give any hint that this was his room, but there was nothing. No photos, nothing on the chest of drawers near the windows, nothing on the nightstand except a glass of water. It was as hotel pristine as the room I'd woken up in.

I took a breath and glanced behind me through the doorway, my heart beating faster. It was empty and so was the hallway behind it, and I still couldn't hear a thing.

Perfect. If this was his actual bedroom then I needed to look around and see what I could find now, because I didn't know when I'd get another chance.

I took a step toward the chest of drawers.

"What are you doing in here?" a deep, cold male voice said from behind me.

I froze, my heart almost coming to a complete stop in my chest.

What the hell? I'd checked the hallway just a second ago and there had been no sign of him. Either he'd moved so quietly and stealthily I hadn't seen him, or he'd damn well teleported here like a fucking vampire.

“Oh.” I tried to sound nonchalant and casual, like I wasn’t doing anything at all suspicious, all while my heart had started up again, rabbiting around in my chest. “I was just trying to find the kitchen.” Forcing myself to calm down, I turned around and a wave of heat prickled over me, any remaining breath I had escaping from my lungs.

He was standing in the doorway, not in a suit now, but a pair of worn jeans that sat low on his lean hips and a plain black T-shirt. Simple, casual clothes and yet the effect was devastating, the jeans emphasizing his narrow waist and powerful thighs, the T-shirt showing off broad shoulders, muscled arms, and wide chest. His gaze was electric, pinning me as surely as a deer in the headlights of a car.

Oh my God. He was *gorgeous*.

“This is not the kitchen,” he said.

“I know, I only just realized that,” I babbled like an idiot. “Sorry, I was also looking around trying to find the stairs—”

“The stairs right outside your room?”

Oh. Shit.

I swallowed, trying to think of a reasonable excuse for me to be in his bedroom — because this had to be his bedroom, right? — and only being able to think of one. “Actually,” I said, not having to pretend that my voice wasn’t exactly as husky as it sounded. “I was trying to find you.”

His beautiful face remained impassive. “Well,” he murmured. “Now you’ve found me.”

My heart continued to race. Did he believe me? His expression told me nothing. Even worse, I could feel desire gathering inside me, a desire braided through with a thread of delicious fear, and I couldn't look away from him. As if his presence had a gravitational force and I couldn't break free of his orbit.

You're going to have to distract him if you don't want him asking more questions about what you're doing in here.

Shit, no, I definitely didn't want him asking more questions.

"S-Sir," I began.

"This is not a scene. The rules don't apply now."

Oh, right. Well, that was something at least.

I pulled the sheet tighter around me, feeling off-balance, as if he was somehow shaking the ground without even moving and I couldn't find my feet.

Get it together.

I tried to think. Distraction, that's what I'd decided and well, there was only one way to distract this man.

"If the rules don't apply, then I guess I don't need to bother being naked then." I let the sheet to drop enough so that it covered my front, but nothing else.

Except his too-sharp stare didn't move from my face. "You're afraid. Is it because I found you where you shouldn't have been?"

The thread of fear pulled tighter inside me. How did he do that? How could he read me so damn easily? He'd be furious if he knew the real reason I was here, and he'd kick me out faster than I could blink.

“Sorry, didn't see the ‘no trespassers’ sign on the door.” I lifted my chin in challenge because what the hell? I hadn't woken up in his bed so quite obviously he didn't want me. “I need to find my purse so I can call myself an Uber.”

One black brow lifted. “And why would you do that?”

“Because you paid me for a night and now the night is over.”

His gaze roamed over me, sharp and assessing. “Did you want to say goodbye? Is that why you're in my bedroom?”

I still couldn't read him, not at all, and the nervous tension was almost killing me. I had to stay if I wanted my money, but I couldn't have him being suspicious and yet he was. He wouldn't allow himself to be distracted either, since my little sheet drop hadn't worked.

Beg him. That worked yesterday.

I should, but I was already feeling vulnerable and couldn't bear the thought of going down on my knees and pleading with him only to have him turn me away. And he was just standing there, being so fucking gorgeous and my brain wouldn't work.

“No,” I said, unable to keep the husky note of uncertainty from my voice. “I...I mean, yes. I mean, I....” I trailed off as he took a slow step towards me, then another, and another, like

a panther stalking me. That should have terrified me, should have made me reach for the can of mace that I normally carried everywhere with me. But it was him. And my fear was more complicated than simply being hurt. His gaze held me captive as he came closer and closer, hypnotizing me. I couldn't have looked away even if I'd wanted to.

“You don't want to say goodbye,” he said softly, coming to a stop in front of me. “That's why you're in here, isn't it?”

I had to say something, give him something that wasn't the actual truth, but near to it. Except he was so close, towering over me, making me feel small and fragile and delicate. Making me want to turn my face into his chest and inhale him the way I had last night, find that feeling of safety again.

But my brain wasn't working and that spicy, peppery warm scent of his combined with his heat was making it difficult to think, to even breathe. Like I was drunk.

“Of course, that's why I'm here.” I tried to shake off the effects of his presence. “I just need to—”

His hand came up and even though I knew he wasn't going to hurt me, I was so keyed up that I flinched before I could stop myself.

Instantly he went still, a flicker of surprise crossing his face, closely followed by a bright flare of anger. Then he moved again, reaching out, his strong hands gripping my hips as he jerked me against him. “Who was the man who hurt you?” he demanded. “Tell me.”

My mouth had gone even drier than it already was, and I was cursing myself for what I'd given away. I hadn't flinched like that in years and I had no idea why I had just then. Perhaps it was all the nervous tension in the room and me unsteady and off-guard because of him.

All of this was because of him.

His body was hot and hard against mine and I was caught by a desire to melt against him and let him do whatever he wanted to me that was so strong, I struggled to breathe.

"Why do you think it's got anything to do with—"

"You flinched," he interrupted. "You've been hurt, and I won't have it, little sub. Do you understand? I won't have anyone damaging or hurting my property." There was a fierce look in his eyes, a cold fire that seared me down to the bone. But it wasn't me he was angry with, I knew.

My throat ached. "I'm not your property."

"Yes, you are." His hands on my hips tightened. "I paid for you, and I took your virginity, and that makes you mine."

"The night's over and you didn't wake me up." The words escaped before I could stop them, my chest aching along with my throat. "So, I can't be yours anymore."

"But you want to be." It wasn't a question.

I couldn't bear him to see how much I wanted it, so I tried to pull away, but his hand came up again, slower this time, and he took my chin in a powerful grip. "Look at me, little sub."

Given no choice, I did.

“I have a proposition for you. I’ll pay you another five hundred thousand to stay for the entire weekend.”

I blinked in shock. “What? *Another* five hundred thousand? Just for spending the weekend with you?”

“Yes. Though, you won’t be ‘spending the weekend with me’. You’ll be my submissive, which is a different thing entirely.”

I swallowed. He did want me. He did. Still, though, be his submissive. For an entire weekend. Could I do that? Or, more importantly, was I up for that? Last night had been confronting and if I stayed the weekend with him, I could only expect more of the same.

His fingertips were warm on my skin. “I’ll make you work for your five hundred thousand and it won’t be easy,” he went on. “In return, for example, I’ll require answers to my questions.”

Oh, great.

“What questions?” I asked, even though I knew.

His thumb stroked over my chin. “What you’re doing in my bedroom, for example. The real reason, not the half-truth you gave me just now. And I’ll insist on knowing the name of the person who hurt you. Your name too, will also be required, and why you were selling your virginity, why you were so insistent you come home with me.”

I will turn you inside out...

The warning he’d given me the night before rang in my head and yet some part of me wanted to give him the answers

he demanded. Because I was tired. Tired of holding onto them and guarding them, tired of having to pretend.

You'll never get to Santorini if you do.

I wouldn't get to Santorini if I refused either. But if I accepted...I might be able to delay the moment when I had to tell him the truth about my mission here, and that might give me enough time to search for the evidence I needed.

But that's not all I'd get.

I'd get him too.

"It's... a lot of money," I said. "Are you sure you want to pay that for me?"

"Why shouldn't I pay that for you? You don't think you're worth it?"

Of course, you're not worth it. Why else did your mother leave you behind? Why else did your father hate you so much?

I ignored the thought. "I didn't say that."

His blue gaze was a spear pinning me in place, as if he'd heard every word of that doubt. "But that's what you meant."

He saw too much. It wasn't fair, especially when I couldn't read him at all. "You have no idea what I meant," I shot back. "You don't know anything about me."

"Don't I?" He settled me more firmly against him, and I could feel the hard length of his cock behind the zipper of his jeans, making his interest very clear. "You're determined and stubborn. Smart and very brave. Yet you're also desperate for my attention, for my approval. Why is that, hmmm?"

It was as if he was taking a scalpel to my skin and peeling it off, exposing all my nerves to the air, making me feel tender and raw. Why had he said all those lovely things about me and then ruined it with making me sound so desperate and needy?

He's right though, you are.

I hated the thought. But...I couldn't deny it. Yes, I wanted his attention and approval because I'd never had either of those things. Or rather, I'd had the attention, but it had been of the wrong kind and as for approval...had anyone ever thought I was any good at anything?

I didn't want him seeing all that terrible doubt, so I tried to pull away yet again, but he was too strong, holding me fast.

"Keep still," he said quietly and with so much authority that I obeyed, my breathing ragged. "You can want those things and I'll give them to you, because that's what a Dom does. But know this. When I buy something, I pay exactly what that thing is worth, nothing more and certainly nothing less. And if I think a weekend of your company is worth five hundred thousand dollars, then that's what it's worth, understand?"

I swallowed again, achingly conscious of his grip on my chin. Of the warmth of his fingers, of his body.

He thought I was worth that much money...

I could barely comprehend it.

"I haven't agreed to anything yet," I said in a scraped voice. "Don't we have to have some kind of contract or something?"

“What? Like in the movies?” Disdain dripped from every word. “I think not.”

“But I—”

“Little one,” he interrupted with icy calm. “Know this. You belong to me this weekend. And I take care of what’s mine, understand?”

I take care of what’s mine...

He had taken care of me. Those dim memories of being held in his arms, then washed gently, before he’d tucked me into bed. I’d never had anyone take care of me before. I was always the one who’d had to take care of myself, and I was fine to do it. I didn’t trust anyone else.

Yet last night, I’d trusted him.

“Why?” I asked suddenly. “Like I said, you took my virginity. Aren’t you done with me?”

He stared at me for a long moment, then his fingers opened and he let go of my chin, but only for his hand to trail lower and circle my throat in a gentle yet possessive grip. “Why would I be done with you? Your value isn’t in your virginity. Your value is in you and you’re...interesting to me.”

Warmth sat in my chest. “Interesting? How?”

“You’re full of contrasts and complexities. You’re a puzzle and I like puzzles. It’s been years since I’ve had a sub who doesn’t know the lifestyle and I...find I like the idea of teaching you.” He paused, his hold a warm pressure around my neck. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had a sub who’s mine and mine only, and I like the idea of that too.”

I hadn't been expecting him to be so honest and for a moment I didn't know what to say.

"Do you want to be special, is that it?" he murmured, his thumb stroking the side of my neck absently, sending prickles of heat through me. "Then know that you are. I haven't claimed a submissive for longer than a night in years."

I blushed then, because as stupid as it was, I *did* want to be special.

"Well?" A note of demand had entered his voice, despite the gentle way he was holding me. "Will you be mine for the weekend?"

There were so many reasons to refuse and so many reasons I couldn't. But all I could think was that I didn't *want* to refuse. After all, what else did I have waiting for me this weekend?

Another weekend on Jay's couch, tangled up in the worry about my money situation and the stress of knowing I didn't have anywhere to go.

But if I agreed, despite the risk of discovery, I'd have a warm bed for the night. I'd be safe. I'd have someone to take care of me and as much pleasure as I could handle.

If I agreed, I'd have *him*.

I couldn't think of anything I wanted more.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'll be yours for the weekend."

Tennyson

I couldn't tell myself the dominant in me wasn't fiercely pleased at her agreement, almost as if I'd been concerned that she'd refuse. Perhaps I'd have tried to convince her otherwise if she hadn't, or perhaps I'd have let her go.

Letting her go was probably the most sensible course, especially given how I'd found her lurking in my bedroom. She hadn't been expecting me to turn up, that had been clear, and I suspected that her excuse for being here had only been partly true. It wasn't just me she'd been looking for though, because if it had been, there wouldn't have been fear in her eyes.

It might have been that fear I'd seen in her last night, but that had been before I'd taken her virginity. Before she'd turned her face into my shirt as I'd carried her up to bed, and there hadn't been any fear in her then.

This was different. She'd been afraid of being discovered, I was sure. Then I'd forgotten about that as she'd flinched

when I'd lifted my hand as if she'd thought I'd been going to strike her.

The possessiveness that had broken loose inside me the night before had surged in that moment, bringing with it a hot burst of fury. Not at her, but at the man who'd hurt her, and a part of me had been surprised at the intensity of my anger on behalf of a woman whose name I didn't even know.

I hated physical abuse of any kind and would naturally be angry toward anyone who perpetuated it, but this felt... personal on some level.

Of course, it's personal. She's yours.

That possessiveness tightened its grip and for some reason I'd found myself remembering being with Juliana, how we used to sit in her father's car that I was supposed to be parking, and talk. At least at first. Then we did more, much more. The first time we'd had sex I held her in my arms, swearing silently to all the world that she was mine and no one would ever take her from me.

But there was no point remembering Juliana. And why was I anyway? I'd loved Juliana, and this woman wasn't her and never would be. Perhaps I was being too possessive of someone I'd only just met, but that was likely due to it being a long time since I'd allowed myself a sub of my own and my dominant side was enjoying being let off the leash.

Whatever the reason, I'd allow it for now. She was a woman worth being possessive over, regardless of why she'd been in my bedroom.

She was still blushing after I'd told her that she was special, and it was a very pretty blush. She was a very pretty little sub. That had obviously meant something to her, and it pleased me to please her.

This weekend was going to be very interesting indeed.

Anticipation gathered inside me, along with a certain excitement, making me aware that it had been far too long since I'd felt either of those things. Years, possibly. Was it her? Or was it merely the newness of it? Of having something and someone different for a change? Someone to engage my intellect as well as my body?

Regardless, I was going to indulge it totally for the next forty-eight hours.

She felt soft, making me conscious that she was wearing nothing but that sheet. I had one hand gripping her hip, the other at her throat, and her bare skin was silky beneath my palms. All her tension was slowly bleeding away, her muscles loosening even as I held her, as if now she'd given herself to me, she could finally relax.

It was sweet to see her surrender. So very sweet.

"Good." I stroked the side of her neck with my thumb then dropped my hand to the sheet she still held in front of her. "Now, remember what I said. You will be naked in my house."

"Yes...Sir." She let me tug the sheet away, unwrapping her like the luscious present she was, and she shivered as I eased her naked body back against mine, watching goosebumps

chase over her pale skin. I didn't think it was because she was cold. That wasn't why her nipples had hardened either.

That was all me.

Satisfaction stretched out like a wolf inside me, my cock liking the sight of her nakedness very much indeed. But I had all day. I didn't need to rush. And there were some necessities to take care of first.

"First, you will answer the question I asked about who hurt you," I said. "Second, you might be sore from yesterday, in which case a warm shower will help."

Her lashes lowered, veiling her gaze. "It's not important."

"Disobedient again," I chided. "Eyes on me, sub."

It took her a moment, but her lashes lifted again, and her silvery gaze met mine, little flickers of defiance glittering in it.

She was defensive, I could see that, and trying to protect herself. Trying to minimize what had happened to her, trying to make it not matter.

But it did matter. All violence mattered.

"It *is* important," I said. "You're mine and as I told you before, I take care of what's mine. I won't allow anyone to hurt you. So again, sub, answer my question."

She sighed, her gaze dropping to my chest. "Oh, it was my dad. Years ago, now. My mom left when I was thirteen, so it was just him and me. He drank a lot, had a temper, the usual story. I ran away when I was sixteen."

I let her stare at my chest, allowing her some measure of privacy, since she'd given me the truth and I wanted to respect that. But I was conscious of my own sudden fury.

I wasn't a good father, I knew that. I'd distanced myself from Isabel for years and caused her all manner of heartache. But I'd never laid a hand on her in anger, or on any woman, and I never would. And I despised the men who did.

I wanted to ask more questions, get his name from her, get his address, get every detail about him so I could track him down and repay him in kind, and then go and ask her mother why she'd left her child with a man like that, but I stopped myself. Hammering at her for details wasn't the right way to go about this and I didn't want her having to relive trauma just for my sake. Still, she'd been so young, and running away at sixteen....

I'd been fifteen when I'd come to New York after escaping my uncle's house, so I knew a little something about being a teenage runaway. And she'd been a girl which would have made things even worse.

"Running away at sixteen can't have been easy," I said.

She lifted a shoulder. "It was easier than being kicked in the guts on a regular basis."

Minimizing again. But then that's what runaways did. The lost kids, kids without families or homes, they developed a hard skin, a hard shell to protect themselves. Being seen as weak, being seen as prey was the worst thing that could happen to you — I knew that. That's how I'd grown up too.

I pushed a lock of her soft, silken hair behind her ear, and she looked up at me suddenly, temper in her eyes, as if the gesture had annoyed her. “It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. I’m not a victim, okay?”

I understood her defensiveness, but I wasn’t going to have it directed at me. My role was to protect her, not hurt her. “You’re speaking out of turn, sub,” I warned coolly. “You’re also trying to prove something you don’t need to prove. If I thought you were a victim you wouldn’t be here, understand?”

She gave me a suspicious look. “What?”

“You don’t need to prove that you’re strong. I already know, that’s why you’re my sub for the weekend.” I ran my hands over her ass, relishing the softness of her skin and the heat of her pussy pressed against the zipper of my jeans. “Submissives aren’t weak, little one. It takes strength to surrender to another person and strength to trust them. Strength to want to test your limits and go beyond them. So, you’ll let me take care of you because you have nothing to prove. You’ll use your safe word when appropriate because you’re smart. And you’ll obey my orders and take any punishments I may give you because you’re strong. Do you understand?”

Her gaze was still narrowed, as if she didn’t quite believe what I’d said, and I was beginning to realize a little more of what she needed, what she didn’t even know that she needed.

Acceptance and reassurance. Someone to make her feel special because I suspect no one had.

And that someone is you?

Not long term, no. But she trusted me already, even though she was fighting it, so I could start the process. I could give her a little of what she was searching for, enough so that she understood herself and felt secure in her own desires. Enough that she would make a good choice for her next Dom, if that's what she wanted.

“Do you understand?” I repeated.

“Yes,” she muttered, all skepticism. “I mean, yes, Sir.”

Clearly a demonstration was going to be in order.

“Good.” I released her and stepped away. “You need a shower now.”

She flushed yet again. “Oh, I'm sorry, I should have—”

“To be clear,” I interrupted. “I like you smelling of sex and me, and sometimes a shower will not be what I want you to have. But it is now because I think you might enjoy it.” I held her gaze. “As I said, I take care of my property, though you spoke out of turn which means a punishment.”

She started to say something but then, obviously remembering the rules, bit her lip instead and remained silent.

Good girl.

“I think we'll go with denial again,” I went on. “Which means, you're forbidden to touch me unless I say otherwise.”

The flush in her skin deepened and I thought I saw disappointment flicker in her eyes. “Yes, Sir,” she said.

I couldn't tell myself I was displeased with her disappointment. No, I liked that very much.

“Come.” I took her elbow. “Shower first.”

I led the way into my ensuite bathroom, which was huge and covered in dark slate. There was a walk-in shower with numerous jets, and I dialed up a temperature that was warm but not too hot. Then once the water was warm, I urged her beneath the rain head shower.

Then I began to take off my clothes.

She was watching me, and her eyes got very wide.

“Yes,” I said to her unspoken question. “I will be joining you. Since you’re my property this weekend, I’ll be caring for your needs, and that includes washing you.”

She blinked, the water darkening her hair and catching in her lashes, her gray eyes dilating as I got rid of the last of my clothing.

Such a pretty sub and even more gratifying that she couldn’t take her eyes off me.

“Turn around,” I ordered, stepping into the shower with her. “Put your hands on the wall and don’t take them off. If you take them off, you will receive another punishment.”

She did what I asked, her hands flat against the slate of the bathroom wall. Her back was to me, a long, elegant curve then the tempting swell of her hips and thighs.

Mine. All mine.

Possessiveness made me hungry, but I quelled it.

Now she’d agreed to the weekend, I’d get all her secrets from her. She’d told me one and the rest would soon follow, I

had no doubt. One thing was for certain though, she wouldn't be wandering around my house on her own.

Tonight, she would sleep with me.

I picked up a bottle of liquid soap and dispensed some onto the soft cloth I'd brought with me into the shower, then I stroked it down her back. Her muscles tensed, but I kept on stroking my hand up and down, soaping her skin and then rinsing it, and eventually, she relaxed.

I didn't speak, allowing silence to fall between us as I continued to wash her back then her arms, then down over the swell of her hips and ass, down her thighs to her feet. Her head bent, her hair streaming around her as I coaxed her to lift one foot, cleaning that carefully and then the other. She squirmed a little, obviously ticklish and I filed that observation away, as I filed away all her responses for use at another time.

I knelt behind her, dropping the cloth for a moment, running my hands up her thighs to her hips and then back down again, so warm and silky and soft. She shivered as I caressed her. Responsive little sub.

Firming one hand on her hip, I stroked the other down over her ass and squeezed, making her gasp. Then I slipped a finger between her cheeks, finding the tight little opening there and pushing in gently.

She gasped again, sharper this time, her thighs tensing, her hips pushing at my hand as if she wanted to move away. Understandable. But she had to know that her body was mine. All of it.

“Don’t move,” I said.

She obeyed, but her breathing was fast, and she didn’t relax.

I eased my finger deeper and she gave a soft little whimper, but this time she remained still. “Good,” I murmured. “This is unfamiliar to you, and I realize that. But this ass is mine, little sub. And I will do what I want with it, when I want.” I eased my finger out and then in again, and she groaned. “Later, when I decide you’re ready, my cock will be here instead of my finger.”

“Y-Yes, Sir,” she stuttered like the good little sub she was.

I played with her ass for another few moments, giving her some time to get used to being touched there, then I took my hand away, picked up the cloth, and rose to my feet.

She was still trembling as I reached around her, sliding the cloth down the front of her body between her thighs, pressing it gently against her pussy.

The touch made her tremble harder, so I stroked her with the cloth, little movements against her clit, feeling the tremors that went through her. I was standing very close, her warmth almost pressing against me, and I was hard as a rock. But a quick fuck up against the shower wall wasn’t what I had in mind.

She was a special sub and she needed to know that.

I passed the cloth over her pussy once again then dropped it and replaced it with my hand, cupping her gently.

“I don’t like it when my property is mistreated or damaged in any way,” I said softly, my breath in her ear, the warm water falling over us. “Especially such pretty property.”

She shivered against me, her breathing ragged.

I circled her clit with my fingers making her shudder again. “I don’t like it when my property is afraid of my hand either. You need to know that pleasure is the only thing my hands will give you.” Slowly, I slid one finger into her pussy, feeling her inner muscles tighten around it. She was hot and already slick enough for my cock, but I wasn’t going to take her just yet, not when my lesson wasn’t finished. “Sometimes they will deliver pain too, but only pain that you’ll enjoy.” I eased another finger inside her and she gasped. “Say yes so I know you’ve heard me.”

“Y-yes, S-Sir.” She moaned as I eased my fingers out then in again, her hips flexing against my hand, the curve of her ass pressing against my cock.

Hunger spiked inside me, but ruthlessly I leashed it as I fucked her slowly with my fingers. “You’re a special little sub and you will be treated as such.”

She squirmed against me, clearly enjoying what I was doing to her.

“And are you feeling pleasure now?” I murmured against her neck. “Is it my fingers fucking you that’s making you so wet?”

She twisted and gasped, her hands pushing hard against the slate. “Yes, Sir...oh...yes...”

I added a press of my thumb to her clit as I sunk my fingers even deeper inside her. “Do you want my cock?”

She groaned. “Oh, yes...please...”

“Then beg me. Show me how strong you are by begging for my cock.”

She was panting now, her pussy tight and wet. I ran my free hand down her side, stroking her, then I reached around and cupped one breast, pinching her hard little nipple. She writhed, her head lifting, her eyes shut against the water falling around us, her lush mouth opening. “W-why?” she panted. “Why do you want me to beg?”

“Speaking out of turn again,” I said softly. “But just this once I’ll allow it. Why? Because it pleases me. Everything I ask you to do is because it pleases me. That’s why you do it. You want to please me.” I pinched her again. “You want to please your master, don’t you, little one?”

“Oh, yes, S-sir. I want to please you.”

“In that case...” I eased my fingers out of her, pushed her against the wall of the shower and pressed my body against hers, feeling her tremble, feeling her shake. Then I put my mouth close to her ear. “You know what to do now, don’t you?”

She took a ragged breath. “Please, Sir. I w-want your cock. Please...please...I need it.”

Hunger wound through me at the need in her voice, at the note of pleading. Such a good sub.

I pinned her against the wall too, so she had the unyielding slate at her front and my warmth at her back. “Where do you want it, little one?” I nuzzled the soft skin beneath her ear. “Tell me exactly.”

“I want it...” She was trembling hard now. “In my pussy, please.... oh please...”

She was delicious like this, desperate and begging. A passionate little sub under all that cool defensiveness. It made me even more hungry to find all the ways I could release that passion in her.

There had been intimate details in the information given about her at the auction, including that she was on the pill and didn't mind bareback.

“Fucking you here means no condom,” I said. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “Yes, I want that, Sir. If it... would please you.”

A wave of the most intense heat swept through me. If it would please me...

I pressed my mouth against her neck, licking the water from her skin. “Yes, little one,” I murmured. “Yes, it would please me very much.”

Her back flexed, the curve of her ass pressing against me, making the hunger even worse.

“Put me inside you,” I ordered roughly. “Do it now.”

She reached down, her shaking fingers finding my cock, her tentative touches sending electric shocks through me.

Teasing little sub. I was going to take great pleasure in teaching her how to touch me properly.

She went up on her toes, arching her back as she fitted the head of my cock against the slick entrance of her pussy, and then she eased me in, and I growled at the tight fit. Slick and wet, but tight.

“Hands back on the wall,” I ordered and when she did so, her body shaking, I put mine over the top, threading my fingers through hers and pinning her palms to the slate.

Then I pressed her up against the wall, her slick curves and the way she gasped and writhed the most pure aphrodisiac.

I fucked her slowly at first, shoving her against the slate with each thrust, letting her feel how completely surrounded she was with my cock inside her and me at her back, and she gave the sweetest moans.

“Beautiful little sub,” I murmured against her ear. “Your cunt all tight and slick for me.” I thrust harder, feeling her body shake as I buried myself inside her. “It’s so tight and so slick, you deserve a reward. So, I’m going to give you an orgasm. But you can only come when I say and not before.”

“Yes, S-sir,” she said shakily, gasping as I thrust again.

I pulled one hand away and slid it down her body, finding her hard clit and pinching it, making her cry out. She shuddered as I continued to thrust, harder, faster. I pinched her

clit again, then circled it with my fingertip, and she gasped.
“Oh...Sir, please. *Please...*”

I liked the pleading note in her voice. I like the sound of her desperation.

“You’re perfect,” I said, nuzzling the side of her neck. “Your neck, your breasts, your hot, tight little cunt. Everything about you is fucking perfection. And I think I’d like you to give me one of your perfect little orgasms too.” I thrust hard, making her shudder as I played with her clit. “Come for me, sub. Come for your master.” And then she screamed as the orgasm took her.

I let the leash off myself, driving myself in deep until it took me too.

And I had one last thought. I was going to unravel her completely this weekend and she wasn’t leaving until I had.

Zara

Perhaps I should have paid more attention, not let myself become so sex drunk. Perhaps I should have realized that a man like Tennyson Fox wouldn't give up when he wanted to know something.

But after he fucked me in the shower, after I'd told him about Dad, given him another little piece of truth, I just...let myself surrender to him.

That day, the rest of the world faded away as he introduced me gradually to what being his submissive was all about.

He didn't try to restrain me again, for which I was glad, but he made me lie on the bed without moving as he introduced me to a flogger of soft leather. He didn't hit with me it, though, trailing the ends teasingly all over my body instead, and ordering me to stay as silent as possible while he worked me into a frenzy.

Of course, I couldn't stay silent, for which I was punished by being ordered not to come as he slowly fucked my brains

out.

I failed that too, but I wasn't unhappy about it, because he was right about one thing: I did love the punishments he gave me.

In fact, I loved every moment. He'd told me the truth. His hands delivered nothing but pleasure.

I was the center of his attention, and he made no secret of it. Looking at me with that sharp gaze as he used pleasure to take me apart and then his touch to put me back together. "You're perfect", he said over and over again, the way he had in the shower. "Every part of you is perfect."

A couple of times I even believed him.

He made me sleep in the afternoon and then afterward he made me dinner, putting me in his lap, feeding me delicious morsels of food, and letting me sip from a glass of the loveliest champagne. I'd never had champagne before, except at Arcadia. I'd never had anyone cook for me before either.

He wouldn't let me touch him, though, and I knew that was deliberate, that he was withholding it to use later as a reward. I was determined to be especially good if so, because I wanted to touch him more than anything in the entire world.

I forgot about my mission, not that I could have done anything about it anyway since he was with me constantly. But for the first time in my life, I felt taken care of and completely safe.

He was everything and I was transfixed. There was a ferocity burning beneath all that ice that drew me, fascinated

me. He kept it locked away, but I could see it, I could sense it. I could see it in his eyes whenever he looked at me. And I wanted to know more about it, why he was so controlled with it, why he kept it in such a firm grip.

He was like a volcano trapped in a glacier, all that heat building and glowing hot, yet never erupting. It made me want to be there when it did. It made me want to *be* the reason it did.

I became obsessed with the idea. I became obsessed with him.

I knew all about his life and the background that was publicly available. I knew too, his private life in the file that the Hamilton contact had given me. But none of the information I had gave me any clue about the man he truly was.

Cold. Ruthless. Brilliant. Controlling.

He was all those things and yet I knew there was more to him than that.

I wanted to find the key that would unlock him, that would melt the glacier, free the volcano. I wanted to do to him what he did to me every time he touched me. Except, I didn't know how the hell I was supposed to do that when I wasn't allowed to touch him.

Later that night, after dinner, he told me to kneel in front of the couch, put my hands on my thighs, and not move while he cleared the table and dealt with the dishes. I did what he asked, feeling full and slightly drunk from the champagne and very

smug at not having to clean up. It made me want to be very, very good, so I sat without moving, waiting.

He came back into the living room eventually and paused to examine me, his gaze lighting up with approval, which made me blush and feel even smugger.

“Good little sub,” he murmured, his fingertips briefly brushing the top of my head. “You kneel so beautifully, and you ate well tonight too. You’re pleasing me very much. Perhaps you deserve another reward.”

Everything in me tightened in anticipation, my breath catching. I didn’t dare move, didn’t dare look at him in case that was an infraction.

He moved over to the couch and sat down facing me, leaning forward to place a finger beneath my chin and lifting my gaze to his. “This is special,” he said. “This is a reward that I only give to the best subs, the most obedient, the most beautiful, the most perfect, understand? But you are all those things and you’ve earned it.”

I quivered at his praise. “Yes, Sir.”

He stroked my chin. “You’re going to suck my cock, little one. You’re going to suck it until I come, and then you’re going to swallow every drop. And if you make me come quickly, afterward I might even give you an orgasm too.”

Oh my God. I was going to get to taste him. I’d never given any guy a blow job before, though certainly, many men had demanded it from me. I’d never wanted to give one either. But again, like so many other things, Fox was different, and a

quivering feeling began to move through me, shaking me, a hunger that made me almost breathless with anticipation and nervousness.

He noted my expression, reading it effortlessly. “You’re excited, I can see that, and but you’re also worried, aren’t you? What about?”

I swallowed. “I...I’ve never done this before. Sir. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“I know you haven’t. But remember, all you have to do is what I tell you. A workman never blames his tools, hmm?”

This was deeply reassuring because all I wanted in that moment was to give him pleasure.

This is how you can undo him.

The thought stole through my head and the instant it did, I was certain: if he wanted me to suck his cock, I’d do it. I’d give him the best damn blow job in the entire world, good enough to melt the damn glacier that surrounded him.

He let go my chin and leaned back on the couch, his hands dropping to the fastening of his jeans. I couldn’t take my eyes off the movements of his hands as he undid the button and then pulled the zipper down.

Fuck, if I got this hot just watching him undo his fly then there was no hope for me. Right in this moment though, I didn’t care. I hadn’t had a chance to look at him naked except that moment in the shower this morning, and what I’d seen then...holy shit. Wide shoulders and muscled chest, chiseled abs, and the long lean power of his thighs. And his cock.... I

hadn't missed that. Long and thick and hard. I'd wanted to fall to my knees then and there, and worship him, but he'd made me turn around and put my hands on the wall.

Now though, he opened his jeans, shoved down his underwear and slowly took his cock out. He curled his fingers around it and gripped it, his gaze on mine. I couldn't hide how turned on I was or how my mouth watered for him, so I didn't. I let him see how much I wanted this.

He pumped his cock lazily, watching me, and I had a sudden fear that he wasn't going to get me to suck him at all, that he was just going to sit here, full of that cool, lazy arrogance, jerking himself off while I watched.

But then he said, "Come here, sub."

My heart hammering, I shuffled forward, kneeling between his spread thighs. With his free hand he gripped my chin and pulled me in close. "Hands behind your back and open your mouth," he ordered, his voice rough, and when I did, he guided the head of his cock between my lips.

He smelled good, all warm and spicy and musky, and he tasted even better. His skin was smooth and velvety and salty and, God, so hot.

I closed my mouth around him, reveling in his taste. Reveling too in the sound he made, a harsh intake of breath. His hands moved to gather my hair at the nape of my neck and my scalp tightened as he gripped my hair one fist. "Now, use your tongue to lick me. You can use your teeth too and no, you won't hurt me. Then I'm going to get you to suck, understand? Nod if you do."

I nodded frantically, my tongue already exploring him, learning the shape of him and his taste, every sense I had focused on him and his reactions to what I was doing. And he was reacting, I could feel it in the tight grip he had on my hair and in the way I saw the muscles of his thighs tense.

I licked him and then I used my teeth, nipping him delicately. I had no idea if I was doing it right, but when he made a low, male sound of pleasure, I couldn't help feeling exceptionally pleased with myself.

I wished I could use my hands, but he'd ordered them at my back, and I didn't want to move them. He might stop this as a punishment and God knew I didn't want this to stop.

I shut my eyes, focusing on the feel of his cock in my mouth, so thick and so hard. Licking him, wanting to drive him as absolutely out of his mind as he drove me.

His grip on my hair tightened. "Suck me, little sub." His voice had turned guttural now. "You got me this hard so now you have to deal with it. Which means you have to make me come as quickly as you can, because now I'm impatient."

So, I sucked him and when he gripped my hair even tighter and flexed his hips, beginning to thrust into my mouth, I kept on sucking him. He brushed the back of my throat, making my eyes water, but I didn't stop.

"Harder," he ordered roughly.

I sucked harder as he fucked my mouth, the movement of his hips and his grip, the feel of his cock and his taste making the pressure between my thighs become acute.

His movements became rougher and then abruptly he made a harsh sound. "Fuck, yes," he growled and unable to help myself, I looked up, watching his face as the orgasm hit, the lines of his face twisting in a snarl, and then his eyes closing as pleasure swept over him.

Beautiful man.

I did as I was told, I swallowed every drop, and when he was done and his eyes had opened again, the blue dark, he made me lick him clean.

After that, he lazily put himself away and then pulled my head back by my hair. He leaned forward and slipped one hand down between my thighs, his fingers pushing into my slick sex. I trembled and gasped as he leaned down, his lips inches from mine. "Clever little sub for making me come so hard. You have the most perfect mouth." Then much to my shock, he kissed me, his tongue pushing into my mouth, tasting me. "Mmm," he murmured. "I like tasting myself. I like tasting you. I like tasting us."

Then he kissed me again, harder, as he worked his fingers in and out of me, fucking me until the orgasm hit in a wild wave, making me shiver and cry out against his lips.

He pulled his fingers away and gathered me up into his arms, holding me against his warm chest as I shook with the aftershocks. And once they'd subsided, he eased me onto the couch, found a soft woolen throw, and wrapped me up in it, then he got up. "Stay there," he murmured. "I'll be back in a minute."

I lay there for a while after he'd gone, feeling sleepy and sated and exceptionally pleased with myself. Then my purse, which was still sitting near the coffee table where I'd dumped it the night before, caught my eye. And suddenly I remembered that I'd been supposed to text Isabel and let her know I was okay.

Shit.

I wriggled off the couch and went over to where my purse lay, grabbing my phone and coming back to the couch and sitting down. There were no notifications from her, which was weird. But maybe she was trying to give me some space. I pulled up my messages app and quickly typed a 'I'm fine' text. Adding a 'I hope you got yours too'.

"Who are you texting, little sub?" A cold voice came from behind me.

Fuck. Had he seen Isabel's name on the text? He'd be furious if he knew it was his daughter, and that would set him wondering how I knew her. He was ferociously intelligent and from there it would be a small step to him finding out who *I* was, and he couldn't know.

Quickly I pressed send and turned the screen off, hoping he hadn't seen anything. I slipped off the couch and put the phone on the coffee table. "Just a friend, Sir," I said and then, so he wouldn't keep asking questions, I added. "They wanted me to text them to let them know I was okay, but I forgot about it until now."

"I see." His gaze remained on the phone, his expression unreadable. And then quite suddenly he looked at me and all

the air left my lungs. “Don’t think I’ve finished with you, sub. There’s a reason I got you to have a nap this afternoon and it’s not because I’m planning to let you sleep. You got a nice reward for your behavior and now it’s time I claimed mine.”

He was as good as his word and soon, I forgot all about Isabel and the text. Soon I forgot about everything.

Everything except him.

Tennyson

Despite her nap in the afternoon, the little sub fell asleep quickly after I'd given her a third orgasm. I left her to sleep in my bed while I went into the living room and poured myself a scotch.

I couldn't settle and there was a reason. It was sitting on the coffee table right now. Her phone.

I held onto my tumbler of scotch, sipping slowly, staring at the damn thing. There was no point picking it up because I wouldn't be able to get into it, but I hadn't missed the name of the person she'd been texting when I'd come back from the bathroom.

Isabel.

It had to be a coincidence of course, because it couldn't be *my* Isabel. How could it? How would my little sub know my daughter? There were millions of Isabels all over the world and the chances of her friend being Isabel Fox were remote. Too remote to worry about.

And yet....

I didn't know who the little sub was. I didn't even have her name. I knew she'd had an abusive father and had run away when she was sixteen, but that was it. I could have asked her more questions — I'd threatened her with them after all. But I hadn't wanted to. Part of me didn't want to demand them. Part of me wanted her to give them to me.

She'd been so sweet today, so delicious. Blushing when I showed my approval, and it was clear she thrived on that and my attention. Holding her in my lap and feeding her had been a special privilege, especially when she'd obviously enjoyed the food I'd cooked for her. Punishing her was pleasurable, but rewarding her... That had been a delight.

Her sweet mouth, hot and soft, sucking me like a fucking dream. Inexperienced yes, but she'd followed my lead beautifully. Even as I rewarded her, she rewarded me. I was already planning on how to reward her more, but that text reminded me that she was still an unknown. A stranger I'd let into my home.

Into my bedroom.

She wasn't a physical threat to me, but she might be a journalist. She might be someone already working on a story about Tennyson Fox's sexual proclivities. Or she might be someone more sinister. Someone sent by my enemies to get some kind of information from my house or about my house.

I hadn't known the truth about Sir George and my ignorance had almost led to getting Isabel hurt. I'd never risk ignorance again.

Getting my own phone out of my pocket, I hit Atlas's number.

"What the fuck, Ten?" he answered. "It's nearly midnight."

"And yet you're awake enough to answer the phone."

"It's Saturday night," he said, as if that explained everything, which if you knew Atlas it did.

"I assume your 'situation' is handled?" I asked, referring to Friday night's text conversation.

He let out an audible breath. "Yeah, pretty much. So, what's up?"

I frowned. He was usually much more expansive when it came to his 'situations' and I wondered why he wasn't bothering to explain now. Then again, it wasn't any of my business, so I said, "I need to find out the name of the woman who sold her virginity to me on Friday night."

"Fucked if I know," Atlas said. "You could try asking Cal. But you know what he's like about privacy."

Oh yes, I knew. It would be easier to get blood from a stone.

"Can you find out?" I asked.

There was a long silence.

"Why, pray tell?" Atlas asked, deceptively casual. "You can't do it yourself?"

I hadn't planned on telling him that I'd kept the little sub and that she was still here, mainly because he'd give me no end of grief about it. He knew how much of a stickler I was

about security, not to mention that I'd never taken a woman back to my house, let alone a stranger.

But there was no help for it. I'd only end up with more questions from him, making this whole procedure take longer than it should, and I didn't want to deal with it. So, I said, "Arcadia won't give me that information, you know that."

"Surely you've got tech minions who can hack into something?"

"No one else can know," I said. "I just need a name."

There was another long silence.

"Did you take her home?" Atlas asked.

"Yes," I bit out.

Atlas gave a low whistle. "Finally, my friend. I'm not surprised. She was one sweet—"

"The name, Atlas."

"Suspicious, I see. So far, so Ten."

"She's not suspicious," I said, not wanting to get into it. "She's not a threat. I just need to know who she is so I can discount her." I paused and then added, as if he wasn't already aware, "You know the situation with Isabel. You know the Hamiltons are moving against me. I can't be too careful."

He gave another sigh. "Yeah, okay. Good point. Though I'm surprised you took her home without a background check. She must have been quite something to make you forget that."

Heat stole through me at the memory of her mouth and the quite frankly magnificent blow job she'd given me. She'd

been inexperienced, yes, but watching her face, seeing the hunger in her eyes as she'd licked me, as if tasting me was the most incredible experience of her life...

It had been far too long since I'd had a woman who'd looked at me like that and I couldn't deny it had been an intoxicating experience. It reminded me once again of things I'd missed, things I hadn't known I'd missed because the subs I'd been with didn't want me. Oh, they wanted a Dom, and they liked my brand of BDSM, but it wasn't *me* they were after. Any Dom would do in the end.

But not this little sub. She was mine and she looked at me the way a Dom's sub should.

As if you were hers too.

I ignored that thought. I was Juliana's and Juliana's only. Nothing could ever change that.

"Yes," I said. "She was something."

"Well, in that case," Atlas said on a long breath. "I suppose I can try finding out her name. It's probably better to leave Cal out of this."

"Agreed." Caleb would *not* like me interfering with Arcadia's rules on privacy, not one bit. "Text me when you know."

I ended the call and slipped my phone back into my pocket, thinking about Isabel and what friends she had, because she didn't have many. I knew that was thanks to me and my security concerns, and while I regretted the need for

my security measures, I'd never apologize for keeping her safe.

She hadn't mentioned anyone that I could recall, though she'd been interning at Caleb's company, Cross International, and she'd mentioned one of her coworkers. Zara.

Could the little sub be Zara? That's if she had indeed been texting *my* Isabel.

In which case you've spent twenty-four hours screwing your daughter's friend senseless as well as making her give you a blow job.

I took another sip of scotch, hoping to wash away the splinter of ice that had settled in my gut. There were... implications if the worst came to the worst and the sub *was* Isabel's friend Zara. Implications I couldn't ignore.

Her youth, yes, was a factor. And that she worked with Isabel. She said she'd been at that auction for me, which meant —

But no. I was letting my imagination run away with me.

The little sub wasn't Isabel's friend, and she hadn't been texting her. I was either seeing things or she just happened to have a friend called Isabel who wasn't my daughter. And I could have another day with her, one last day where she was mine. Because I couldn't keep her. No matter how much something inside me was asking what was wrong with keeping her for another couple of days, just a couple more. It wouldn't hurt. Just to fully get rid of this fascination with her, nothing more.

But no. Better to limit myself. And maybe once she'd gone, I really would try and find myself another sub. Because it was only sex, nothing more.

Speaking of....

I'd let the little sub sleep long enough.

I wanted to make this night last as long as possible.

Zara

Sunday morning, I woke very late since he'd kept me up until almost dawn — honestly weren't older men supposed to get tired at some point? Apparently not him — and I was alone in his bedroom.

I couldn't remember whether he'd been with me when I'd fallen asleep or not — I'd been exhausted after the last orgasm he'd given me — but he was clearly not there now.

I ached in all sorts of delicious places, yet the ache that sat in the pit of my stomach at the thought of leaving today hurt more than I'd thought it would.

A weekend, he'd said. And though today had only just begun, this would be the last day I'd have with him.

Last day to get the evidence you came for.

I shut my eyes. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to go riffling through his house or hack into his computer to find evidence that he'd killed a man, because I was sure that he hadn't. Not the man who'd cooked me the most delicious food

and then fed it to me bite by bite. Who'd picked me up off the floor after an intense scene and then sat on the couch holding me close in his arms as I trembled through the aftershocks.

The Hamiltons had gotten it wrong, surely?

Then again, I couldn't let myself think about him, because none of this was about him. It was about the money. The money I needed to get out of this city and go to Greece. To pretty, white houses and blue, blue water, and safety.

I'd imagined myself there so many times when Dad was shouting and throwing things at the walls. When I curled up in a ball on the kitchen floor as he kicked me. Imagining myself not here but in that place where it was sunny and warm. Where I slept in one of those white houses and every day, I'd drink a thick, black coffee in a white cup and look at the water just outside my window.

My happy place.

I had to get there. I *had* to, and I couldn't let one man who'd somehow unlocked the passion inside me, stop me, no matter how beautiful he was.

I groaned and rolled over, burying my face in the pillow.

The one mercy was that he hadn't asked me any more questions, at least not so far. There was still a whole day to go, though, so I wasn't home free yet. I needed to think about what answer I wanted to give and how I could cover the fact that I was going to have to lie. How I could make him believe me and not see through me the way he always did.

Finally, I sat up, thinking about slipping out of bed and taking a look around, but then the door opened, and he strode in carrying a breakfast tray, and I shoved all of that aside in favor of him giving me breakfast in bed.

In fact, I successfully managed not to think about it for a good couple of hours until after the breakfast had devolved into him wanting to know how long I could last without coming and testing me pretty thoroughly, and I was zoning out after the orgasm he'd let me have, that had just about blown my mind, when he checked his phone and after a glance at me, quietly left the room.

I lay there for a few moments, trying to pull myself together, realizing as I did so that for the first time since I'd woken up, I was alone.

Get your shit together, come on.

I let out a breath and slipped from the bed, going over to the door, and opening it. Outside in the hallway, it was silent. I couldn't hear anything. Where was he? In his office? It was on the next floor down, I was pretty sure since the only rooms on this level were bedrooms and bathrooms.

Quickly, I checked the other rooms, but he wasn't in any of them, which meant he wasn't on this level. Good.

I went to the stairs and took a few cautious steps down them, but the hallway at the bottom was empty too. I still couldn't hear anything. I hadn't been on this level before, so I took the opportunity to have another lightning fast look around. It appeared to consist of a darkened home theater, a

library, a bathroom and near the front of the building, a spacious home office.

Fox wasn't in any of the rooms.

I stood in the doorway of the office, listening, my heartbeat thumping.

I wasn't guaranteed to find anything in here either, but I wouldn't get another chance to search. Perhaps I'd hack into his computer and see what I could find, and if it wasn't evidence of a murder, then there had to be something else. The Hamiltons had said they'd be happy with anything they could potentially use against him.

I stepped into the room.

It was as minimalist as the rest of the house, with shelves lined neatly with books and a few other boxes. His desk was clean of everything except a keyboard and a monitor. The walls were bare in here like they were everywhere else, and there were no knickknacks or anything personal lying around.

I crept over to the desk, pulling open a few drawers to find only stacked office stationery. I didn't think there was a diary lying around somewhere with 'Today I killed Sir George' written down helpfully in it, but you never knew.

After finding nothing of interest in the desk, I grabbed the back of his chair in preparation for pulling it out and sitting at his computer.

"What are you doing in here, little sub?"

I just about jumped out of my skin at the sound of his cool voice coming from the direction of the doorway.

Fuck. He was a problem creeping around like that.

Trying to get my racing heartbeat under control, I took a step back from the desk and looked up.

He'd leaned one shoulder against the doorframe, his cold blue gaze meeting mine. There was something about the way he was standing, a certain tension, and the sharp glitter in his blue eyes looked like...anger.

Shit.

I swallowed, ignoring the ball of tension sitting my gut, and came around to the front of the desk. Then I levered myself up, so I was sitting on the edge of it, one leg draped decorously over the other, hoping I looked sexy and sultry and not guilty as hell.

“Oh, Sir,” I said huskily. “I woke up and you weren't there. I was just trying to find you.”

He didn't reply, not even to admonish my tone, merely staring at me in that unnerving way he had.

“Sir,” I said eventually. “Are you—”

“You were texting Isabel last night, weren't you?”

Cold shock pulsed down my spine. “What?”

“Were you texting Isabel?”

My mouth was dry, and the shock was now pooling in my stomach. “Isabel who?” I forced out.

“My daughter, Isabel.” His blue gaze bored into mine. “Your friend. Whom you work with.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. He'd found out. I had no idea how, but he had.

My mind was blank, I couldn't think of a single thing to say. "I...I don't know what you're talking about," I managed weakly.

But of course, he saw right through me. "Yes, you do, little sub," he said. "Or should I say, Zara."

My heart stopped and if I was cold before, I was all ice now.

Fuck. He knew. What had given me away? He must have seen Isabel's name while I was texting her, though why he'd automatically think it was her, I had no idea. Then again, maybe it was no surprise. He was so intense, so focused, not to mention suspicious. I hadn't told him who I was, and I knew he hadn't forgotten that. He must have seen Isabel's name and had somehow found a connection to me.

Either way, though, I was screwed.

Then again...maybe not. He might know who I was, but he didn't know why I was here, or about the Hamiltons. He couldn't know.

My heart restarted, racing now. I could pretend I didn't know what he was talking about, but lying to him was next to impossible. I was going to have to own it.

I shifted on the desktop, feeling cold and exposed, but determined not to let him see the fear that was digging its claws into me again. "Well," I said, my voice only a little

reedy sounding. “Full marks for finding out so quickly. How did you do it?”

“I have a few contacts.” He didn’t move. “You’re going to answer every single one of my questions and you’re going to answer them now.”

Double fuck.

I’d gotten used to being naked around him and I’d lost my self-consciousness about it pretty much the day before. But now I wished I had something to wrap around me. I had to settle for folding my hands in my lap as casually as possible.

“Of course, sir.” I met his gaze. “Do the rules apply?” He’d taken to telling me this so I knew if we were in a scene or not, and it was useful, because while I’d gotten used to being able to tell by his tone of voice, sometimes I couldn’t.

“No,” he snapped. “Because you’re not my sub anymore.”

Pain shot through me, and I had to fight to not let it show on my face. Okay, so he was angry. No, not just angry, he was furious.

Are you surprised? You’re his daughter’s friend and you didn’t tell him.

“I didn’t lie to you,” I said before he could say anything else, knowing I was being defensive and not being able to stop myself. “I just didn’t tell you I was Izzy’s friend.”

“Lies of omission are still lies. You knew I was her father, and you didn’t say anything.”

“No, of course I didn’t say anything. Would you have taken me home if I had?”

He was silent, fury burning in his cold blue eyes. Letting me know the truth without saying a word: no. He wouldn’t have.

I’d learned early on to fear male anger and then later, to armor myself against it, and it should have been easy to armor myself against his. It shouldn’t matter to me, but...I’d loved being the center of his attention. I’d loved being taken care of, being told I was beautiful and perfect. Being told I was a passionate, good little sub. I wanted him to keep seeing me that way. I didn’t want him to be angry with me.

*No one else ever saw anything in you worth cherishing.
Why would he?*

My throat closed, an ache behind my breastbone, though I had no idea why, since it wasn’t as if he was important to me.

But now he’ll know the kind of woman you really are.

So, what if he did? Sure, I was a two-bit hacker who took on dubious jobs from a low life to make ends meet, had nothing to my name, and was currently sleeping on someone else’s couch because I didn’t have anywhere else to go, but that was what it was. Who cared?

I didn’t like the idea of him knowing my most recent position was at Cross, and he’d probably be wondering how I managed to get the job and then....

I forced the thoughts away. One thing at a time.

“So, Arcadia,” he said flatly. “Was selling your virginity just for the money?”

I didn’t even think about lying, especially when he was this angry, cold rage pouring off him. “Yes,” I said as levelly as I could. “I assume you did a background check on me?” Because of course he would have.

Again, he said nothing, which was an answer all on its own.

“Okay fine,” I went on. “So, you know the answer. Of course, it was for the money. You’ll have seen that I have no education and that means finding a job difficult. I have nothing. I wanted to get out of New York, and this was one way to do it.”

“If finding a job is difficult,” he bit out, “then why did you have one at Cross?”

“A friend showed me the job ad and I applied.” It was more or less the truth. “For some reason they decided to overlook my lack of education and work history.”

“‘For some reason’,” he repeated. “How convenient. Especially since Isabel was working there too.”

The cold in my gut became ice.

“Look, she worked in the cubicle next to mine, and we got to talking and—”

“You told me at Arcadia you were there for me.” A muscle flicked in the side of his strong jaw. “Did you target me?”

“Are you asking me whether getting to know Isabel was part of a plan to target you?” Might as well grab the bull by the horns right away.

“Well, was it?”

I had to be very careful here, very, *very* careful. “Getting to know Isabel made me...aware of you. But I didn’t know you’d be at Arcadia that night. When I saw you in the audience, I knew who you were, and I...wanted you.” I didn’t look away from him, even though holding his gaze was difficult. “I hoped you’d buy me. Yes, I knew you were rich, and Isabel had said a few things about you being overprotective and I...I liked the thought of that. I hoped that would mean you’d buy me and, well... You did.”

The muscle in his jaw flicked again. “How did you find out about Arcadia?”

I kept it very simple. “I already had the idea of selling my virginity and I was doing some research into it. I read something online about Arcadia and I contacted the woman involved and she gave me Arcadia’s contact details.” I swallowed and then added, “Isabel doesn’t know anything. When I texted her last night, I just told her it was a one-night-stand.” Another lie, but I put as much conviction as I could into it, making sure my gaze didn’t flicker. I didn’t want to get her in trouble with her father, not when she already had her own problems with him.

There was a moment’s tense silence and then I asked, because I had to know, “You saw Isabel’s name in my contacts, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And so you...what? Just knew it was your daughter?”

“I’m a suspicious man. I’ve told you that already. You’re in my house, and I had no idea who you were, and you refused to tell me. I have enemies and I wanted to know if you were one of them.”

A strange ache closed my throat, though again, I didn’t know why. Because why it should it matter to me if he thought I was his enemy? I wasn’t, but there was no reason I should care if he thought I was. “So, it wasn’t about me, then? You only wanted to know if I was an enemy or not?”

He stared at me, his gaze sharper than a knife. “Are you?”

“No,” I said huskily. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you’re lying to me, Zara.” My name felt like a slap. “You’ve been lying to me ever since you got here and you’re still lying now.”

My chin came up, a saving thread of anger pushing through the ice. “I’m not. I told you—”

“You haven’t told me the real reason you’re here and it’s not just for me.” He shoved himself away from the doorframe suddenly and straightened, stalking into the room, coming over to where I sat on the desk. I kept still as he came closer, trying to hide the way I shivered, shame, fear, and anger knotting in my gut. Fear of his disapproval. Shame at the things I’d kept from him. Anger that I should feel shame and fear when there was no reason for me to feel either.

If you find that evidence, the Hamiltons will take him down and that will be your fault.

He put his hands on the desktop on either side of my thighs and leaned on them, his face so close to mine. He was so warm, and he smelled familiar, and even now after hours in his bed, I still wanted him desperately.

“Tell me why you’re here,” he ordered, his tone all command, his gaze reading me like a book. “It’s not just for me and it’s not just for the money, so what is it?”

Shit.

I lifted my chin, determined not to give in to my fear. “It is the money, I told you that—”

“If it was just about the money, you wouldn’t have insisted on coming back here. It’ll be in your account tomorrow, in fact.” He kept on staring at me, as if he was trying to look inside of my head. “Why did you insist? Did you have to do something here? Is that why?”

“No, I—”

“Or perhaps you don’t have the money yet, is that it? Perhaps you can’t get the money until you’ve completed whatever task you have to do here?”

Oh God, he was too smart. I had to say something or do something, put him off the scent somehow.

I leaned back on my hands and uncrossed my legs, presenting my naked body to him, but he didn’t even blink, that too smart brain of his working overtime. “Is someone holding your money?” he went on. “Is someone paying you to

get inside my house? I have enemies, lots of people want to take me down, but there's only one family who's been moving lately." And there it was, the realization glowing in his blue gaze. "The Hamiltons," he murmured. "It's them, isn't it? You're working for them."

My stomach dropped and all the blood left my face. I didn't have to answer, he could read my every thought anyway.

He knew. He knew *everything*.

My fingers and toes had gone numb. I knew I should try to get it together, find my hard shell again, but no matter how I tried, I couldn't find it. It was almost as if now he'd stripped it away, it was gone for good.

"That's not..." I started, hating how hesitant I sounded. "That's not exactly—"

"What are you here for, Zara?" he demanded, his voice a blade of ice. "Tell me now."

He'd worked it all out without me saying a thing and he'd probably work out what I'd been asked to search for too. All I had left was the truth and there wasn't much point in hiding it from him any longer.

"Come on," he said when I didn't answer quick enough. "You might as well tell me since I've guessed everything else. What do they want you to get?"

I held on to my courage and met his gaze. "They want me to find evidence that you murdered Sir George Wyndham."

Tennyson

There were many things I was expecting her say, but that was not one of them.

I pushed myself away from the desk, still burning with fury about the confirmation text Atlas had sent me not ten minutes ago.

I hadn't wanted to believe that my little sub was Zara Bishop, Isabel's friend, and coworker, but she was. My gut had been right; there had been something off about her and now I knew what it was.

Now I knew everything. She didn't need to confirm the truth, it was written all over her pretty, pale face.

She was working for the Hamiltons, and it wasn't insider information about my company, no, it was information about the one thing I'd hidden from the entire world.

I'd killed my mentor. He'd been going to take Isabel from me and he'd been going to hurt her. I'd been twenty and completely at his mercy, because he was rich, powerful. He'd

had the money to do whatever he wanted while I was a street kid with no family and no resources. He'd told me he was going to prove me an unfit father and that he was going to adopt her, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was too old for him now, he'd said, but in a few years, Isabel would be perfect.

He was a sexual predator, a monster and there was only one thing to do with a monster. You had to put them down.

So, I had. And with Atlas's help, we'd made sure that there was no evidence to prove that he hadn't had heart attack. No evidence that he hadn't died of natural causes. And the best thing was that I'd still been in that monster's will. He'd told me if I did what he said, he'd leave it all to me when he died, and so he had.

I'd started Fox Tech with that money.

But I'd thought all the evidence had been gotten rid of, that no one knew, so how the Hamiltons had found out, I had no idea. But I didn't like it one bit.

I didn't like that the little sub — Zara — knew too.

Her face was ashen, her silver-grey eyes dark, and while she was trying to pretend that she wasn't afraid, I could see the fear there.

I didn't like that she was afraid of me, either.

Still, that didn't make any difference to my anger. It wasn't her fault, they were using her, and yet I was furious at her for thinking she could play me, and at myself, too, for letting myself get played. I was also angry at the whole situation

because now I knew who she was this was the end of my time with her.

I couldn't keep sleeping with her, not given she was Isabel's friend. It was wrong, the gap between us too wide. I had decades more experience than her, more power, more money, more of everything, while that background check I'd quickly run on her had revealed mainly how much less she had. No criminal record, no education, no bank accounts, no work history. She had nothing. She was vulnerable and I couldn't ignore that.

But you've already crossed the line. Why stop now?

Because I had to stop somewhere, and control was the code I lived by. I couldn't ignore that control just because I'd crossed a line. The line couldn't be crossed back over it was true, but that didn't mean I couldn't draw a new line.

I wasn't going to touch her, not again.

Fury was acid in my gut, but I held onto that instead of disappointment. Even now I knew she'd been the honeytrap I'd fallen into and willingly, she was still beautiful, and I still wanted her. She was mine and the weekend wasn't over. Yet I couldn't trust her now and it so it wouldn't happen again.

"I see," I said expressionlessly, locking down my anger and keeping tight control of myself.

She stared at me. "You don't seem surprised."

"It's none of your business." I wasn't going to explain myself to her. "You know I can't let you leave, don't you?"

Her eyes widened. "What?"

I couldn't. Even though she'd confirmed all my guesses about what she was doing here and why, I still had to confirm them for myself. I needed to find out how the Hamiltons had discovered the truth about Sir George's death, and then I had to decide on a suitable response.

I couldn't have Zara going to report back to them. Even though I was pretty sure she had no information that would be of use, she still knew the truth and until I'd figured out what to do with her too, I couldn't have her running around with all that information in her head.

"You'll have to stay here until all of this has been handled," I said shortly.

Her brows arched down. "Why?"

"You're a smart woman. You figure it out." I reached out and grabbed her elbow, pulling her off the top of the desk. She stiffened, but allowed herself to be pulled, and as she did so, I caught another flare of fear in her eyes.

You're angry. Remember her past.

I tightened my grip on her elbow minutely. "I won't hurt you," I said, to remind her that she was safe with me. "I swear on Isabel's life. But you can't leave, not yet."

Instantly that determined little chin of hers came up — she always fought when she was afraid, I'd discovered. "What are you going to do with me then?"

I didn't answer, marching her out of my office and back up the stairs to the guest room, trying not to focus on the warmth

of her bare skin where I gripped her. “You can stay in the guest room in the meantime.”

She didn’t fight me and when I pushed her into the room, she only turned around, and looked at me, her big gray eyes full of an expression I couldn’t name.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” she said unexpectedly and the way she said ‘sir’, even though the rules didn’t apply, sent a pulse of hunger through me. “I didn’t expect to like it, and I did. I liked it a lot.”

The sex she was talking about presumably. Well, I wasn’t in the mood for either an explanation or an apology. “At least you got something for your trouble,” I said coldly then shut the door on her and locked it.

Turning away, I called my head of security and organized one of the team to keep an eye on her, then I prepared to leave.

I had to see Atlas, let him know what was going on since he was the only other person who knew what had happened to Sir George.

Atlas was, unsurprisingly, on site at a current development in Midtown even though it was a Sunday. He was a workaholic like Caleb and me, though when I walked into the site office an hour later, he was sitting in a chair wearing dusty jeans, a T-shirt, and a hi-vis vest, with his legs stretched out, his hard hat on the desk beside him while he played chess on his phone.

He didn’t take his eyes off the phone as I entered, just held up a hand for me to wait. Except I wasn’t in the mood for

waiting.

“Put that down,” I said. “I have something important to talk to you about.”

Atlas let out a long-suffering sigh and finally put his phone down on his desk. Then he leaned back, folded his hands across his stomach, and gave me a cool up and down look. “Apparently,” he said. “Where’s the fire, chief? This about Izzy’s friend?” His eyes gleamed with his usual brand of lazy amusement. “Who you’re apparently screwing on the side?”

I ignored this, trying to resist the urge to pace around. “She’s a Hamilton plant.”

Atlas’s gaze lost the amusement. “What?”

“They sent her to find evidence I murdered Sir George.”

He blinked. “How did they—”

“They must have found out about me buying virgins and decided that was the perfect way to get someone into my house.”

“Buying virgins?” Atlas repeated. “What are you—”

“And they must have been hoping she would honeytrap me into revealing the evidence, or more likely a confession since there *is* no evidence. I assume they want to use it to convict me, and maybe that’s why they’re moving on Isabel. She’ll stand to inherit Fox Tech so if they manage to get to her, they can potentially take control of my company in some kind of bizarre revenge—”

“Ten,” Atlas said. “Back the fuck up.”

I shut my mouth, conscious abruptly that I was still furious, and the fury had a possessive edge. They were using her, my little sub, and holding money over her head. Though of course, she was using me. Had she pretended all this time? Was it me she really wanted? She'd said she'd enjoyed it, but had she? Or was that just another lie?

Why are you even thinking of her? She was a playmate for a night, and it was good, but now it's over. What does she matter?

She didn't. Yet the way she'd lied to me felt like a betrayal all the same.

“Okay, so first things first,” Atlas said. “The virgin you bought on Friday night is Zara Bishop, Izzy's friend and who works with her at Cross.”

“Yes,” I bit out.

“And she's a Hamilton plant.”

“That's what she said. The money for her virginity auction will be paid to her once she completes the task of finding evidence that I killed Sir George.”

“So...Ten. Why have you been buying virgins? Is this a regular thing?”

I let out an impatient breath. “I don't do anything with them. I buy them and tell them to think through the consequences of their actions and then let them go on their merry way.”

Atlas blinked at me again. “Fuck's sake. You buy them, deliver a lecture and then...release them? Like fish?”

I gave him a cold stare. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

But he held up a hand. “Hey, no, I understand. You’ve got a daughter, that makes sense. Except in this instance, you didn’t release her.”

A muscle ticked in the side of my jaw. “No. She wanted to come home with me.”

Atlas leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together. “You took her home without a background check? I’m surprised, Ten. Very fucking surprised. That’s not like you.”

I didn’t deign this with a response because I knew how stupid I’d been. “She knows nothing,” I said. “There’s no evidence to find and I certainly didn’t tell her about my past. But the Hamiltons know, or at least they suspect, and they’re not going to let it go.” I paused, then added, even though he’d no doubt have spotted this already, “There’ll be implications for you too.”

Atlas nodded thoughtfully, his sharp brain already turning things over. He looked like a biker and acted as if he didn’t care about anything, but he owned a massive construction company and he was one of the most intelligent men I’d ever met. “Well, we’re going to have to find out what they know and how they know it.” He muttered a curse. “We should really pull Cal in on this.”

But I shook my head emphatically. “No. He doesn’t know a thing about it, and I want to keep it that way. He’s got enough on his plate without this anyway.”

Atlas gave me a narrow look but nodded. “Okay, so who do you know who has the inside track on the Hamiltons? North might know something, but he wasn’t sure about what was happening with Izzy, so I don’t think he’ll have any intel.”

North was Atlas’s brother and had fingers in all kinds of pies.

I thought a minute and then remembered something. Something I should have thought of a while ago. Cal still retained the reins of his old crime empire, though he’d distanced himself from it years ago. However, I was pretty sure he still kept tabs on it through the girlfriend of Old Nick, the crime lord who used to run it before Cal took over. Livia was the titular head, but I knew she reported to Cal.

I also knew her. She’d been kind to us when Old Nick had caught us as teenagers trying to pickpocket some of his men. He’d dragged us into The Castle, the bar he’d used to run, all set to give us the lesson of our lives. But she took pity on us and intervened. She’d remember me, I was sure. Just as I was sure she was the source Cal was using to track what the Hamiltons were doing with Isabel.

If I could contact her, I could find out what they knew about me too.

“You’ve got an idea,” Atlas observed.

“Livia,” I said succinctly.

“Oh yes, good plan.” He sat back. “So what? Hit her up and see what she can find out?”

“I’m sure she has some contacts. I’ll see if I can get in touch with her.”

He nodded. “I’ll send out a few feelers. I’ve got some contacts of my own.”

I should have felt better with a plan, but it made no difference to the anger sitting like a large, hot stone in my gut. “I’ll have to keep the girl,” I said. “At least until we know what the Hamiltons are up to for certain. She knows too much.”

Atlas gave me an assessing look. “Really? Who’s going to believe her, though?”

“I’m keeping her,” I repeated flatly. I wasn’t going to argue about it. Zara would have to stay with me until all of this was sorted out. I couldn’t risk her going anywhere with the kind of information she had on me already.

Atlas is right though. She’s a poor little nobody. Who’s going to believe her if she takes it to the media or anywhere else?

I ignored the thought. I couldn’t let her go, the risk that someone would find out was too great. She was staying with me and that was final.

Atlas’s gaze turned speculative. “Is she something to you, Ten?”

I snorted. “Hardly. She’s Isabel’s age.”

“So?”

“What do you mean so? She’s nearly twenty years younger than me.” I was about to say more, but then stopped myself. I’d already invaded Zara’s privacy with a background check, I didn’t need to pass her secrets on to Atlas as well. “The gap between us is too wide,” I continued instead. “I shouldn’t have taken her home in the first place.”

Atlas lifted a shoulder. “If you say so.”

I gave him a glare. “It’s just sex, nothing more.”

“I hear you.”

Except he was radiating skepticism. Not that I was going to waste time arguing with him. “Let me know what you discover,” I said, turning for the door.

“I will. And Zara?”

“She can stay where she is,” I said shortly as I walked out. “In my house.”

Zara

Being locked in Fox's guest room wasn't the problem — after all, it wasn't as though I had anywhere else to go. It was having utterly screwed up my mission that was the problem.

He knew. He knew everything, and all without me saying a damn word. The only thing I'd done was text Isabel and from that one text and a glimpse of her name, he'd managed to uncover every single thing.

Asshole man.

I'd failed. And the worst part wasn't that I'd failed myself, my plans for escaping New York now in ruins. The worst part was the feeling that I'd failed him.

I didn't understand, because seriously, who was he to me? Why the fuck did I care? This weekend had been only about sex, so why the memory of the anger and disappointment in his eyes when he'd looked at me in his office this morning should make me feel so awful, I didn't know.

He was a billionaire, a hugely powerful man with a massive company and a ruthless reputation, and I was sure it wasn't about me in particular. He was angry because I'd played him. Because I'd taken him in. It couldn't be for any other reason.

Dad used to look at me that way, and with him I didn't even need to do anything. My mere existence was a disappointment.

I guess Fox couldn't let me leave, though, not when I knew all about his secret. He was being paranoid — I mean, I could go to the media, but I had no evidence to back me up and no one was going to risk potentially being sued without hard facts. Not that I would go to the media anyway. I didn't want to share what he and I had done over the past couple of days, not with anyone. It felt private, special. Even if it hadn't been special to him, it had been special to me, and I wanted to keep it close.

Still, I didn't know what else he was going to do with me. He wouldn't hurt me, I was certain, but God knew how long until 'the situation had been handled' was going to be.

You don't even know if he even did it.

I'd been certain he hadn't, and yet he'd avoided the question when I'd asked. Had he done it? Had he murdered his mentor? I couldn't imagine a man as controlled as he was hurting anyone in a fit of anger. If he had, it would have to have been very purposeful and even knowing him as briefly as I had, he would have had a very good reason for it.

Does it really matter anyway? It's not as if you're going to be getting involved with him after all.

It didn't matter, because no, I wasn't. And I didn't care about him. I didn't.

The day passed with aching slowness and eventually, sick of the way my thoughts circled around and around, I curled up on the bed and tried to sleep.

At some point the door opened and a stranger delivered a tray of food for me, before leaving.

A prisoner. I was a prisoner.

Pacing around didn't help, so I sat disconsolately on the bed, flicking through the channels on the TV on the wall opposite.

I didn't see him and that night, I went to sleep alone.

I didn't sleep well.

Monday morning came and another tray was delivered. I'd been hoping to at least get my cellphone back but that clearly wasn't happening.

I picked at the breakfast and when the door opened a second time that morning, I was expecting the stranger once again.

It wasn't though, it was Fox.

He stood in the doorway, dressed in an expertly tailored dark suit and a silver tie. He looked cold, ruthless, every inch the powerful billionaire he was, and I didn't want to care that I'd been going to sell him out for the sake of five hundred

thousand dollars. That if I'd managed to get the evidence I'd needed, he could very well have gone to jail, which was where he should have been if he was guilty.

But I did care, and I hated that I did.

I pulled a blanket from the bed around my nakedness, feeling exposed as his cold blue gaze raked over me, but I lifted my chin at the same time, letting him know I wasn't going to be intimidated.

"To what do I owe the honor of this visit?" I asked. "Do I get to know what you're going to do with me or are you going to keep me here another day with no word?"

"I'm going to work. I'll figure out what to do with you later tonight."

I lifted a shoulder, trying to look as if I didn't care. "Fine. It's not like I have anywhere else to go. But can I at least have my phone please?"

"No," he said.

Something ached inside of me, not so much because of the phone, but because of what his refusal meant. "You don't trust me?" I wanted to say it out loud, I had to say it.

"No, I don't trust you." There was an edge in his voice now, a flicker of fire in his blue gaze. "Why would I?"

He's got a point.

He did, but I still hated that ache of disappointment, the sign that his opinion mattered to me. That *he* mattered to me in some way. It was ridiculous. So, he'd given me pleasure and

had made me feel cared for and cherished. So what? I'd given him a couple of pieces of myself, but nothing more. He didn't know me, and I certainly didn't know him.

Yet that ache pressed against my ribs like a sharp stone.

"I'm sorry," I said, even though I hadn't meant to. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you who I was or why. I just...wanted the money."

The tension in him had pulled tight, his posture rigid. "Did you ever think that doing what the Hamiltons wanted would have an effect on Isabel too?"

A thread of shame wound through me, because of course I hadn't, and of course that made me angry. "No," I said. "But she'll be okay. She's got money protecting her, just the way you've got money protecting you." I swallowed again, fighting the urge to explain, because why should I justify myself to him? Yet I couldn't stop. "I have nothing," I said baldly. "Not a single fucking thing. I've *never* had anything. No education, no prospects. Just a father who beat me and then swore if I ran away, he'd hunt me down and kill me. I do hacking jobs for a piece of shit guy who hires me out and pays me cash, and he kicked me out of the apartment he'd let to me and stole all my savings because I wouldn't sleep with him. So, when the job for the Hamiltons came up, yeah, I took it, I didn't care. I just want to get out of here. Get out of New York where I'm not sleeping on some stranger's couch. Find a new life where I'm not beholden to assholes who only try to take advantage of me."

Fox said nothing, his gaze expressionless. Apart from that muscle jumping in his strong jaw.

“Is that so wrong?” I demanded, furious at him and how stony-faced he was being. As if none of what I’d told him touched him, as if none of it had made any impression whatsoever. “Is it so wrong to want something for myself? To be safe for a fucking change?”

For a long moment he continued to stare at me, while storms shifted and raged in his eyes.

Then abruptly he turned around and shut the door in my face.

Tennyson

It was halfway through my workday when Caleb called me to tell me that Isabel had escaped his security on Friday night and had gone AWOL.

Anger was such a small and petty word to encompass what I felt at that moment, mainly because anger was the least part of it. There was shame and guilt and grief and fear too, all knotted and tangled so tightly it was impossible to pull them apart.

The little sub standing alone in my guest room, wrapped in only a blanket, throwing my wealth and privilege back in my face and telling me she had nothing and no one. That the bastard she took jobs from had evicted her from her home and stolen her money, and could I really blame her for what she'd done, had also not helped my mood.

I'd been thinking about her all morning, knowing I'd handled it badly by walking out on her, but that had been the simplest way to deal with her. I didn't want to get into a

conversation about Sir George and I certainly didn't want to feel any angrier with her than I already did, yet the moment I'd opened the door to the guest room, I'd forgotten all my good intentions.

Her breakfast tray had been barely touched and there were circles under her eyes. She'd put her chin in the air, radiating that prickly, defensive defiance, and all I'd been able to think about was telling her that the rules applied, and she should kneel for me. She should not have her defenses up because she didn't need them with me.

But I'd had to force that aside. She wasn't my sub any longer. She was just a woman I'd invited into my home, who'd turned out to be a Hamilton plant and the fact that she'd only done it for the money, because she'd had nothing, and no one made not the slightest bit of difference to me.

Certainly not now after hearing about Isabel.

I didn't bother with a conversation over the phone. I disconnected the call, then headed straight for Cross International so I could shout at Caleb in person.

I strode past his dragon of a secretary without a word, going straight into his office to find him waiting for me behind his desk. Atlas was there too, lounging on one of the couches at the other end of the office, his expression neutral. "Pretty much fifteen minutes on the dot," he said, glancing at Caleb. "You owe me a hundred bucks, Cal."

I ignored him, striding over to Caleb's desk and standing there, trying to leash the urge to punch him in the face for his

failure to protect my daughter. I'd trusted him with her safety. And he'd failed.

"Tell me," I demanded icily. "Tell me everything."

Caleb's expression gave nothing away since he was as much of an expert in dissembling as I was. At least, if you didn't know him. But I knew him very well indeed and I could see anger glittering in his black eyes. "She evaded my security team," he said without preamble, since that was Caleb. Straight up and to the point, always. "I tracked her down to a bar in the Village that same night so she's fine. Don't worry, I fired my team."

I was still held rigid by fury and parental fear. The fear that had gripped me the moment she'd been born, and her mother had died, and I'd known that she only had me to protect her. Me, an eighteen-year-old boy still living on the streets.

It was a fear that had never left me and never would, since being a parent meant being in a constant state of terror that something would happen to her, something I couldn't stop. Or perhaps worse, that something would happen to me, and she'd be left all alone.

I'd been alone like that as a child, at the mercy of my uncle after my parents had died. I never wanted that for a child of mine, not ever.

Isabel was an adult now, but I was still afraid for her. If anything, that fear had grown since she chafed against the restrictions I'd placed on her, as any woman of her age would. But still, she was so young. She'd been untouched by the world because I'd made sure of it, and she knew nothing of

how it could rip you apart. How it could change you, remake you, turn you into a monster that your previous self would have hated.

Caleb was supposed to have kept her safe from that.

Caleb was supposed to have kept her safe, period.

He knew exactly what I was thinking, I could see it in his face, and he didn't look away. He wasn't afraid of my anger.

The little sub wasn't afraid of your anger either, even though she had reason to be.

Even now, even here she crept into my thoughts. Telling me she had nothing. Telling me all she'd wanted was a life for herself and was that so wrong?

It's not and you know it.

But she'd used me to get it. She'd used Isabel too and that I couldn't forgive.

I shoved her from my head. "You were supposed to keep track of her. What happened?"

"Your daughter is what happened," Caleb said succinctly. "She's a fucking liability. But don't worry, I made sure she learned her lesson."

I leashed my fury hard because that could keep. There was something more, I could see it in his face. "What else?"

"She's been communicating with the Hamiltons," Caleb said. "I saw the texts on her phone. The reason she evaded my security on Friday was that she was going to meet a Hamilton contact at the carousel in Central Park."

Fear coiled like ice through my veins. The urge to lash out, to break something was nearly overwhelming, so I turned and strode to the windows instead, staring out at the city laid before me as I tried to get a handle on myself.

“She didn’t meet with them,” Caleb went on in a flat voice. “I made sure she didn’t.”

I stared hard at the city through the glass. “Did she say what they wanted?”

“I haven’t spoken to her yet. I locked her in my fucking apartment all weekend so I could deal with the fallout and arrange some better security.” He paused. “I thought you’d want to speak to her first.”

I should speak to her, and I knew it. But I didn’t trust myself. Bitter anger ate away at me, at Isabel for not listening and the stupidity of her escaping the measures I’d put in place to keep her safe. But mostly I was furious with myself.

Because part of me knew exactly why she wanted to contact the Hamiltons, part of me knew very well. She wanted to know about her mother, about my Juliana, and I couldn’t blame her for that, because the reason she didn’t about her know was me.

I never talked about Juliana. Never. And after her death, after the Hamiltons tried to take Isabel away from me, I thought that not talking about her, not even mentioning her name was for the best. I didn’t want Isabel thinking about her or the Hamiltons, thinking they were the good guys, that they were people worth knowing. They were the enemy. They’d tried to control Juliana since the day she was born, and it was

only down to her stubborn strength and rebellious spirit that they hadn't broken her.

I wouldn't let them break Isabel.

But my daughter was as stubborn, determined, and rebellious as her mother, so I wasn't surprised that now she was an adult, she'd go looking for the only family she had.

Caleb had always told me I held her too tightly. He was right.

You shouldn't have kept Juliana for yourself. You should have talked to Isabel about her.

I should have. But I hadn't. And now I had to deal with the fallout.

"Don't worry," Caleb said. "I'm going to find out what they're up to. The texts on Isabel's phone are just about meeting places, times and dates, nothing further, and I'm pretty sure she doesn't know herself. But I have a few contacts I can hit up."

I fixated on a building across the street where a man was currently chatting with a young woman. "You were supposed to keep her safe," I gritted out.

"Take it down a notch, Ten," Atlas murmured, not helping the situation.

"Yeah, I was." Caleb's voice was uncompromising. He'd be as angry with himself as I was with him. "And her evading my security is on me. It won't happen again."

I turned around to tell him he was damn right it wouldn't happen again, when the doors of his office were suddenly flung open and Isabel was standing there, her red hair in a halo around her flushed face, green eyes spitting sparks.

It was obvious she was furious and just as obvious from the way her gaze went from Caleb to me then Atlas that she hadn't been expecting either me or Atlas to be here.

"Ah, Isabel. Just the person we want to see," Caleb said expressionlessly.

She didn't look at him, staring at me instead, the sparks in her eyes draining away to be replaced by shock. "Um...hi," she said hesitantly. "S-sorry, I didn't know—"

"It doesn't matter." I stared at her coldly since she was here now so we might as well have our little chat. "Caleb told me what happened on Friday night."

She swallowed. "About the.... uh....about the...."

"About you somehow escaping your detail. He found you in a bar in the Village. You were by yourself, apparently with plans to..." A muscle in the side of my jaw jumped as the fury inside me reignited. "Meet some *person* at the carousel."

"If you two want some privacy," Atlas began.

But I ignored him. "What *the fuck* were you thinking, Isabel?"

And just like that, the green sparks of temper leapt in her eyes again. "I was *trying* to find out just a little something about my mother," she said hotly. "Oddly enough, I don't know a single thing about her, because you tell me jack shit."

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. It didn't help that what she was saying was exactly what I'd thought it would be. "So, you thought that meeting some complete stranger, on your own was—"

"You can't even say her name!" she shouted suddenly, already halfway across the room toward me. "Her name was Juliana Hamilton, Dad. Say it!"

I blinked. "Sit down, Isabel. You know nothing about—"

"It's okay," she went on. "I know you blame me for her death. I know you hate me because I killed her. I can see it every time you look at me. That's why you won't tell me isn't it?" Then, she added. "And while we're at it, what were *you* doing on Friday night? Going to a—"

"Enough, Isabel," Caleb interrupted, coming around from behind the desk, stopping her in mid-tirade.

I just looked at her, shock pulsing through me along with fury.

Everything she said is true.

No, not it wasn't. I didn't blame her for Juliana's death. I *never* had. But this wasn't the time or the place for that conversation. She was furious and I was furious and there was too much tension in the room.

Why did she mention Friday night?

Yet before I could follow that train of thought, Caleb, who'd come around from behind his desk and over to where she stood, gripped her arm. "Come and sit down," he said quietly to her.

“Ah, kids eh?” Atlas rose from the couch and strolled over to where I stood. “Come on, Ten.” His tone was mild, but the look on his face was not. “You need a drink.”

But I didn’t want a drink. I wanted something else.

I looked at Atlas then Caleb. “That’s not what I need,” I said shortly.

Then I strode past them all and went out.

Zara

I spent all day in his stupid guest room, alternately seething at him for being a complete asshole and not only imprisoning me but also walking out on me. And seething at myself for once again revealing everything to him, as if I was justifying myself to him, which I didn't need, because why should I?

It was true what I'd told him, he had all the wealth and power and privilege in the world. He could pay for high powered lawyers to defend him if he was taken to court, and they'd probably get him off no matter what evidence I found. But I had no wealth and precious little power. I had nothing. I was a nobody just trying to make life better for herself, and that wasn't wrong, it wasn't. Besides, surely if he'd killed a man, he deserved to suffer the consequences.

But he was right. Involving him, also involves Isabel.

I slid off the bed and paced around, not liking that thought. But me not liking the thought didn't make it any less true, because yes, it did involve her. If I'd found evidence that her

father had murdered Sir George Wyndham, then he'd go to jail — if his lawyers didn't get him off — and that would affect her. That would hurt her. She clearly didn't know what her father had done — if he'd even done it at all — and the police arriving to arrest him would be a hell of a way to find out.

Shame coiled inside me.

I'd used her to get info about her father. I'd thought she'd be just another privileged rich girl who had no idea about the real world, and to some extent she was. But she'd also had her own battles. She was a good person and she'd cared about me.

He's a good man too.

Was he, though? Or did I just want him to be? Would a good man keep me locked up in the guest room of his house, telling me nothing? Would a good man have murdered someone? Then again, what did I know of good men? I'd never met one.

I stalked around, my brain going in circles and not finding much purchase with anything except anger, because anger was always my go-to since it was easier to bear than shame and disappointment and hurt, and it was certainly better than fear.

Then right when I thought I'd go mad if I didn't get out of that fucking room, the door burst open, and Fox stood in the doorway in much the same way as he had this morning. Except now there was a fury blazing in him that made me freeze in place.

I was still wrapped in the blanket, yet it may as well not have been there at all as his icy blue gaze raked down my

body. And the fury in his eyes suddenly turned into something else. Something hotter, hungrier.

My breath caught.

He looked dangerous, threatening in the most delicious way, and so fierce. He was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

His gaze met mine and for once there was no ice in it, only heat.

I tore the blanket from around me and threw it onto the floor.

The flames in his eyes ignited.

He crossed the room in two quick strides, his hands falling to my hips, gripping me, propelling me back against the wall and holding me there. But I was already reaching for him, my arms around his neck, my mouth finding his before I could even think.

I was tired of thinking. I'd been thinking for hours, for days, and I was done. I was tired of what was in my head and the endless questions that had no answers, the endless recriminations, and doubts.

I just wanted him. I just wanted *this*. Where I didn't have to think. Where the only thing that mattered was his hands on me and the pleasure he could give. The taste of him, the feel of his powerful body against mine and his heat.

His authority. His commands. His care.

Right now, though, there were no rules. No Dom and no sub, just his lips finding mine, his tongue in my mouth, kissing

me hot and demanding and fierce. Exploring me, ravaging me.

Something had happened today. I could sense it in his fury and his tension. And obviously from the fact that after telling me I wasn't his sub anymore and leaving me alone for a day and half, he was now kissing me as if he couldn't get enough. I didn't know what had made him change his mind, but I wasn't complaining.

I'd give him whatever he needed.

In that moment, I would have given him anything.

His body was a furnace against mine and I was fumbling with his belt, desperate to get it undone. He muttered something under his breath and dealt with the issue before unzipping his pants and getting his cock free. Then he lifted me against the wall, and pushed into me, hard and deep, pinning me there. "Little sub, little sub, I swore I wouldn't do this again," he murmured, his lips moving against mine. "But I can't stop thinking about you." His hips flexed as he drew his cock back and then thrust in again. "And you're exactly what I need right now."

He was what *I* needed too. What I didn't even know I needed.

But I had no breath for words as I gasped and arched against him, loving the stretch of him inside me and wanting more. He slid a palm under one of my thighs and hauled it up and around his waist, opening me further as he thrust deeper, making me groan with the intensity of the pleasure.

He found my mouth again, his kiss savage as he began to drive himself faster inside of me. He wasn't gentle and he didn't hold back, every flex of his hips shoving me against the wall. Perhaps I should have been afraid of him like this, but I had no room in me for fear.

It felt so good. And he was...fierce. Amazing. So fucking hot. Stripped of all the rules and his frigid control, he was nothing but intensity and passion and I loved it. It was especially sexy that even as he fucked me with relentless force, he had one hand at the back of my neck, cradling my head, holding me for his kiss, sure, but also protecting it from hitting the wall with each of his brutal thrusts.

He took my moans and my cries into his mouth, kissing me deeper, harder, until there was nothing in the world except his kiss and the push of his cock, the friction of his jacket against my sensitive bare nipples and the heat of his body burning through his clothing, rubbing against my skin.

"You're mine, little sub," he said roughly, breaking the kiss for a moment. "And perhaps I won't let you go. Perhaps I'll never let you go."

And perhaps you won't want to leave.

I certainly didn't want to leave now. He wanted me so passionately and whether it was just because of whatever had happened to him today and me being available, and any woman would have done, or whether it was me in particular, I didn't care.

I was the one he was with *now* and that's all that mattered.

There was no sound in the room except my gasps, the low sounds of masculine pleasure that he was making, and then the coiling pleasure drew achingly tight before the orgasm came barreling down on me like a freight train, completely unstoppable.

I screamed against his mouth as it hit, ecstasy exploding through me. Fox thrust harder, faster, until at last he turned his face into my neck, and I could feel his teeth against my skin as he bit me, a groan of release escaping him.

For a few minutes after that, neither of us moved, too shellshocked to do anything but stand there, his body holding me pinned to the wall, one hand beneath my thigh, the other at the back of my head.

I was trembling but his hold on me was secure, his breath warm against my neck, and he stayed there until the aftershocks had passed. Then he pushed away from me, dealt with his clothing, and without a word, swept me into his arms and carried me from the room.

I was still too breathless to say anything let alone protest, not that I wanted to protest. All I wanted was to lie bonelessly against his chest as he carried me downstairs so that's what I did. Except once we were in the living room, he set me on the couch, wrapping a blanket around my shoulders before remaining crouched in front of me, his blue gaze assessing. "Are you okay?" he asked after a moment. "Do you need something to eat? Something to drink?"

"No, I'm fine." I settled into the cushions and then asked a little hesitantly "Do.... the rules apply?"

“Not yet.” He frowned, not in an angry way, more as if he was weighing something up. Then he said, “You won’t find any evidence that I killed Sir George Wyndham, because there isn’t any. I made sure of it.”

A small, cold shock pulsed through me. “So...you did do it?”

He looked at me steadily. “Yes. And if I had to make the same decision again, I would.”

I was rattled. I had no idea what to say. I’d been so sure that he couldn’t have done it and yet...his blue eyes were unflinching. This was the truth.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“Because you need to know that there is no evidence here. I got rid of it all. And no one knows except Atlas. Though I suppose the Hamiltons suspect, and of course, now you know.”

I swallowed and then tried to get some moisture into my dry mouth. “I was never going to—”

“Also,” he interrupted firmly, “I’m tired of secrets, so you might as well hear the truth from me.”

“Why?” I asked. “I mean, I kind of did lie to you.”

“You did. But you know a few things about me that no one else knows now, so I may as well tell you the rest.” Slowly he rose to his feet then shoved his hands into his pockets. “Sir George Wyndham was a child abuser. Juliana and I had a small apartment we were going to move into after Isabel was born, but when she died, I lost the apartment. So, I was on the streets

with a new baby, and I was desperate. He was a man who preyed on such desperation, and I was an easy target. He offered me a home in return for...certain services and I agreed for Isabel's sake. The Hamiltons were trying to find us, and they were threatening to take her from me and so..." He stopped, a muscle in his jaw leaping. "Anyway, I knew eventually Sir George would find me too old and start looking for new prey, and sure enough, he started dropping hints about adopting Isabel. I tried to talk him out of it, but he wasn't a man who could be distracted when he was after something. He had the money and power to do whatever he wanted while I...I had nothing. I was trapped in between him and the Hamiltons." His gaze found mine, a fierce blue flame burning in it. "I had to do something to protect my daughter, so I did."

Shock rippled down my spine, a chill creeping over my skin.

He'd been alone like I'd been alone, and he'd been abused and taken advantage of, too. Not in the same way, but he was a victim as much as I was, even though I hated admitting that. He was also protective, and naturally, he'd want to deal with the danger presented to his child.

Some people when pushed into a corner found a way to escape, while others fought back. I'd escaped. He'd fought back. Could I really blame him for that? He'd been a street kid with nothing up against a powerful, rich, older man who wanted something he had and was going to take it. What else could he have done?

“I couldn’t run,” Fox went on. “I couldn’t take her anywhere else, because the Hamiltons would have found us. Make no mistake, I’m fully aware of what I did, but Sir George was a predator, and you can’t reason with them, or argue with them. The only thing you can do is put them down.” His face was all stark planes and angles, his expression unflinching, uncompromising. He hated that old man, I could see that, and no wonder.

“These ‘services’,” I began hesitantly. “Were they—”

“They were exactly what you’d imagine.”

“Sir, I’m so—”

“No,” he said. “Not ‘Sir’ now. My name is Tennyson.”

I’d forgotten the rules didn’t apply now and it was strange to feel a sense of loss at the ‘Sir’. Especially when it also felt wrong to call him Tennyson.

I took a breath. “I’m sorry you had to do that. And I’m sorry that was the only option for you.”

He was silent a moment, then he let out a breath. “I wanted you to know the context. There was no other way out for me, and I would have died to protect my daughter.” Unexpectedly, he glanced away. “I wouldn’t have covered it up if Isabel hadn’t been with me. But she only had me to protect her and if I’d gone to jail, she’d have had only Caleb and Atlas, and I couldn’t let them take that responsibility. It was mine.”

I understood. But I could also see that what he’d done hadn’t left him untouched. Taking someone’s life left a mark,

no matter how awful a person that someone was, and it was clear that Sir George had been an awful person.

“I don’t blame you,” I said, wanting him to know that I didn’t judge him. “If I’d had a knife, I would have quite happily put it in my father’s heart without a second thought.”

He looked back at me and something wordless passed between us. A shared experience of trauma, an understanding of it. We’d both been preyed on by people more powerful than we were, who’d taken advantage of us. Who’d hurt us. And we’d taken the steps we’d needed to take to protect ourselves.

How strange that I should have so much in common with a man twice my age and miles above me in terms of wealth and power.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” he said unexpectedly. “It’s not a weight I would wish you to bear.”

I got up from the couch then, unable to sit there any longer, going over to him where he stood. I wanted to put my hands on him, touch him, because the weight he was talking about, I could see it sitting heavily on his shoulders. But even now I felt shy, so I held my hands clasped in front of me instead.

“You had to protect your daughter,” I said. “You did what you had to do. What other choice was there?” I took a breath then added. “I know what it’s like to be powerless, to feel like there’s no way out.”

He looked down at me. “Then you’ll understand why the Hamiltons can never know. I can’t let this get out. I’ve always been prepared to face the consequences and I would have

turned myself in long ago if it hadn't been for Isabel. She's an adult now, it's true, but I still have enemies who would take advantage of my absence. And she doesn't know the world like I do. I've...protected her from it for too long."

I could understand his worries. But Isabel wasn't an idiot. "I think you'll find that Isabel's perfectly able to take care of herself. I'm around her age and I've been taking care of myself for nearly seven years."

His gaze was deeply skeptical, but he said nothing.

"Why do you hate them so much?" I asked since we were sharing. "The Hamiltons I mean."

"Isabel's mother was Juliana Hamilton. She died having Isabel and her family have never forgiven me for her death. They didn't approve of our relationship, and they approved of me marrying her even less."

I knew about Juliana, but her name had just been a word in that file. Now, I could see what that word meant. There was a wealth of complex emotion in his eyes, grief and fury and despair and a longing so intense it stole my breath.

He'd loved her.

"I'm sorry," I said again, pathetically since I didn't know what else to say. "I'm sorry you lost her."

He stared at me for a long moment and this time I couldn't interpret what I saw in his eyes. "So am I," he said.

Tennyson

It had been years since I'd looked at another woman and not seen Juliana. The subs I played with didn't count because they were subs and subs only. They occupied a different place in my mind, a different compartment. Juliana had never been my sub. I hadn't even known back then that I liked dominance games, though perhaps if she hadn't died, I might have discovered that part of myself with her.

But she had died, and she'd never know the dominant part of me. The little sub did, though. The little sub knew that about me. She knew I bought virgins, and she knew I'd been on the streets, that I'd whored myself out, that I'd killed a man.

She knew all my secrets and she understood, I could see it in her eyes.

We both had had similar things happen to us, and we were both alone.

We were the same, the little sub and me.

No. *Zara*.

I was sorry I'd lost Juliana, sorrier than I was about any other part of my life, but it had been a long time ago, and I'd been a different man. I'd been a boy. I'd had some kind of innocence back then, even if it had only been the innocence of youth, and that innocence had been slowly scraped away over the years, leaving exposed the hard shell underneath. The hard shell I'd had to develop or else be destroyed.

I wouldn't have thought any part of that eighteen-year-old boy, that overly emotional, fiercely protective boy, was left, but apparently there was still a fragment of him somewhere inside me. A small spark that had leapt into life the moment I'd opened the door of the guest room, wanting to question Zara further after that scene in Caleb's office. And I'd seen her standing there dressed only in a blanket, realizing at that moment that I didn't want to question her. I didn't want to hold her at a distance, distrust her or disbelieve her.

I wanted her body against mine. I wanted her heat, her scent, and cries of pleasure. And I wanted the pleasure and relief she gave to me in return.

In fact, I'd wanted her so badly I hadn't thought, only acted. Crossing the room and shoving her against the wall, burying myself inside her before either of us could say a word.

I'd known then that I'd been lying to myself. That keeping her at arm's length, telling her she couldn't be my sub anymore, that I had to give her up, were excuses. Anything to hide the fact that my control around her wasn't as good as I

wanted it to be. That she was in my thoughts too much. That she'd gotten under my skin.

I wanted her and telling myself that I didn't hadn't made any difference to that want. All I could do now was accept it.

So, I was going to keep her, I didn't know for how long, but I was. And keeping her meant telling her everything. Not that she didn't know everything already, but I wanted to tell her in my own words. Give her context.

For too long it had just been Atlas who'd known about Sir George, and perhaps I shouldn't have said anything considering how she'd kept things from me, but I was tired of my own secrets. Tired of their weight. And it was a relief to be able to tell someone else. Atlas had understood my actions, but it was different with Zara. She'd had no part in what I'd done, and she hadn't known Sir George. She hadn't known me back then either. Also, she wasn't my friend. She was my lover.

She was watching me, sympathy and understanding in her eyes, a sympathy and understanding I hadn't had from anyone in all the long years since I'd lost my Juliana. It eased a part of my soul.

I reached out and cupped her silky cheek, stroking it gently with my thumb. She didn't pull away. She'd never pulled away from me since I'd brought her here, not once.

"You never used your safe word with me," I said, caught by that sudden realization.

"Why would I?" She leaned into my palm. "You never made me feel unsafe."

My chest tightened. Beautiful little sub. She was a treasure and I'd treated her badly. I'd locked her up in my guest room, kept her prisoner, deprived her of my presence and even though I'd had good reason for all those things, it was still wrong. She didn't deserve that.

She was a woman who needed to be cherished and kept safe. Who bloomed like a flower when given passion and pleasure, though she wasn't all fragility. She had strength and courage too, and underneath that I suspected a generous, giving heart.

How could I let a woman like that go?

You can't get in too deep with her. That heart of hers is also vulnerable.

It was true. I couldn't give her love, that was beyond me, but I could give her everything else. And if she was happy with that then why not?

I dropped my hand from her cheek and reached for her, gathering her up in my arms again. She gave a little squeak as I did so, her eyes going wide as I backed over to the couch and sat down on it, still holding her close.

She relaxed then, putting her head back against my shoulder and looking up at me. "So...what's going to happen now?"

"What's going to happen now is that I've decided to keep you," I said. "And if you don't want that, you need to tell me because this will be your only opportunity to refuse." Better for us both to be clear about this up front.

Surprise flickered through her eyes, and I thought I caught the glitter of something hot and excited. “Really?” Her lashes lowered abruptly and she reached for one of the buttons on my shirt, toying with it. “How long are we talking about here?”

She wanted to stay, I sensed. She wanted it very much.

The tight feeling in my chest got even tighter. She needed me, the little sub, and it had been a long time since I’d been needed. Isabel was an adult, our relationship was strained, and as for my friends... Well, I only had two of them and it wasn’t as if they needed me in particular. Atlas and Caleb didn’t need anyone.

I put a finger under her chin and tilted her back, so she was looking up at me again. “I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Perhaps until we both decide we’re done. But there are some things I can’t give you, Zara. Things I can’t give anyone.”

“What things?”

“Long term commitment.” I paused. “Love.”

She flushed. “We barely know each other, and I never said —”

“I know you didn’t. But I have to be honest with you. Juliana was my wife and I loved her very much. It was a once-in-a-lifetime love, and she took my heart with her when she died. I don’t have anything left to give anyone else.”

Her chin jutted. “Okay. But just so you know, it’s not like I’m ready to settle down or anything.”

I stroked her silky jaw with my thumb, aware of the note of defiance in her voice, aware of what it meant. But if I

thought about that too hard, my better self would get in the way, and I'd end up letting her go for her own good. I didn't want to do that.

“Give me an answer then, little sub,” I said. “And quickly.”

She pulled away from my hand and leaned back in my arms, her warm weight shifting and making all the blood in my veins race below my belt. “Will the rules apply?”

It had been a long time since I'd smiled — I'd never had much to smile about — but I couldn't help the way my mouth curved, satisfaction stretching out inside me. “Yes,” I said. “The rules will apply.”

The silver sparks were back in her eyes now, all excitement and heat. “In that case, I think I would like to be kept.”

My grip on her tightened. I wanted to put her on her knees immediately, but there were some other things we needed to discuss first. “The issue of the Hamiltons will need to be dealt with,” I said.

Instantly, she sat up. “I would never tell them—”

I put a finger over her soft mouth, silencing her. “I know you wouldn't. But they're waiting for you to complete their task. And am I right in assuming they're not going to pay you until you do?”

She nodded.

I lowered my finger. “I won't let you go back to them, Zara. Understand that right now. But I don't want you to miss

out on the money you should have had from them either. So, I'm going to give you the five hundred thousand you earned from your auction."

Her eyes widened. "Sir, you can't—"

"I can. I have a lot of money and you have nothing. It would affect me not at all to give you what you were owed."

She frowned. "It's too much money. You can't just give it to me."

"You didn't seem to have a problem with it at the auction on Friday."

"That was different. And I had a job to do." A pink flush stained her cheekbones. "I'm not a charity."

I understood. She had her pride. In which case I needed to know what had led to her taking the job from the Hamiltons in the first place. "You mentioned taking the job because you needed the money. Because someone stole it."

"Yeah." A breath escaped her, and she glanced away again. "Don't worry about him. He doesn't—"

"I gave you an order, sub," I warned gently. "And you know I don't like repeating myself."

Her nose wrinkled and I suspected she only just stopped herself from rolling her eyes. "I'm a self-taught hacker and I get — I mean, I used to get — jobs from this guy called Donny. He would pass them on to me and take a cut."

Interesting. That was why she didn't have a job history presumably. "Illegal jobs, I'm guessing?"

“Yes. Turned out I was pretty good at computer stuff, but I didn’t have any qualifications because I couldn’t afford school. The jobs Donny passed on paid better than just about everything else and he got me this apartment... It was good. But he turned out to be a creep. He wanted me to sleep with him and when I refused, he kicked me out of the apartment and took all my stuff, including my savings.”

The simmering embers of my anger ignited, burning hot, every protective, possessive impulse going into overdrive. How dare this man hurt her? How dare he take what was hers, what she’d worked for? How dare he not take ‘no’ for an answer?

I forced it down, trying to stay in control. “You didn’t call the police?”

She gave a humorless laugh. “No, of course not. The money wasn’t earned legitimately, and I didn’t need the cops looking at my little career and deciding to investigate me either.”

“Fair,” I conceded. “So where did you go?”

“I’ve been sleeping on a friend’s couch.” She kept her gaze averted, and I knew this was because she didn’t want me to see whatever expression was in her eyes. “I don’t really have anywhere else to go.”

But I didn’t need to see her expression. I knew. She was scared.

“Your mother?” I asked, even though I suspected that I already knew the answer. “Any other relatives?”

She shook her head. “No idea where Mom is now, and no.”

“How did the Hamiltons contact you? Why?”

“Donny had passed on some work from them to me before and this time they contacted me directly.” She finally looked at me. “I couldn’t refuse. The money would change my life.”

And it *would* change her life, which meant I wasn’t going to change my mind. She would have her money one way or another, I’d make sure of it.

“Hacking hmm?” I studied her for a long moment. “I could use someone like you in Fox Tech.”

Her eyes went wide. “What? Work for you, you mean?”

“Yes. And if you don’t feel comfortable with that, then I have contacts in the industry. There are plenty of companies that would hire you in seconds flat.”

She stared at me for a second, then her gaze narrowed. “But I have no qualifications and no—”

“You’re very smart, you’re very stubborn, and you’re very tenacious, and I suspect you have a good array of skills already. Everything else you can learn on the job.”

She was still staring at me, wary and suspicious, as if I’d offered her poison not a job.

“Zara,” I said. “I’m being serious.”

“As long as I sleep with you, though, right?”

Wary little sub. I could see why she was distrustful, why she was suspicious. With her background, how could she be anything but?

“No,” I said flatly. “I’m not that kind of man, as you very well know.”

She did have the decency to flush. “Okay, I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Any job you get, either at Fox Tech or somewhere else, you can keep, irrespective of whether we’re sleeping together. And before you can ask me, no, hiring you is not about sex either. We’ll assess your technical skills and go from there. I don’t hire people for jobs they aren’t suitable for.”

She wasn’t used to being given things, to having people help her, that was clear, and she still regarded me slightly warily. “Okay. Maybe.”

“Think about it. But one thing is for certain, you’re not going back to the Hamiltons.”

Her brow creased. “But what about you? What about Sir George?”

“I need to think about it. I need to find out how they know I was involved in Sir George’s death in the first place. Because this is the first I’ve heard of it, and he’s been dead a long time.”

The crease between her brows deepened. “I should have asked them, but I just took their orders.”

“You had no reason to ask.” I touched that little crease with my finger, smoothing it out. “And I don’t want you beating yourself up about it. That’s an order.”

Her mouth curved into the most beautiful smile. “Yes, Sir.” She gazed up at me for a moment then, a little hesitantly, she

reached up and cupped the side of my face, her palm warm against my skin. I allowed it, caught by the sweetness of her hesitation and the gentleness of her touch. And when she lifted her head and kissed me, I let her do that, too.

It was a light, tender kiss, a brush of her mouth against mine then lingering there as if unsure of her welcome.

A beautiful kiss from a beautiful sub.

I let her kiss me, let her mouth explore me, tentative at first and then getting bolder. And when her fingers came to rest on my tie and she said against my lips, “Sir, please. Let me give you pleasure,” there was only one answer.

“Yes, little sub,” I said. “I would like that very much indeed.”

Zara

I spent the whole night in his arms and then we had a long, lazy morning in bed the next day, because Fox decided not to go into work.

I loved every second.

It was as if the night before had unlocked a part of him or unleashed something in him, and he was by turns fierce, passionate, possessive, and demanding in ways he hadn't been before. And he let me do things to him that he hadn't allowed before too.

That night he let me undress him and explore him, and I did, taking my time, indulging us both. And I was proud of myself when he eventually lost patience, turned me over onto my front on the couch, and then took me from behind, hard and fast.

The rest of the night I was his to command and my reward was as much pleasure as I could handle. Apparently, I could handle quite a bit.

So, I was sleepy that morning and still yawning as he sat me in his lap at the dining table, feeding me bites of the breakfast he'd made — waffles and strawberries, my favorite.

When the knock on the front door came, at first, he paid no attention, though I felt his body stiffen beneath mine and his blue eyes glittered as he held out a strawberry to me. I was about to bite into it when a knock came on the door a second time. Then his phone, which was sitting on the tabletop next to my plate, started vibrating. It had been vibrating on and off all morning, but he'd been ignoring it. Now, he stared at it as if it had suddenly turned into a viper.

“Are you going to answer that, Sir?” I asked since it was obviously bothering him. “I don't mind.”

“But I do,” he growled.

The phone stopped vibrating for a second, then almost immediately started up again.

One thing I'd learned about Fox was that he didn't curse except during sex or when he was particularly angry, so it was almost a shock when he finally grabbed the phone and answered it with a, “What the fuck do you want?” There was a pause. “What about? I'm very busy at the—” He broke off abruptly and his face went white. Then he put down the phone, eased me out of his lap, and got to his feet. “Stay here,” he ordered in a cold voice, before striding out, leaving me staring after him in shock.

What was going on? I hadn't liked that white look on his face one bit. Had he received bad news? Was it about the Hamiltons?

I should have done what I was told and stayed where I was, but concern for him had me going into the living room and sitting on the couch, listening.

I could hear his voice in the hall and another man's, deep and rough. They were arguing and Fox sounded absolutely furious.

Worry tightened inside me, and before I could second-guess myself, I'd grabbed the blanket off the couch, wrapped it around me, then crept to the living room doorway.

"You hurt her, I'll kill you," Fox was saying furiously. "I might kill you anyway."

"Hurting her is the last thing I want to do, believe me," the other man said.

That was Caleb Cross' voice, Fox's best friend.

I peeked into the hall then, because Caleb's arrival had obviously made Fox angry and whatever it was, I wanted to know about it.

Stupid of me to even think about intervening, especially when angry men were a red flag for me, but I wasn't thinking logically. All I could think about was how Fox protected me, and now I wanted to protect him.

He was down the other end of the hall, by the front door, his tall, broad figure standing there rigid. He had his back to me and his hands in fists, while Caleb — because it *was* Caleb — stood facing him. They were of a similar height, yet Caleb had a cut lip and a bruise on his jaw. Fox must have punched him.

The tension that filled the hallway was almost choking and I knew that if I didn't say anything to break that tension somehow, Fox was going to launch another punch.

“Sir?” I asked, pitching my voice clearly.

Fox stiffened then glanced over his shoulder in my direction. His blue gaze was burning, his face bone white. Then he turned back to Caleb. “Get out,” he said icily. “Get the fuck out of my sight. We’ll have this conversation later.”

I should have stayed where I was, but I couldn't bear the note of pain in his voice, so I moved out into the hallway and took a couple of steps down it. Caleb saw me, his dark eyes widening in surprise. I'd worked at his company for a month, but he was the CEO, he wouldn't know who I was. Besides, I'd never met him formally.

Fox must have either heard my footsteps or sensed me, because he stepped in front of his friend, blocking me from view. “Get out,” he repeated. “Get the fuck out now.”

Caleb gave me one last glance, then turned and went out without another word, the door closing heavily behind him.

Fox stood frozen in front of the door, a tall, muscular statue carved out of stone. He didn't turn and he didn't say a word, and though I was supposed to stay where I was, I couldn't bear it. Whatever Caleb had told him had hurt him badly and I wanted him to know I was here. So, I walked down the hallway toward him.

He didn't move as I approached and when I came around to face him, his gaze was on the front door, blue eyes burning

like gas flames in the mask of his face.

“Sir?” I asked, my chest tight with concern. “What happened?”

He didn’t look at me. “I told you to stay where you were.” There was a darkness in his voice, icy and yet at the same time full of hot rage.

If it had been at any other time, I would have apologized and begged him to punish me. But something was wrong. He was furious and hurting and I wanted to know why.

“I know you did,” I said. “But you were shouting, and I was worried for you. Why did you hit him?”

“Go back into the living room.” A muscle leapt in the side of his jaw. “And stay there until I come to you. I am not fit company now.”

Perhaps I should have done what he ordered and left him to his fury. Because being around men in a rage had never ended well for me. But I didn’t even think about that. All I knew was that I wasn’t leaving him alone.

“No,” I said simply. “You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to, but I’m staying right here.”

Finally, he looked down at me, his gaze full of frozen fire. “Not a good idea, little sub. I can’t be trusted at the moment.”

He was still white around the mouth, fury rolling off him, and it took me a moment to realize something. I’d never been afraid of him since after that first night, and even now, even when he was quite clearly in a rage, I still wasn’t afraid. He

wouldn't ever hurt me, I knew that with a certainty that went bone deep.

“You might think you can't be trusted, but I think you're wrong.” I dropped my blanket and stepped up to him. “And I trust you.” I didn't wait for permission. I slid my hands beneath the T-shirt he was wearing, stroking my palms over the hard, cut muscles of his abs and chest, feeling the warm satin of his skin and the tension in him.

He said nothing and didn't move, but I didn't stop stroking him, standing close so my body was pressed to his, and eventually the rigidity left his muscles. He let out a breath and reached for me, his hands sliding down over my butt as he brought me close, fitting me against him. “Caleb came to tell me that he and...” The muscle in his jaw leapt again. “That he and Isabel are...together.”

A bolt of surprise went through me, but hard on its heels came a small burst of gladness. Isabel had had a crush on Caleb — or at least, she'd said it was a crush, but from the way she'd always spoken about him, I knew it was more than that. She'd never said anything to him about it, because he was her dad's best friend and so much older than she was. He'd used to babysit her as a kid, too, which had complicated things. Yet it seemed as if her crush had been reciprocated which made me happy for her. Though...I could see why Fox was so angry about it. Even despite how much older and more powerful Caleb was than Isabel, there were a lot of dark rumors about his past swirling around him. Perhaps I should have been worried too, but Caleb was Fox's best friend and

Fox was a good man. If Caleb had been awful, then surely they wouldn't have been friends.

I slid my arms around his waist, putting my head on his chest, reveling in his warmth and the steady beat of his heart. "She's had a crush on him for years," I said. "She told me so. But I knew it wasn't a crush. She's in love with him."

Fox's hands on my hips squeezed hard. "Caleb's nearly twenty years older than her. He was supposed to be protecting her. He was.... His past...." Fox broke off. "She's my daughter. And he's my friend. I didn't think I'd have to protect her from *him*."

"I know." I reached up to cup his face between my palms. "But Isabel isn't stupid. And I'm sure she knows exactly who Caleb is. She wanted him. She can make her own choices, just as I made my choice to stay with you."

Rage still flickered in his eyes. "It's different. You're different."

"But I'm still twenty-three."

"You know the world, Zara. Isabel has been protected all her life. She's an innocent, she's—"

"She's your daughter and you love her," I interrupted gently. "And you're afraid for her. That's fair."

His attention shifted, focusing in on me in that intoxicating way he had. "Caleb's my closest friend," he said. "But he's the last person who should be anyone's partner let alone Isabel's. It's a betrayal."

“I know. You’re angry with him, and that’s fair too. You’re allowed to feel that way.”

“You don’t understand,” Fox bit out, releasing me suddenly. “I know what it’s like when an older man takes advantage of someone younger. That happened to me. That’s what I was trying to protect Isabel from.”

I got it now. Of course, this would screw with him. Sir George Wyndham had taken advantage of him, had used him, and now that was all he saw.

“You’re right, I didn’t understand.” I didn’t try to touch him again. “I do now. But, Sir, this isn’t the same. Izzy isn’t desperate and she doesn’t have a child to protect. She’s very stubborn too, so in many ways, good luck with that, Caleb. And if she loves him then he has to be a good man, doesn’t he? Like I said, she’s not stupid. She wouldn’t love someone who took advantage of her.”

Fox said nothing, so I went on, “Plus, Caleb is your friend. I don’t know him, but I can’t imagine him taking advantage of Izzy in any way because that would not only hurt you, but it would hurt her too. He wouldn’t want that.”

“How well do you actually know Isabel?”

There was an almost accusatory note in Fox’s voice, but I decided I wasn’t going to rise to it. He was angry and there was no point making myself a target.

“I worked with her for a month or so while she was interning at Cross,” I said. “And I got to know her pretty well. She’s...really great. I like her a lot.”

His intense blue gaze held mine for a long moment, then he let out a breath and shoved a hand through his black hair. “You know her better than I do then. I just never thought... Never even had the slightest hint that...”

Ah, so that’s what the problem was, his relationship with his daughter.

I closed the distance between us again, not actually touching him, but nearly. “It’s not the same, Sir,” I murmured. “It’s not the same as you and Sir George. Izzy had a choice and she made it, and I think you should trust her to know what’s right for her.”

He was silent, but he put his hands on my hips and pulled me even closer.

“Don’t do anything rash now, not while you’re still so angry.” I placed my palm on his hard chest. “Let your sub please her master.”

For a long moment, he remained quiet, then the expression in his eyes changed, became focused, intense. Dominating. “I want to restrain you,” he said, his tone hard. “I want to blindfold you, gag you. I want you helpless before me. I want you to submit to me in every way there is.”

He’d never restrained me since that first night. He’d never even held my hands. All he’d done was order me to place them on a wall or above my head and to keep them there.

If it had been Friday night I would have refused. But now I trusted him. I trusted him completely and if he needed this then I wanted to give it to him.

So, I didn't think twice. "Yes, Sir," I said.

Tennyson

The little sub was brave to approach me, especially when my rage was strangling me. The way it had choked me that day with that bastard Wyndham, after he'd threatened Isabel, told me that I was too old for him, that he thought she'd be 'easy meat'.

I'd always known there was a devil inside me, just waiting for the chance to break free. Juliana's death had taken the padlock off the cage I kept it in, and grief had worn away the door. So, when Sir George had made the threat to Isabel and told me that there was nothing I could do to stop him...

That devil of mine had stepped out of that cage.

I'd given him everything he'd demanded of me, but I would rather die than deliver Isabel to him. A red veil had descended, and I'd given myself up to it, punching him in the face. He'd fallen back and hit his head on a table, knocking himself unconscious.

I'd stood there, staring down at him, full of rage and hatred, desperate to protect my child, and that's when I'd made the decision. I hadn't questioned it. I'd picked up a pillow from a nearby chair, held it over his face and kept it there.

He'd died so easily, so quickly.

I'd been in shock afterward, but even then, I knew I couldn't involve Caleb, that Atlas was the only one who could help. He knew people who could make any incriminating evidence vanish, and that's what had happened. I didn't ask how. And I didn't regret what I'd done to Sir George. He'd been a predator, a threat, and so I'd eliminated him.

But that didn't change what I was deep down. A killer.

If Zara had any sense she should be running for the hills, yet she only stood there, her warmth and softness against me, staring up at me. She must have seen what was in my gaze, but she didn't flinch. She wasn't afraid.

She should have been.

All I could think about was my daughter with my best friend, and how it was wrong on every level. Caleb had looked after her when she was a kid, when I was away and didn't trust Sir George an inch with her care. I'd trusted him instead. I'd trusted him implicitly.

He'd told me that it was her who'd seduced him, that she'd had a crush on him, but that didn't excuse it. He was the one with the experience. He was the one who should have resisted, and it was far too reminiscent of my own experiences with Sir George's manipulations for comfort. The power an older, more

experienced person had over someone much younger and certainly in Isabel's case, more innocent.

Caleb didn't know about what Sir George had demanded of me — I'd never told him — but still. Caleb's past was as dark as my own and he should have resisted Isabel for her own good. But he hadn't, and now I wanted to fucking kill him. I probably would have that morning if Zara hadn't turned up in the hallway, disobeying a direct order of course, and distracting me.

A good thing for Caleb's sake.

Not so good for Zara.

Fury boiled inside me. At Caleb for how he'd betrayed our relationship and at myself for how badly I'd let my relationship with Isabel deteriorate to the point where I had no idea what her feelings were or how she thought, no idea what kind of woman she even was. And not a small part of me was furious with Zara herself, for not only pointing out that Isabel was the same age as she was but also that Isabel was in love with Caleb, something I'd had no idea about.

Giving orders as a Dom while I was so close to the edge was a mistake, as was getting anywhere near Zara. Yet I felt so powerless in this moment that all I wanted was to exert my control.

A dangerous thing to want when I was in this mood. I'd need to be careful and right now I had no patience for careful. I could push her beyond her limits and risk re-traumatizing her, which was not at all what I wanted to do.

Forcing myself to release her, I stepped back. “No. I’ve changed my mind. I can’t do that, not while I’m in this mood.”

Her brow creased and she studied me for a moment. “You want to though, don’t you?”

She was getting good at reading me and I did not like that one bit. Yet, she wasn’t wrong.

“I’m too angry, Zara.” I put as much certainty as I could into the words. “I could push you too far and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me,” she said as if this was self-evident. “And you won’t push me too far. I trust you, Sir.”

“I shouldn’t—”

Before I could say the rest of it, much to my shock, she reached up and touched one slender finger to my lips, silencing me. Touching me when I hadn’t given her leave was a punishable offence, yet I was so taken aback I couldn’t think of a single word to say.

“I trust you.” She said the words quietly and firmly, her gaze holding mine. Then she dropped her hand. “You need this, Sir. I can help you find your control again, so let me.”

She wasn’t wrong. My fury burned too hot, urging me to find Caleb, teach him a lesson in pain, and then grab Isabel, take her back here, put her in a room, and lock her in it for the rest of her natural life. Neither of which was a good idea.

I needed to cool down and yes, find my control, and she clearly thought that a scene would help.

She might not be wrong about that, either.

No. Maybe she wasn't.

"I killed someone, Zara," I said roughly, in a last-ditch effort to warn her. "I killed him in anger. Which makes me dangerous, especially when I'm in this mood."

She gave me a look that I couldn't quite read. Then she held out her hand, one side of her mouth curving upwards in a faint half-smile, as if a confession of murder meant nothing to her.

If I'd been serious about her safety, I should have walked away.

But I didn't. The Dom knew what it needed and what it needed was her. Her submission. Her trust in me. The man needed it too.

So, I reached out and took her hand and let her lead me upstairs to my bedroom, where she went on her knees, her gaze respectfully down. "What are your orders, Sir?"

I looked at her, kneeling at my feet, naked and beautiful, silver blonde hair falling over her shoulders and down her back, her pale skin flushed.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" I asked. "I need you to be sure, Zara. Very sure."

She didn't hesitate. "Yes, Sir. I'm yours to command."

My little sub. She was so wary, so defended. But not with me.

Something shifted in my chest, the Dom acknowledging the gift she was giving me. The intense satisfaction and pleasure of having her absolute trust. It made my fury start to solidify into that cold, clean blade of control.

I took a silent breath. “On the bed, sub. Lie down on your back and don’t move.”

She obeyed and once she was there, I went to my wardrobe and opened the cupboard inside where I had my favorite toys. I took out the set of padded cuffs I preferred, the soft leather flogger, a vibrator and then, after a moment, some jeweled nipple clamps. Then I took them back to the bed.

She lay there watching me quietly and didn’t make a sound as I grabbed her wrists one at a time, putting them in the cuffs and attaching each wrist to the D rings I’d had put in the headboard of my bed. Then I did the same with each ankle, attaching them to the footboard.

She made no sound, not even tensing as I finished with her ankles, and when I stood back to survey her, spread-eagled on my bed, there was no fear in her eyes.

She was mine, at my mercy. Under my control. And, looking down at her, into her eyes, I knew she would obey me. She would go where I led, trusting me to keep her safe. Trusting me in a way no one ever had.

I knew at that moment, too, that I wouldn’t let her down. I was determined not to. The gift she’d given me, her trust in my hands, would never be taken for granted. It was precious and I’d make sure she never regretted it.

“Beautiful,” I told her. “This is the way I like to see you, sub. Bound and completely at my mercy.”

Her eyes glowed, pleased with the praise, the flush in her cheeks giving away her arousal and excitement. She wasn't afraid. She wanted this as much as I did.

I held up the ball gag, the blindfold, and finally the nipple clamps. “I'm going to use these on you. You might be afraid of them, and they might cause you pain, but remember that I think you're strong. I think you can handle them. And they are for your pleasure, never to hurt or damage you. Do you understand?”

She glanced at the toys, and I could see apprehension in her eyes, but she only said, “Yes, Sir.”

I dealt with the gag first, putting it in her mouth and adjusting the straps behind her head. She shivered as I did so, shifting on the bed, and I paused. “You won't be able to speak,” I said. “And once I put the blindfold on, you won't be able to see either. So, if you're uncomfortable, shake your head. Nod if you understand.”

She nodded, the look in her eyes still apprehensive, but not afraid.

I brushed a lock of silky blonde hair from her forehead. “Good little sub.” I let approval warm my voice, watching as it worked its magic, her apprehension easing as she gave the last few pieces of her trust to me, knowing I would keep her safe.

I let her have a moment, then I put the blindfold on her with slow, deliberate movements, giving her time to get used

to it and to being blind, to being completely helpless.

She was trembling, yet a flush ran down from her throat and over the pale curves of her luscious breasts. Her nipples were hard, and I could also see the telltale sign of moisture gleaming on the cluster of curls between her thighs.

Beautiful little sub. Aroused and at my mercy.

The Dom in me relaxed, satisfied, and calm spread out inside me.

I turned and gently put the nipple clamps on the tips of her breasts, pleased with the way she gave a strangled gasp, her back arching as the clamps closed around her sensitive nipples.

“Yes,” I said. “They will hurt. But you’ll soon learn to love the pain, I promise.” There was a fine silver chain connecting the clamps and I tugged on it gently for emphasis, increasing the pressure and causing her to make another choked sound from behind her gag.

I studied her, focusing on her completely. The quickened sound of her breathing. The rise and fall of her pretty breasts. The tension in her muscles. The gleam of arousal on her slick thighs. Her hair tangled around her head. The gag between her teeth.

I was going to give her so much pleasure. I was going to destroy her with it.

“You are at my mercy now, little sub,” I murmured. “Everything I do to you will be because it pleases me, and all your pleasure will come from me. You will only have the

orgasms I choose to give you and you will only have them when I say.” I turned and walked slowly down the end of the bed, trailing my fingertips down her body as I did so she could track where I was, watching as goosebumps rose on her skin where I touched her. “You’ve gotten very good at coming on command so I expect you won’t have any trouble with this, will you?” I reached to tug on the chain between her breasts again, a slightly harder tug this time, making her jerk. “No,” I answered for her. “You won’t.”

I picked up the flogger from where I’d put it on the bed and snapped it experimentally, so she could hear the sound and know what was coming. I’d already used it on her, but only as a gentle sensitization technique, deciding that a proper flogging would be too much for her initially, given her background.

But now, watching her react to the sound of the leather as I flicked it in the air, her body tensing, her breathing getting faster, I decided that I was done with holding back.

“You’re a strong little sub,” I said. “So, I’m going to use this flogger in the manner it was intended, and you will bear it because you want to please me. Nod if you understand.”

Her head moved in a frantic nod, though I could see her still trembling.

Good.

I gave her no other warning, letting her feel its bite as I snapped it across her stomach. She gasped beautifully, her body jerking as she reflexively pulled against her restraints,

and I watched her a moment, waiting for her to shake her head, but she didn't. So, I flicked her again, across her thighs.

She made another sound, but I didn't stop, snapping it over her stomach and then up to her breasts, watching her jerk and pull against the restraints, the cuffs rattling, listening to the sounds she made against the gag. I reached out and gripped the chain between her breasts and tugged again, flicking the ends of the flogger against the clamps, bringing all the blood to the surface of her skin, making her more sensitive. She groaned in response, jerking and pulling against the cuffs.

“What a good little sub,” I murmured as I directed the flogger down, this time across the tops of her thighs, making the ends flick lightly across her pussy. She gave a strangled scream, her breathing fast and frantic.

I paused a moment, studying her, my focus absolute. Her body was delightfully flushed, and the delicate musk of her arousal scented the air. It made me hard, made me want to bury myself inside her immediately, but my desire wasn't the point of this. Only hers was.

She'd given me the whole of her trust and I was going to reward her for it.

“I think you like this, don't you?” I flicked her pussy again and she moaned helplessly “Good. You're going to be nice and sensitive by the time I'm finished with you.”

I worked her over some more, until she was panting and trembling, her skin flushed a deep red. I was harder than I'd ever been in my life, my cock pushing hard against the zipper of my jeans. But I ignored it as I strolled to the edge of the

bed, brushing my fingertips over her heated skin. She groaned again, shivering with reaction to even this light touch.

“Good,” I said approvingly. “So sensitive, just the way I like it. The flogger stings, I know, but it won’t leave any marks. I would never damage such pretty property.”

I was quiet a moment, looking down at her, letting her senses try to pinpoint where I was and what I was going to do next, drawing out the next moment of touch until she was desperate for it.

Sweet little sub. Delicious little sub.

She’d grounded me and now I was fully in control of myself.

She’d given that back to me, it was all her.

I dropped the flogger on the carpet.

Now it was time to really get started.

Zara

I lay suspended in darkness, my hands and feet tied, a gag in my mouth. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak, all I could do was feel. Every physical sensation was heightened. I was trembling and so sensitive I could feel even the slightest movements of the air on my skin.

There was a pressure between my thighs, an intense ache, a pulsing desperate hunger just on the edge of pain. My nipples throbbed, the tightness of the clamps making the hunger jagged and sharp.

I was helpless. Completely and utterly helpless and yet after that first burst of apprehension as he'd shown me the toys he was going to use on me, I wasn't afraid. His voice was my anchor, his touch binding me as securely as the cuffs around my wrists and ankles.

It was so strange. He could do anything he wanted to me, anything at all, and I wouldn't be able to stop him. I wouldn't

be able to fight or even run. I should be terrified and instead I felt secured. Held as if I was in his arms. Safe.

The short, sharp shocks of the flogger had been like lightning strikes, coming out of nowhere and hitting me in places I didn't expect. It had stung and yet still, I hadn't been afraid. The sting of it had amplified the need inside me, the pain becoming something I wanted because it felt good. The very opposite to the blows my father had given me. Those he'd dealt out to hurt me, to demonstrate his power over me, to make me feel weak and small, a victim.

But Fox dealt out pain to make me feel good. To make me feel strong. To give me pleasure, and that made all the difference.

So, I didn't fight him and I didn't fight the sensations rolling through me, I gave myself up to them, I gave myself up to him, trusting that he would only give me what I could handle and nothing that I couldn't.

He'd told me I would only get pleasure from his hands and that had been true this whole time.

It was still true.

I heard a thump on the floor and then the pillow dipped as I felt him put his hands on either side of my head. I could also feel the warmth of his body as he leaned over me, my skin stinging.

"You handled that very satisfactorily." His voice was cool, but his breath against the side of my neck was hot, and I

shivered uncontrollably as I felt the brush of his mouth against my throat. “Good, little sub. Very good indeed.”

Then came the rough scrape of his tongue as he licked me, down from my throat and between my breasts, making me shudder as he circled one throbbing nipple. My skin was so hot that his tongue felt cool as he licked around the clamp, sending an intense, biting pleasure along all my nerve endings. The pressure between my legs grew and grew.

I’d stopped trying to anticipate what his next move would be and there was a freedom in that. This was for me. All of this was for me.

He took advantage of my helplessness, his mouth moving down my body, licking my stomach and then nipping at the insides of my thighs. I moaned, pulling desperately on the restraints, shifting my hips to direct his wicked tongue to my clit, where I needed it most. But he gripped my hips all of a sudden, pinning me to the mattress. “Keep still,” he said icily. “You don’t get to make demands, little sub. You only get what I choose to give you and if you keep up with that nonsense, you’ll get nothing. Understand me?”

I nodded frantically, going still, my breathing coming in short, fast pants.

There was a silence.

Then he said, “Good.” And tugged on the chain that connected the nipple clamps, the resulting pleasure/pain making me scream inarticulately against the gag.

He let go, the pressure mercifully releasing, then I heard him move around the bed. “Beautiful sub,” he murmured, his cold voice laced with heat. “You’re very strong and I know this about you. I know you’re stubborn too, so let’s test that out, shall we? Remember what I said about not coming until I tell you.” The direction of his voice changed until I knew he was standing down the end of the bed, between my legs, spread and held wide by the cuffs around my ankles. One warm hand settled on my thigh and then something cool slid into my slick sex, pushing in deep. The vibrator.

I jerked against my restraints, moaning helplessly into the gag as my inner muscles clamped hungrily around it, the friction almost tipping me over the edge then and there.

“Now,” he went on. “If you come before I tell you to, you will be punished. Let’s find out how long you can hold out.”

Then he turned the vibrator on.

I wailed as the pulsing rhythm started, seeming to consume my whole world. Pleasure began its relentless build, making me writhe as much as my bound hands and feet would allow. Moans vibrated against the gag in my mouth, the darkness behind the blindfold shot through with bright, glittering lights.

I was teetering on the edge already, desperate for him to let me come, and really, it was a good job he’d gagged me, because if not, I’d be begging him to give the word. As it was, all I could do was make choked noises and tremble and shake.

He’d know how close I was. He’d know. And clearly, he was going to push me to my limit, the bastard, because all he said was, “Such a good sub.” His voice was close, the ice

laced with warm approval and I latched on to the deep timbre of it, an anchor in the storm of pleasure sweeping through me, stopping me from going under.

I *was* a good sub. I wasn't going to come until he said. I was determined.

"You can handle more, though, I think. Keep still for me."

I tried. He was close, I could smell his delicious aftershave, feel his warmth. Then like a lick of flame, his fingertip pressed directly down on my clit, before moving around in tight little circles, adding friction to the pulse of the vibrator.

I wailed harder, fighting the agony of pleasure, trying to find the strength to hold out. But the stroke of his finger, sliding around my clit and giving me small pinches, made it impossible.

"Good girl," he murmured. "Now come for me, sub. Come for your master."

Almost as soon as he'd finished saying it, the orgasm swept over me, crushing me beneath it, and I screamed and screamed against the gag, the darkness behind my blindfold exploding into glittering lights.

I was floating, the aftershocks pulsing through me, barely aware of anything as he slid the vibrator out of me.

"A perfect performance," he murmured. "You came so beautifully, and I think you deserve a reward. That pretty little cunt of yours is hungry for more and so I'm going to give it exactly what it wants."

I was still trembling through the aftershocks when I heard his zipper being undone. Then the mattress dipped and there was a shock of heat from his hands as he ran them up my thighs and gripped my hips. Then his cock was pushing into me, deep and hard, uncompromising.

I groaned, because it was too much, far too much. I was too sensitive and keyed up, but he didn't move. He stayed still, buried deep inside me, waiting for me to still.

“Breathe,” he said. “Breathe slowly, sub. I want you to take me, so breathe.”

I did, feeling the sensitivity ease and my trembles subside. I could have shaken my head and he would have stopped, but I didn't want him to stop. I wanted him inside me. That's where I always wanted him to be.

When I'd finally quieted, I felt the pressure on my nipples ease as he got rid of the clamps, but then the sharp pain of the blood rushing back into them made me wail, so he chafed them, easing the pain at the same time as it sent jagged pulses of pleasure through me.

He stayed buried inside me as he ripped off the blindfold, bright light stabbing me. He carefully removed my gag and I lay there, staring up into his intense blue gaze.

Tears filled my eyes, a weird bubble of emotion catching in my throat. The sharp, precise planes and angles of his beautiful face, his straight black brows, the dusting of snow at his temples, the way his gaze burned, all that heat beneath the ice, and all for me.

I hadn't known what a good man looked like; I'd never known. But I knew now. A good man looked like him.

The bubble of emotion expanded, warmth filling me and then heat, a raw powerful feeling coursing through my veins, almost dizzying in its intensity.

I'd never felt it before, yet I knew what it was all the same.

It was love.

I'd only known him a few short days, but I was in love with him.

If he knew what the look on my face meant, he gave no sign, merely staring down into my eyes as he began to move, a deep slow rhythm, then gathering speed.

Pleasure began its relentless spiral, the tears spilling down my cheeks.

He said nothing, but I knew he saw them.

His fingers dug into my ass cheeks as he gripped me harder, slamming himself inside me, the bed shaking with every hard thrust, my body jerking against the restraints.

His gaze was a fire, a blaze of blue flame, devastating in its intensity and so possessive I could hardly breathe.

"You're mine," he said very clearly, very distinctly as the bed shook again. "All of you, Zara. You are mine in every way there is. Mine to command." He thrust again, making me cry out. "Mine to use. Mine to spoil." Another deep hard thrust. "Mine to own. Understand? Say it."

"Y-Yes," I stammered, my voice rusty and hoarse.

“Whose are you?” he demanded, driving into me with relentless strength.

“Yours,” I gasped. “Yours, Sir.”

I was, and I felt it in every part of me.

I’d always belonged to him.

I always would.

When the second orgasm came, I didn’t break. I didn’t shatter.

I flew.

Tennyson

The next couple of days, I didn't leave the house. I spent the time with Zara, getting rid of my stubborn anger at my friend and my daughter in the endless distraction and pleasure dominating her was turning out to be.

She was perfect in just about every way. She took the sharp edges off my fury, turning it into something hotter and less cruel, less corrosive. She channeled it outward, making it a fire that blazed instead of needles of ice turning inward and shredding parts of my soul. She gave me my control back.

I'd had no idea I'd needed her until now.

I should have gone and made my peace with Isabel, but I was still too angry to consider speaking to her. Caleb had told me he didn't want me to, and that was fine. I was still debating whether to kill him, but again, Zara had taken the edge off my anger at him, too.

She made everything better through some alchemy I didn't understand.

However, even Zara couldn't make the Hamiltons disappear.

I'd been going to call Livia to ask her for any inside details on the Hamiltons, since I was sure Caleb had mentioned that she had a contact. But I realized at the last minute that I couldn't ask her any specific questions since that would give away what had happened to Sir George and my role in his death. And there was no way I was going to do that. Which meant if I wanted to find out how the Hamiltons knew I'd killed him, I needed to find another way to do it.

I went into work a couple of days after Caleb's visit. Zara assured me she would be fine on her own. She was, apparently, very content to lounge around naked in my house, and I was very, very happy to let her.

It put me in a foul mood to leave her— not that I wasn't in a foul mood already — so I wasn't best pleased when Karl, my secretary, announced through the intercom, “Miss Isabel is here, Mr. Fox.”

The next minute, my daughter strode through the glass doors of my office.

Instantly I came to my feet, ready to give her the tongue-lashing of the century. All my good sense and Zara's advice had gone straight out the window, buried beneath a flood of fear and worry for Isabel, not to mention the desperate anger that covered it.

“Isabel,” I began, “What are you doing—”

“I need to talk to you about me and Caleb,” she interrupted, coming to a stop in front of my desk.

She was different today. There was a poise to her, a calm I’d never seen in her before. As if at some point, she’d found an emotional focus or center, instead of being a wild storm flailing around trying to find a target.

Caleb’s doing perhaps?

I didn’t want to think about that. I didn’t want to think about *him*. “Don’t mention his name to—”

“Oh, stop it,” she interrupted with some disgust. “I don’t want your righteous anger. I know you want to protect me, all the bullshit I’ve had to endure for years is all about your need to protect me. But I’ve had enough, Dad. It ends today.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she held up a hand. “I haven’t finished. I love Caleb. I’ve loved him for years. Yes, I know his past. Yes, I know what he’s done. The thing is, Dad, is that he’s the only one who has ever given a shit about me. The only one who ever gave me the attention I wanted. He made me feel important. He made me feel wanted. He made me feel like I was worth something.”

You knew what your distance did to her. You knew how she would feel. And you just didn’t want to do anything about it.

It was true. It was all true. At first putting distance between us had been necessity. It had been grief at the loss of Juliana, and the horror at what I’d done to Sir George. Then, after that, had come the hungry demands of my business. There had

always seemed to be a reason not to overcome that distance, and soon it had become insurmountable.

I couldn't think of anything to say. The honesty in her green eyes and the utter certainty of what she was saying were like a blade through my heart.

“You held me at a distance for so long,” she went on, mirroring what was going through my head so closely it was as if she could read my mind. “And you know what I thought? I thought it was because you blamed me for Mom's death. I thought you couldn't stand to look at me, because of her.”

Shock hit me. Yes, she looked like Juliana — too much like her — and sometimes that was uncomfortable. But that wasn't why I'd distanced her. I wanted to explain, but she continued on, “Regardless, Caleb was there for me and he always has been. That's why I fell in love with him. I know he's older than me and I don't care. But as it happens, he's not willing to love me back and since I'm not accepting scraps from him ever again, you don't have to worry about us being together, because it's over. But I won't have you destroying a friendship over me. I refuse to be the thing that breaks you up. He's a good man. He's loyal and protective, and you need him whether you know it or not. And he needs you.”

I had no idea what to say to that. I was still struggling with the fact that she loved him to even process that he'd apparently rejected her. Instead, I turned sharply away, striding over to the windows, where I stood, hands in my pockets, trying to get my thoughts in order.

Beneath me the city gleamed, all steel and glass.

“I know I haven’t been a good father to you, Isabel,” I said. “And you will never know how sorry I am for that. When your mother died, I was so furious with the world that I thought it was better to keep you away from me.” Slowly, I turned from my survey of the city and met her green eyes, so like Juliana’s. “But you have to know that I *never* blamed you for her death. She wanted you so much. She loved you from the moment you were conceived, and she would have given her life up a thousand times just so you could exist. We both would.”

The expression on Isabel’s face was taut with hurt and all I could feel was a deep, heavy regret that I had let it get to this point. That I’d distanced her for so long, putting at risk a relationship I valued more than any other.

This was my fault and I had to put my anger aside and fix it.

“If she could see the woman you’ve become,” I said, giving her the truth. “She...She would have been so proud. Just as I am proud.” I paused a moment. “I’m sorry, Isabel. I’m sorry for all the years I wasn’t there for you. And... It should have been me taking care of you, not Caleb.”

“Is that why you were so angry with him?”

She wasn’t wrong. There had always been a part of me resentful of him for that. But that had been my choice, not Caleb’s. And it wasn’t the whole reason for my anger.

“That’s part of it,” I admitted. “But you’re still twenty-three and he’s forty-two. He was your babysitter. Him taking you is a betrayal of trust that I—”

“Wait up,” she said coolly. “He didn’t ‘take’ me. I pretty much took him. I also don’t appreciate you acting as though I had no agency in this. I’m not a child, Dad. I knew what I was getting into with him. I know about fucking power imbalances. And I can’t believe I’m having this goddamn conversation with yet another man, but for fuck’s sake. I might be young, but I’m not naive. I’m an intelligent woman who can make her own choices and you have to start letting me. I will make mistakes, sure, but I can learn from them. That’s what being an adult is all about.”

Now all I could think about was Zara, telling me that Isabel was a grown woman who could make her own choices. Just as she had in choosing to be with me.

“He should have known better,” I muttered, still grappling with my anger.

“Jesus, didn’t you hear a word I said? If you’re going to blame anyone, blame me, for God’s sake.” She folded her arms. “Anyway, it’s moot point now. He told me he’d never let me go, but he did.”

She’d mentioned that before, but now I could fully hear the pain in her voice. I tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I told you he didn’t want me. He went on and on about how he’d never let me go because he’s committed to this idea that he’s the world’s most terrible person. So, I told him that if he wasn’t going to give me his entire fucking soul then I’d walk out of there and he’d let me go. And since he didn’t want to give me his soul, he let me go.”

I didn't know whether to be furious about that as well or relieved. One thing I did know was that I hated the pain in her voice.

But I'd had no idea Caleb felt that way about himself, which made his not wanting to give her his heart understandable. He must feel as if he didn't deserve her, and he was right. He didn't. Perhaps it *was* relief I should be feeling.

"Jesus, Isabel," I said. "You seriously thought he might?"

Pain rippled across her face. "I'm not that unlovable, Dad. I thought it was a reasonable request."

"I didn't mean—"

"Not that it makes any difference. Caleb's convinced he's a terrible person and is trying to protect me from himself. A fact which you did not in any way try to disabuse him of."

I hadn't. Which was the height of hypocrisy given my own actions. But really, this wasn't about Caleb, and I knew it. It wasn't even about Isabel. It was about me. About my experiences with Sir George and how he'd used me.

I wasn't going to talk to Isabel about that, however, and I never would.

I turned back to the windows. "You shouldn't have anything to do with him."

"Why? Because he killed the man who would have killed him? Yes, I know all about that. He told me. But that doesn't mean he's beyond redemption. He's also the most fiercely loyal man I know and the most protective, and he wants to do

good by the people who are important to him. Not to mention that he's had a shitty life, and no one has really taken care of him, not one single person."

I wasn't the only killer amongst us. Caleb had taken out the crime lord he'd once served and taken his empire into the bargain. Another small reminder of my own hypocrisy. How could I judge him? When I'd done the same thing?

And as to the rest, it was true. It was all true.

"Is that why you love him?" I asked, staring at the city beyond the glass. "Because you want to take care of him?"

"No." Her voice had gotten husky. "I love him because he makes me happy."

I felt that like a cut to the heart. Happy. When had she ever been happy? Given her childhood and a father who'd withdrawn emotionally so completely that he may as well have been a stranger to her?

Juliana would have hated what I'd done to our little girl. She would have been appalled.

We'd talked so often about her, about what she'd look like and what our future would be. We'd envisioned a family together, out of the city, away from her family's controlling grasp. A beautiful little house. A swing set in the yard. A dog maybe. A baby brother for her. She would grow up safe and loved and have so many friends. She'd go to college and fall in love and get married.

Except all of that was not to be. And she'd fallen in love with the worst man possible, my oldest friend. Who'd loved

and protected her and been there for her in a way I never had.

She loved him. He made her happy. How could I resent that? How could I stand in the way of my child's happiness when that was all Juliana and I had ever wanted for her?

"You deserve to be happy," I said abruptly into the silence. "Your mother would have wanted that for you and...so do I." I turned then, and looked at her, strong and beautiful. Confident. Decisive. I was so proud of her.

She deserved the world, and I would give it to her if I could.

"Where are you going?" She asked as I headed abruptly toward the door.

But I didn't answer. I was going to find Caleb and give him the kick in the ass he so richly deserved for daring to make my daughter so unhappy.

Zara

I didn't want to think too deeply about that night with Fox, or about my feelings for him. I didn't want to think about love or why it had hit me so suddenly and for a man who was wrong for me in every way there was. I didn't want to think about how he was going to let me go eventually and it was going to hurt like hell when he did.

I didn't even want to think about Santorini. All I wanted was to laze around his house, secure and safe, excited for his return at the end of the day, so that's what I did.

Isabel had texted me a couple more times and I'd replied as vaguely as possible, since I had no idea what to say. I didn't know how long I'd be with Fox and then there was the fact that I'd lied to her about working at Cross and being her friend. She deserved a face-to-face conversation but given how difficult Fox was being about her relationship with Caleb, I decided she probably didn't need me adding to the mix.

I'd been waiting for Fox to text me, since he'd told me that morning he'd be issuing me with instructions for his return, but I hadn't heard from him, and I was just starting to get worried when I heard the front door slam.

I quit lounging on the sofa, dumped the tech magazine I'd been flicking through, and was halfway to the doorway, when Fox appeared. His black hair was disheveled as if he'd run his hands through it one too many times, and there was a weariness in his face that hadn't been there this morning.

My heart contracted and instantly I went to him. "Shall I take care of your tie, Sir?"

I waited for his nod then lifted my hands to the knot. "You look tired," I added. "What happened today?"

He let out a weary-sounding breath. "Isabel came to see me and gave me a lecture on how she was an independent woman who can make her own choices."

I bit back a smile as I got the silk at his throat undone. Of course, Isabel wouldn't accept her father's nonsense about her and Caleb, nor should she. But still, Fox was clearly unhappy about it.

"I've been a terrible father to her," he went on, his deep voice full of a regret that made my chest ache. "I've held her at a distance yet suffocated her. I was far too overprotective, yet I never let her get too close to me." He paused and closed his eyes a moment. "She thought I hated her because she looks like Juliana."

The self-recrimination in his voice made me hurt for him and all I wanted to do was make him feel better. “You’re not a terrible father,” I said. “And believe me, I know what a terrible father looks like. You love her and yes, you made some mistakes, but you want what’s best for her and that’s the most important thing.”

He didn’t answer immediately as I pulled the tie free, coiling it up in my hands and laying it on the arm of the couch. Then I started to undo the buttons at his throat. “She loves Cal,” he said eventually, opening his eyes again. “All she wants is to be happy but...he refused her because he thinks he’s not good enough for her. So, naturally, I had to go and give him a lecture.”

The button slipped free of the buttonhole, his skin warm against my fingertips. I went up on tiptoes and pressed a kiss in the hollow of his throat, which technically was against the rules, but I didn’t think he’d mind. Instantly, his hands came up, cupping my head as I came back down on my feet, tipping my head back to look at him.

“She didn’t want me to lose my friendship with Cal because of her,” he said, looking down at me. “He and I are... brothers. And he deserves happiness as much as she does. So, I told him that, and I gave him my blessing. But...did I do the right thing, Zara?”

For a second, I couldn’t quite process the fact that he wanted my opinion, and not as a Dom, but as a man. A father. It made my chest ache even more that my thoughts mattered to

him, that he cared enough to even ask. And perhaps most of all, that he trusted me enough to share his doubts with me.

After a moment, I said, “Yes. You did the right thing. Isabel’s old enough to make her own mistakes and you can’t save her from them. But for the record...I don’t think this is a mistake. I think she’s going to end up giving Caleb hell for the rest of their lives.”

The stark look in Fox’s eyes faded, the tension around his mouth fading along with it, and almost I got a smile. They were rare, Fox’s smiles, but when they appeared they stopped my heart.

“Yes, she probably will,” he said. “I don’t envy him one bit.”

I put my hands on his chest, leaning against him. He hadn’t said anything about rules yet, so I was taking advantage shamelessly. “There, you see? You’re a great father. You put your daughter’s happiness ahead of your own. Isn’t that what a good parent does?”

His hands came to my hips, and he studied me for the longest time, the expression on his face unreadable. “How did you get to be so wise, little sub?” he asked eventually. “You’re not very old.”

“It’s a gift. Also, I’ve got an old soul.”

This time he did smile, and I felt something in my chest shudder with delight. I loved how I could get a smile out of him. It felt like a victory.

At that moment my phone, which I'd left on the couch cushions, lit up with a call. Reflexively I glanced at it and went cold all over.

It was the Hamilton contact calling me.

Fox noticed my tension immediately and he glanced at the phone too. Then he released me, picked up my phone and without another word, hit the answer button. "This is Tennyson Fox," he said icily. "Zara will not be completing the task you set her, nor will she be having any contact with you or anyone else in the Hamilton family. If you need anything from her, in the future you will go through me." Then he hit the disconnect button and dropped the phone back on the couch.

I stared at him, part of me unhappy at how he'd answered my phone without even asking me if he could, while another part was secretly thrilled at the protective way he'd dealt with them. "I could have handled that," I said. "I didn't need you to do it for me."

"I know you didn't. But since I'm here, I handled it and now you don't have to." His expression intensified. "You're my sub, Zara, and your difficulties are my responsibility. I will handle them as I see fit, understood?"

It was reflexive to fight him, I realized, to protest at the way he took charge. But it was an old reflex and one I didn't want anymore. Because I *wanted* him to take charge, to handle things for me, to take care of me. That's why I was here, why I hadn't left. It wasn't only the money, it was him. And I didn't have to fight him anymore.

“Yes, Sir,” I said breathlessly, relaxing into his care.

“Which reminds me. I have transferred money into your account, all of what the Hamiltons owe you.”

I blinked. So. It was mine now. I could go to Greece at last. I could go to Santorini. I could leave New York, leave my past behind, leave everything behind. Start a new life.

What about him?

My heart twisted painfully. If I left for Greece, I’d leave him behind, because after all, we’d made no promises to each other. He’d said he was going to keep me until we both got sick of it and who knew how long that would be? Not long, I was thinking.

You want it to be, though.

I shoved the thought away. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s money you were owed, and I paid you in good faith. It should be yours, not the Hamiltons.”

“Money I was only going to get if I did something that would betray you.”

He lifted one powerful shoulder then reached for me again, pulling me close. “But you didn’t betray me. And you had plans for that money, I bet. It’s not as if you were doing it purely for the pleasure of taking me down.”

“No, I suppose not.” I stared at the buttons of his shirt in front of me. “I was planning on leaving New York. I always wanted to go to this Greek island, Santorini. I thought, once I got the money, I’d go there.”

“Santorini? Why?”

I toyed with one of his buttons, not wanting to meet his gaze in case he saw the reluctance in my eyes, the pain at the thought of leaving him.

“I had a couple of magazines when I was a kid,” I said. “And there was a travel feature on Santorini in one of them. When Dad was shouting and smashing things, I used to go hide in my room and look at the pictures of the white houses and blue water. I used to imagine I was there and not in a shitty apartment with an evil monster for a dad.”

He was silent a moment and then his finger was beneath my chin, gently but firmly tilting my head back. His gaze was very steady. “You’ll get to Santorini, Zara. I’ll make sure you do.”

The words had the force of a vow, a solemn promise, and my heart twisted a little more. “What about you? What about the Hamiltons and them threatening you?”

“I’ll deal with them in due course.”

“But I don’t need to go yet, though,” I said before I could stop myself. “I can stay with you for a bit longer, right?”

Something flickered in his eyes, something I couldn’t read, and abruptly he released me. “Zara...” He stopped and it looked as if a weight had descended on him.

I felt cold suddenly. “What? What’s wrong?”

He looked away and ran a hand through his black hair, and the cold feeling deepened. He never looked away first. Never.

“Actually... I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay.”

My stomach dropped away. I didn't know what I'd expected him to say, but it wasn't that. “But I thought we were going to continue on until we were sick of each other.”

He glanced at me, and seemed as if the lines of his face were more sharply etched, more deeply carved. “I've changed my mind.” There was regret in his cold voice. “I think it's better for you if we end this now.”

I stared at him, bewildered, feeling as if he'd yanked the ground out from under me. “What do you mean? How is it better for me? Why did you change your mind?”

This time his gaze didn't waver. “Caleb is in love with Isabel, and she is in love with him. I still don't approve of their relationship, but he'll make her happy and that's all I ever wanted for her. Only happiness. And I...” He paused a moment, then continued, “I want you to be happy too, Zara. You need it. You deserve it. But I can't give it to you, and I never will. I'll only end up causing you pain and you've had enough of that to last a lifetime.”

The cold was creeping over my skin, freezing every nerve ending, the terrible gentleness in his voice like steel wool rubbing over my heart.

I knew this would never be permanent, I'd always known. I knew he'd never love me the way I loved him, because why would he? We'd only known each other barely a week and I was a nobody with nothing. No education, no home, no money. Only a history of illegal jobs and homelessness, and

one parent who didn't give a shit about me, and one who actively hated me.

Yet...I thought we'd have longer together.

I swallowed against the lump rising in my throat, blinked back the stupid tears prickling in my eyes. "Why the hell would you think that my happiness is dependent on you?"

His gaze scanned me the way it always did, sharp, penetrating. Seeing right through me, seeing everything about me. "Because you're upset, Zara. And if you're upset, it's already too late."

I blinked harder, my hands closing into fists as I reached for my anger to shield me from the pain. "Too late? Too late for what? If you mean, it's too late for me not to feel anything for you then you're right. It is." I took a couple of steps toward him, suddenly furious with him and furious with my stupid heart too. For falling for him. For wanting what it could never have. It wanted the impossible dreams, it always had. "But you're wrong in that you can't make me happy. Happy is all I've been this entire time with you, and I think I make you happy too." I swallowed yet again, fighting not to break down in front of him like a child. "So why can't we just keep going until we don't make each other happy anymore?"

Tennyson

Zara's face was white, her gray eyes glittering with tears, yet she stood in front of me with her stubborn chin lifted, daring me, challenging me the way she always did.

There was an ache inside me somewhere, a pain I didn't want to acknowledge so I didn't. This had to be done and the decision had been slowly made as I'd come back from Arcadia, after I'd delivered my lecture to Caleb, and he'd come to his senses about Isabel. He'd gone after her, ready to claim her, and I was glad. I only wanted happiness for her, but it had gotten me thinking about Zara, about what I could offer her and what she needed.

My little sub hadn't had much happiness in her life nor many chances for it, and I knew without a doubt that holding onto her would be a mistake. Because if I kept her, she'd never get that chance. She'd never find that happiness with me.

I'd lost the ability to make people happy years ago, perhaps when Juliana died. And all I'd done since was hurt the

people closest to me and make their lives a misery.

I could give the little sub satisfaction and pleasure. I could make her feel safe and protected. But I couldn't give her the one thing she needed and deserved above all.

She wasn't a stupid woman. She was generous, passionate, and caring, and eventually, she'd want more. Eventually, she'd feel that something was missing, and she'd be right. There was something missing.

I couldn't love her the way Caleb loved Isabel, and I never would.

Looking at her right now, fiercely blinking back the tears in her eyes, her hands in fists at her sides, I knew I'd made the right decision. Because it *was* too late. She already felt something for me and so this would hurt her. But better some pain now than agony later.

"Because that's not fair to you," I said. "You're young, Zara. You'll get over me—"

"No," she interrupted fiercely. "No, I won't get over you." She took a deep, shaky sounding breath. "Don't you understand? I've fallen in love with you, Tennyson."

The ache inside me deepened into pain at the sound of my name and at what she'd said. Of course, it was too late. Of course. There was something savage underneath the agony, but I ignored it. I had to.

I should never have taken her home that night after the auction. I should never have touched her. I should have paid

her the money and sent her on her way, but I hadn't and now I had to deal with the consequences.

There were always fucking consequences.

"I'm sorry, Zara," I said, trying for my usual ice and failing. "But that's why we have to end this. I don't feel the same way. Juliana took my heart with her when she died, I told you that, and I have nothing left to give you or anyone else."

Zara shook her head, swiping at her tears with one hand. "I'm not asking you to love me, Jesus Christ. I don't want marriage and forever, and kids and a white picket fence. All I'm asking for is a couple more days."

She *was* young. Too young. She had no idea how your heart could be ripped still beating from your chest. How love could leave you hollowed out, a shell of the person you'd once been. How it took years to even feel normal again, except you'd never feel normal. You'd never feel whole.

Zara deserved more than that. More than the half-man I was.

"And if I give you that?" I asked. "Do you really want a couple more days when you already know it's over? How will that make you happy? And when the time comes to say goodbye, will it be any easier for you?"

She dashed away another tear. "No," she said with brutal honesty. "Will it be easier for you?"

It should be. The thought of it should have meant nothing to me at all. Easy come, easy go. But there it was again, that pain at the thought of letting her go, letting her disappear into

the city and out of the country. Out of my life. Not mine any longer...

You can't keep her. This is better for her in the long run.

I wasn't done with her, but no, I couldn't keep her. I couldn't force her to stay with me knowing she would always want more. Knowing that there was one thing my sub needed above all else and that I couldn't give it to her. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. And I couldn't do it.

I should have lied to her then, but her honesty deserved better than that. "No," I said. "It won't be easy at all. But it's necessary."

"Fuck necessary." She took a step closer, looking up at me. Pale skin, silvery hair, the prettiest gray eyes. The most beautiful woman. "Do you want me? Will it hurt to give me up?"

She was so hurt and so angry, and she wasn't hiding it. She was showing me everything she felt, and the Dom in me wanted to claim those emotions. Take them away and make them mine.

But she loved me. She *loved* me and I couldn't do anything with that.

I took a breath, my icy control beginning to slip at the pain in her eyes and her physical closeness. Her warmth and sweet scent. I didn't want her getting near me, testing my control, testing my determination, and for the first time since I'd met her, I was the one who took a step back. I was the one giving ground.

“My feelings have nothing to do with this,” I said coldly. “I’m your Dom. I have to do the right thing for you.”

“Bullshit.” She took another step, getting into my personal space, flooding the air around me with her beauty. “You don’t want to give me up, do you?”

I couldn’t take another step back, I couldn’t give more ground, but I also couldn’t bear her getting so close, so I reached out, taking her upper arms and gripping them tight to hold her in place. “No, I don’t,” I said fiercely. “I want to tie you to my bed and keep you there. But I will never be able to give you the things you need, Zara. Juliana’s death shattered me, and I will never be whole, do you understand? I can’t love you back and I never will. Never. Which means the best thing for both of us is to end this while we can.”

Her eyes glittered with tears and pain and fury. She made no effort to get free. “The best thing for you, you mean. Don’t make it my fault, Tennyson. Don’t make all of this about doing what’s right for me, not when it’s about you. You and your fear.”

I let her go abruptly. “Fear? What the hell would I be afraid of?”

“You’re afraid of letting anyone get close to you. Isabel. Caleb. Atlas... You hold everyone at a distance and it’s not because you need to protect them, it’s all about protecting yourself.”

A shock passed through me, hot and electric. “What? No, that’s not what this is—”

“It is!” She stared up at me, all fire and passion. All fury. “You think you’re broken, but that’s just a fucking excuse. An excuse not to want anything, not to try again. An excuse not to live. I know you’ve been hurt and hurt badly, and fuck, same. But you know what you do? You get up. You try again. You let yourself want more because it’s better to fight than fucking giving up and dying!”

Each word was a shock, a bolt delivered straight to my heart.

She’s right.

No. No, she wasn’t.

“You think I didn’t try after Juliana died?” I demanded, suddenly as furious as she was. “You think I gave up? Ask Sir George Wyndham if I gave up. Ask Atlas. Ask Isabel. I fought for them and I—”

“But you didn’t fight for *you*, Tennyson!” she shouted. “What do *you* want? Do you think you died with her? Is that what this is? Because telling me you can’t love is the biggest bunch of bullshit I’ve ever heard. Everything you do is for love, Tennyson Fox. Everything! You’re the most caring, protective, decent man I’ve ever known, and if that makes you broken then I hate to think what that makes me.”

I stared at her, the force of her fury touching something deep inside me. Because she wasn’t wrong. I *had* done all those things for love. Yet they were also why I couldn’t love her, no matter how much she wanted me to, and it was clear she did want me too.

“Yes,” I said, reaching for the ice that never failed me, the cold that kept the pain at bay. “You’re right. Everything I did was for love. I killed a man. I destroyed my relationship with my daughter, and I nearly ruined the friendship I had with two men who are brothers to me.” I took a step towards her, letting her see the devil in me, the demon that lived inside me. “And what do you think I’ll do for you? What lengths would I go to? I would bring down this city and everyone in it, and not waste a second’s regret, and *that’s* why you have to go. Because I can never do any of those things again. I won’t.”

She didn’t back away, she didn’t even look afraid. She stared back at the demon in me, the demon I was, her eyes full of tears. “Coward,” she spat. “You’re just a fucking coward.”

Then she turned on her heel and walked out on me.

Zara

I was shaking with rage and pain as I walked away. Shaking with fury at his absolute refusal to see what I saw in him, at his commitment to being the bad guy when it was obvious, he was the opposite.

It was fear and I think he knew that himself, yet even pointing that out to him hadn't been enough to make him change his mind.

I wasn't enough.

Fucking asshole bastard.

I stormed upstairs to his bedroom and went over to the dresser. I had no clothes and even though part of me wanted to stomp out of his house entirely naked, I had some common sense. So, I grabbed a T-shirt and some sweatpants, rolling up the bottoms of them, and then I took my purse and my cloak, and I left.

I had nowhere to go except Jay's so I called an Uber because I'd be damned if I walked there. And then I sat in the

back as we drove, tears streaming down my face.

I'd had no choice, but to walk away from him, because what else was there for me? He hadn't been wrong about a couple of days. It wouldn't have made things better to stay. It would have only made things worse, and anyway, as I'd faced him and called him out on his bullshit, one thing was clear to me.

I wasn't going to wait around taking whatever he'd give me, not anymore.

I could have told him that I didn't want more, that I'd take whatever he offered, whatever that was. But I wasn't going to.

I'd never fought my father. I took whatever he'd given me and then, when I couldn't take any more, I'd run out that door. I'd never fought my mother, either, when she'd left me. I'd let her go without even a protest. Even with Donny I hadn't fought. I'd taken whatever he doled out to me, and I'd told myself I didn't have a choice.

But I did have a choice. I didn't have to take whatever I was given. I could want more. I could fight for more and I had. I'd fucking fought. And when I'd walked out, it hadn't been because I was afraid.

It was because I wasn't going to take scraps from anyone ever again.

Fuck Tennyson Fox and his cowardice. If he wouldn't change his mind about me, then *he* didn't deserve *me*.

Are you sure about that?

Well, that was the real question, wasn't it? If I was honest with myself, deep down I'd always thought that there was something in me that made my father hate me and my mother walk out. Something that made me unlovable and not worth the trouble of caring about. But.... Fox had taught me otherwise. He'd told me I was special, that I was beautiful. That I was brave and smart, strong.

He'd told me that I was worth something.

So why would I settle now? Why wouldn't I hold out for something better?

I wouldn't find better than him, I knew that deep in my bones, but if he wouldn't give me what I wanted then I'd have to find it somewhere else.

The city passed by out the windows of the car and the tears kept on coming. But I wasn't going to break.

I had my self-respect and I had Santorini and that would have to be enough.

Tennyson

I sat in my office trying to concentrate on the meeting I was having with Atlas — we were trying to find a solution to the Hamilton situation — and failing.

There was a familiar pain in my chest, a familiar sense of loss.

I felt the way I had after Juliana had died, which was ludicrous, because Zara hadn't died. She'd only walked out, and that's exactly what I'd wanted her to do. There was no reason to feel as if a part of me was missing, none.

Ending our brief affair had been the right thing to do, the *only* thing to do. She loved me, but I had nothing to give her, nothing at all. Perhaps if I'd been younger, if I hadn't had Juliana in my past, and Sir George, if I hadn't had a child so young....

But I had all those things. They were part of me, and I couldn't excise them. They'd all taken pieces of me and now I

had nothing left to give anyone let alone a twenty-three-year-old girl who was just starting out in life.

She needed a man with an unstained, untainted heart, not mine. In pieces and torn over the years, worn down into nothing. A man with a devil inside him, who ruined everything he touched.

Perhaps she'd meet someone in Greece, a good man who would give her the love she deserved...

"You look like you want to murder someone," Atlas observed.

He was lounging on the couch in my office, opposite me, staring at me with an amused look on his face.

I shook off the murderous rage at the thought of Zara being with another man and dragged the devil back into its cage. "Been there, done that," I said coolly. "Do you have any other ideas about how to address the Hamilton issue?"

He ignored me, tilting his head as he continued to stare at me "What's got you so wound up? Is it that little virgin?"

The very mention of Zara made the ache in my chest get worse, but I shoved it away. "Nothing has me wound up," I snapped. "Why don't you pay some fucking attention to the question at hand?"

"Ooh," Atlas murmured, apparently not aware that his life was in danger. "Moody."

At that moment a call from an unknown number came through on my cell and I snatched it up, needing a reprieve.

“Fox,” I said crisply.

“Tennyson,” a woman’s cool voice said. “It’s been a long time.”

I frowned, not recognizing the voice. “Who is this?”

“It’s your mother-in-law.”

I stilled. Atlas raised a brow in question, but I ignored him. I’d never spoken to Charlotte Hamilton directly, not once, but Juliana had told me numerous stories about how manipulative and controlling her mother was. It had been she who’d disapproved of our marriage so strongly and she who’d tried to take Isabel away from me.

“Charlotte,” I said with icy formality. “This is a surprise.”

“Yes, isn’t it?” She sounded almost amused. “I had an interesting chat with Isabel a few days ago. She’s lovely by the way.”

Every part of me went rigid. Isabel hadn’t mentioned a word of this to me, not one word. “How did you—”

“Relax. It was a neutral meeting that I engineered because I wanted to meet my granddaughter, not for any other reason.”

“If you attempt to hurt her or manipulate her in any way, I will destroy you,” I said coldly.

Charlotte laughed. “So dramatic. Perhaps you and Juliana were a better match than I thought. She had a fondness for drama too. Anyway, don’t worry your pretty head. I have no intention of hurting my granddaughter or using her in any way.

James had some designs it's true, but I have made him see the error of his ways."

"And this latest attempt?" I bit out. "With Zara?"

"Oh yes, another of James' ill-advised plans. Far-fetched I admit." Charlotte sighed. "Look, I'll be frank with you. The allegations about Sir George Wyndham came from a relative of his who's insistent on investigating his death. However, there have been certain...rumors about him that make me less interested in pursuing an investigation. In fact, I can make the allegations go away entirely."

I didn't relax. "And presumably you want something in return?"

She gave another laugh. "Of course. Nothing comes for free these days. So, we found out recently that Juliana was not our only heir. There is another, a young woman who was brought up outside the family, but she's definitely a Hamilton through and through."

"What has this got to do with me?" I demanded, already losing patience.

"I want a child, Tennyson. A child to bring up within the family the way Isabel should have been. A true heir for my Juliana."

"Again, what has that got to do with me?"

"You will be the father," Charlotte said. "I want you to marry the girl and get her pregnant. The child will then be handed to me."

This time it was my turn to laugh. "You have to be joking."

“I assure you I’m not. The girl is willing to provide me with the child I want.” There was no amusement in Charlotte’s tone. It was clear she was serious.

“Then go find a sperm donor or someone else,” I growled. “You don’t need me.”

“But I do need you. It’s a trifle old fashioned, I admit, but think of the child as...insurance. Your child is being brought up by me, so you back off us and we back off you. You deprived me of my daughter and now you’re in a sense... giving her back.”

Perhaps for her it did make a kind of twisted sense. Juliana had always told me that her family’s machinations would have put the ancient Roman imperial dynasties to shame. Regardless, they’d be doing it without me.

“No,” I said, in no mood to oblige. “There’s no way in hell I’m doing that.”

“Pity,” Charlotte said. “Good luck with avoiding charges. Or anything else we may pursue.”

Then she disconnected the call.

“Sounds like a fun conversation,” Atlas said.

“It was Charlotte Hamilton.” I pocketed my phone. “She’s prepared to make the investigation and allegations about Sir George go away. But in return she wants a baby.”

Atlas blinked. “A what?”

“She wants me to provide her with a child to make up for the one I stole from her and then lost.”

He leaned slowly back in his chair. “How very...Medici of her. So why you?”

“Insurance. Mutual insurance. A child that is both theirs and mine.”

He gave a long, low whistle. “Can’t you just donate some sperm like a normal person?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not giving them anything more of mine. And I also won’t allow my child to be raised by someone else or used as a tool by them.”

“Fair,” Atlas said. “So, who’s the lucky mother then?”

“Apparently a Hamilton raised outside the family. Some poor woman who’s agreed to be their surrogate or whatever she’s supposed to be.” I shook my head. “They probably paid her a lot of money to do it.”

“So, what? Now you’ll have them on your back constantly for the rest of your life?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Not any different from what I have now.”

Atlas shook his head. “What if they go public with these allegations about Sir George?”

“There’s no evidence—”

“We both know that it’s not going to be a good look in the media if they do.”

Unfortunately, Atlas had a point. I didn’t want that, and not only for myself and Fox Tech, but also for Isabel’s sake. I didn’t want to expose her to that kind of media attention.

I muttered a curse under my breath, shoved back my chair and strode over to the windows. “I’ll just have to fight it somehow,” I said flatly.

“Or,” Atlas murmured, “someone else could do the baby thing.”

I swung around and looked at him. “Charlotte said it had to be me.”

“Sure. But maybe they would compromise.”

“With whom? Who else are you suggesting?”

He gave me a crooked grin. “Me.”

I stared at him in surprise. “You?”

“Sure, why not? It won’t be you, obviously, but I’m one of your closest friends. The Hamiltons know I’m your ally, too, and if one of my kids was being raised by them, the effect would be the same. I know it’s not an Isabel stand-in, but it could work.”

“Why the hell would you want to do that?” I demanded.

“You and Cal were there for me when I needed you, as you have been over the years. I was never going to have kids and I was never going to marry. I’m not father or husband material. But this way I get all care, no responsibility.”

“Atlas,” I said, because it was clear he had no idea what he was getting himself into. “You have to marry this woman and have a child with her.”

“So? Marriage means nothing to me. I’ll marry her for a year or two, have a kid with her, and then we’ll divorce. If

she's only in it for the money and I'm there to provide the DNA, what does it matter?"

"It might matter to the child."

"Charlotte wanted the baby for herself, you said. So, if she raises it, the kid is going to be drowning in money and privilege. He or she will have a good life. And hey, they'll know who their father is when the time comes, and they can always look me up."

He didn't know what he was offering, that was clear to me. Because he had no idea what being a father meant. "No, Atlas. I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking me to do it. I'm offering."

"Atlas—"

"Just think about it," he said.

I was about to tell him that there was no way in hell I'd be thinking about it when the doors to my office suddenly burst open and Caleb strode in.

He looked as if he'd somehow shed twenty years, a vital energy to him that I hadn't seen since we were boys.

Isabel's work, I suspected, though I really didn't want to think too deeply about it.

He came to a stop near where I stood by the window, not even looking in Atlas's direction, and folded his arms. "It's the girl, isn't it?" he said without preamble. "You let her go."

"Ah, so that's it," Atlas murmured.

I ignored him and stared at Caleb instead. "What girl?"

“Don’t play dumb, Ten,” Caleb said levelly. “It doesn’t suit you. The girl I saw in your house the day you punched me in the face. The virgin you bought.”

I didn’t want to talk to him about Zara. I didn’t want to talk to anyone about her, and how Caleb had found out about her, I had no idea. But I didn’t like it. “She’s got nothing to do with anything,” I growled.

“Bullshit. Isabel got some kind of confessional text from her this morning, about how she’d been working at Cross for the Hamiltons — not too fucking happy about that by the way — and how you’d bought her the night of the auction, and that she’s been with you for the past week.”

Every part of my body had gone rigid, a savage kind of possessiveness gripping me. She was mine and he had no right to talk about her. Except, of course she wasn’t mine. Not anymore.

The pain inside me deepened still further, acid eating at me from the inside, undermining me, corroding me, but again I ignored it. Life was pain and I’d endured it for the last twenty years. I’d keep on enduring it.

I gave Caleb an icy stare. “What about her?”

He didn’t flinch. He didn’t even blink. “You hurt her, Ten. Badly. Isabel’s upset about it, and I don’t like it when Isabel is upset.”

“What the fuck, Ten?” Atlas was now scowling at me too. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything,” I snapped at both of them. “I ended an affair that wasn’t going anywhere, that’s all.”

But Caleb was looking at me the way Zara did, as if he could see inside my head. He was a brother to me, he knew me better than anyone, and he could see what I was trying to deny. “And you regret it,” he said. “Don’t you?”

“So? Apparently, you know everything so why are we even having this conversation?”

“Because you look like you did when Juliana died.”

Another shock hit me, and I had to grit my teeth against it. “It’s not the same. I loved Juliana and I—”

“You what? You don’t love this girl? Is that what you’re saying? Or is it more that you don’t want to love her?”

Atlas had gotten to his feet and now both he and Caleb were staring at me, judging me. Good. I needed to be judged.

“No. I don’t love her,” I said. “But she loves me, and I don’t want to see her hurt.”

“So, what?” Caleb folded his arms. “You’re nobly giving her up to protect her? I know the fucking drill, Ten, believe me.”

“You don’t understand. I’ve ruined every relationship I ever had and I—”

“Yeah, you deserve a fucking medal,” Caleb interrupted brusquely. “You also deserve another punch in the face for being a fucking idiot. So, you’ve made some mistakes, Ten. Everyone makes them. God knows I’ve made plenty. But you

told me I deserve happiness, remember? So, I don't know why you don't think the same about yourself."

He didn't understand. He didn't know what I'd done, the hypocrite I was deep down.

"I killed Sir George," I said. "I suffocated him and then I lied to you for years about it."

Caleb only stared levelly back at me. "You really think I didn't know? That I didn't suspect you had a hand in it? I don't care. He was a monster and he needed to be put down."

"How can you say—"

"Don't change the subject. Do you love that girl?"

My chest ached, the sensing of loss yawning wide inside me. "Zara," I said, my voice not as cold as it had been. "Her name is Zara."

Caleb's black stare was uncompromising "Well? Do you?"

I should have denied it. It should have been easy. The words were right there on my tongue. But I couldn't say them.

Because they're a lie and you know it.

I turned away, staring out over the city, trying to ignore the pain inside me. Trying not to see the tears in Zara's silver eyes or hear the fury in her voice as she called me a coward.

She's right. You are.

I was doing this for her sake, that's what I'd told myself. It was all for her. A bit of pain now rather than agony later when I'd inevitably hurt her since that's what I did to everyone I

cared about. Yet even now I could hear how hollow that sounded. A justification. An excuse.

“You think you’re broken, but that’s just a fucking excuse. An excuse not to want anything, not to try again. An excuse not to live. I know you’ve been hurt and hurt badly, and fuck, same. But you know what you do? You get up. You try again. You let yourself want more because it’s better to fight than fucking giving up and dying!”

The words she’d flung at me that day came back to me, so full of fury, of certainty. She was so strong, my little sub. Stronger than I was. She’d had so much pain in her life, yet she hadn’t given up. She’d lost everything, but she’d gotten up and tried again, fighting for what she wanted, while I...

I had given up.

“Do you think you died with her? Is that what this is? Because telling me you can’t love is the biggest bunch of bullshit I’ve ever heard. Everything you do is for love, Tennyson Fox. Everything...”

I closed my eyes as the feeling inside me deepened, widened, the loss becoming a chasm I’d tried to ignore, because I didn’t want it again. I didn’t want that feeling again. But it was there all the same.

The heart I’d told myself Juliana had taken when she died was still there and it was still beating. It still felt things, wanted things, and it was afraid. It wanted to protect itself from the agony that love could bring, but...

Love got through all the same.

Somehow Zara had bypassed every single one of my defenses, walking unafraid through the no-mans-land of my soul as if nothing could touch her. And she'd found my heart even though I could have sworn I didn't have one, and she'd taken it. She'd stolen it. And now she'd ruined me.

I let out a breath as the realization stole through me, the knowledge I'd been trying to avoid ever since she'd walked out a couple of days earlier.

It didn't feel the same as with Juliana. Then it had been fire and flash and overwhelming need. But it was difficult to separate that from sexual desire. I'd been eighteen and I had no idea if Juliana and I would have lasted but.... I was older now, wiser, and I knew what I felt for Zara. I couldn't lie to myself any longer. This feeling was deep and hot, tempered with grief and loss and pain, laced with possessiveness and anger, yet also with tenderness and protectiveness. And it was strong. Strong as she was.

My beautiful little sub.

I opened my eyes and stared at the city beneath my feet. "Yes," I said. "I love her."

"Fuck's sake, Ten. What are you waiting for?" Caleb said. "Stop being such a noble asshole and go get her."

The words fell into a hollow space inside of me, resonating.

'Everything you do is for love,' Zara had told me, and all I could see in that moment were all the terrible things, the bad

things. The people I'd hurt and the relationships I'd ruined. Love destroyed, that had been my experience.

But it wasn't my only experience. Love had also given me the most precious gift: my daughter. It had given me Juliana. It had helped me build a relationship with two men whom I respected and valued, and it had saved at least one of those men.

Love was grief and pain, but love was also happiness, and that was something I never thought I'd have again. I'd never thought I'd even want it.

But Zara had given it to me. She'd given me a taste of what it was to have someone in my life. Someone who knew me, who trusted me, who would be there for me. Someone who made me happy.

I probably didn't deserve that happiness, regardless of what Caleb said, not after everything I'd done, but Zara deserved it. And I couldn't deny her that. I didn't want to. What I wanted was to find my little sub and hold her until the day I died.

I turned from the windows and met my friend's black gaze.

Then I strode from the room without a word.

Zara

I met Isabel in a lovely cafe in downtown. After moping on Jay's couch for a couple of days, I'd finally sent her a very long, confessional text that morning, telling her everything. About how I'd lied to her when I'd worked for Cross and how it had all been for the Hamiltons. About how sorry I was and how I'd understand if she never wanted to see me again.

And oh, yeah, I was in love with her father.

I only got one text back. *Let's talk.* Then she named a cafe and a time, and I would have been the world's biggest coward if I hadn't gone to meet her. I was broken hearted and just plain broken, and I didn't want to have to face her. But when all was said and done, she'd been a good friend to me, so I pulled myself together and met her.

Now we sat out on the sidewalk under an umbrella, and she looked so happy it made my heart hurt and yet feel good at the same time. Bittersweet.

We'd talked about my job for the Hamiltons and about me working at Cross, and I'd begged her forgiveness several times. She'd been gracious about the whole thing, shrugging it off as if it didn't matter. And I had the impression that, for her, it didn't. Nothing could shake her good mood, because the man she loved, loved her and nothing mattered but that.

That was why my heart hurt. The man I loved didn't love me, and didn't want to, and that was an agony I'd never get over.

"So," Isabel said at last, leaning forward, elbows on the table. "Come on. What's the lowdown on Dad?"

We hadn't spoken about it yet and I'd almost been hoping she wouldn't mention it. Looked like I was destined for disappointment.

I let out a breath, trying to figure out what to say. "Well... uh.... like I said in my text, he....was the one who bought me at the auction in Arcadia."

"Oh, ugh." Isabel pulled a face. "I don't want details, obviously, but what the hell?"

"He was going to let me go — he does that with virgins apparently — but I...um ...convinced him otherwise."

She frowned. "Why?"

Great. I didn't want to talk about the whys, since that would mean revealing certain things such as Fox's role in Sir George Wyndham's death and that wasn't my secret to tell.

I toyed with my wine glass. "There were reasons. Like you said, you don't want details."

“Okay, fair. So, what? You’ve been with him all week?”

“Yeah, and I...” My throat closed and I couldn’t finish.

Isabel’s green gaze was very level. “You’re in love with him, you said.”

I picked up my wineglass and took a long sip of the crisp chardonnay we were drinking. “I’m sorry,” I said after a moment. “I know, it’s weird. But you don’t have to worry. He doesn’t feel the same way.”

She eyed me. “Well, he’s a dick then, isn’t he?”

“Yes Isabel,” Fox’s deep, cool voice came unexpectedly from behind my chair. “I most certainly am.”

Shock spread like an icy wave through me, and I nearly dropped my wine.

Opposite, Isabel’s green eyes had gone very wide. “Dad? What the hell are you doing here?”

“I imagine you can guess,” he said.

I didn’t move. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to turn and see him. Why he was here, I had no idea, but I didn’t want to know.

It couldn’t be for me. It was never for me.

Isabel looked at me then she glanced back at him. “I’ll leave you to it then.” She shoved back her chair and got to her feet. “But if you’re mean to her again, I swear to God, I’ll throttle you, understand?”

“I understand,” Fox said in the same cool tone.

I didn't want Isabel to go, but she went anyway, and then there was only me and him. Me, sitting at the table on my own, every sense I had focused on the man standing behind my chair. There were tears in my eyes and I fought them. I wasn't going to fucking cry over him again.

"Zara," he said gently. "Zara, look at me."

I didn't want to. But I sensed him come closer, right up behind me, the warmth of his presence and the scent of his aftershave surrounding me.

"Please," he murmured. "Please, little sub."

"I'm not your sub," I said. "Not anymore. That's what you said. You let me go."

"I know." His hands came down on the arms of my chair, his body leaning over me, caging me. "But I was wrong. That was a mistake and I'm here to rectify it. You were right, Zara. I was a coward. Telling myself I couldn't love you was an excuse, a defense mechanism. I didn't want to see the truth, because love wasn't something I wanted, not again. It's painful and destructive, and it made me do such terrible, terrible things, and yet..." I felt the warmth of his breath against my ear as he lent in closer. "It's not all destruction and it's not all pain. There's happiness too, and you made me see that. You showed me that happiness was still possible and..." The timbre of his voice changed, becoming warmer, fiercer. "I *want* that, Zara. I thought I didn't deserve it, but I don't care. I want it and I want it with you."

I was trembling now, and I'd lost the battle with my tears. "You do deserve it," I said thickly. "You deserve it more than

anyone I've ever known.”

“And so do you. I think we both do, don't you? Please, little sub. I love you. I've probably loved you since the moment I first saw you, and I can't think of anything I want more than to come to Santorini with you or anywhere else you might want to go.”

I could stay angry with him for letting me go. Furious that he'd broken my heart. I could hold out and question and fight. But I was tired of fighting, so tired. And he said he loved me.

No one had ever said that to me before. No one.

So, I didn't fight, and I didn't question. I shoved myself from the chair and whirled around, and his arms were around me. He bent his head, and his mouth was on mine, and the world ceased to exist.

“Come home with me,” he murmured against my lips. “I have something I want to give you.”

Little bubbles of joy were effervescing in my bloodstream, tears making my voice hoarse, but I managed to force the words out. “Yes, oh yes.”

He lifted his head and his mouth curved, a secret, private smile just for me, warm and full of tenderness. Then he let me go, took my hand, and led me to the long black car that waited at the curb.

He pulled me inside and I curled up in his lap, safe in his arms, and he kissed me carefully and for a long time as we drove back to his house.

I knew the rules. Once I was inside, I stripped off all the clothes I was wearing without being prompted and it felt as if I was shedding my skin. Taking off my old life and leaving it on the floor, stepping out naked and reborn. His sub. Strong and beautiful and passionate, everything he told me I was.

“Perfect,” he murmured and swept me into his arms, carrying me over to the couch. “You’re perfect, little sub. You’re everything I ever wanted. Everything I ever dreamed about.” He sat down and settled me in his lap, his deep blue gaze on mine, not cold. Not now. There was only flame there. Only heat. Only love.

“You are too, Sir.” I lifted a hand and touched his beautiful face, his cheek warm under my fingers. “I never thought I was a damsel in distress, but you’ve always been a white knight. My white knight.”

His mouth curved in that beautiful smile. “Only yours, little sub. No one else’s.”

“No,” I agreed smugly. “You’re my Sir. Only mine.”

“And don’t you forget it. Oh, by the way, I paid a little visit to your friend Donny. He kindly showed me where he put the money he stole from you and then insisted I take it back.” Fox’s smile became a little sharper. “I gave him some incentive of course. Also, he promised to never contact you again.”

A little thrill went through me. Was it wrong that I kind of wanted to have been there to see the expression on Donny’s face?

“Good,” I said. “And if he does, I’ll be sure to let you know so you can teach him a lesson.”

“Bloodthirsty little sub.” Fox took my hand and kissed my fingertips. “I’m not sure it’s possible for you to get any more perfect.” Still holding on to my hand, he shifted and drew something out of his pocket. “Speaking of. Here’s something for you.” And he handed me a small, black box.

My heart ached, yet more tears prickling in my eyes. No one had ever given me a gift that I could remember, especially not one that looked this special.

Slowly, I took it from him and opened it. Inside, nestled in black velvet, was a short, fine necklace of silver links. In the center were two linked rings set with what looked like tiny diamonds.

It was beautiful.

“Oh, Sir...” I breathed, trying to blink away the tears. “What is it?”

“It’s a collar, little one.” He picked it up out of the box carefully. “I had it made specially for you. It means you’re mine. It means I’ve claimed you, that I own you. And most important of all....” He laid it around my neck, the metal cool against my skin, and fastened it. “It means I love you.”

The collar settled around my throat, the weight so good. Right in a way I couldn’t describe. I touched it gently with my fingertips. I was never taking it off.

“I love it,” I said huskily, looking at him. “But what about you? You’ve done so much for me. Shouldn’t I get you a...a

flogger keychain or something?”

He laughed, the sound shocking me with its warmth. I'd never heard him laugh and right then and there I decided I was going to spend the rest of my life trying to make him do it. “Actually,” he said. “I thought you could get me a wedding ring. And then maybe you'll take me on a honeymoon. Perhaps to Santorini?”

The joy inside me burst apart flooding me with light. “You want to marry me? Really?”

“I'm not getting any younger, Zara. And I know we haven't known each other long but—”

“Yes,” I interrupted, even though I knew it wasn't allowed. “Oh my God, Sir, yes!”

His smile was like the summer sun, his blue gaze as deep and depthless as the sky. “Forever, Zara Bishop. That's what I want.”

I lifted my hands, took his face between them and looked into his eyes. “Then that's what you'll have, Tennyson Fox,” I said.

So that's what I gave him.

We haven't looked back since.

EPILOGUE

Atlas

I sat in my site office staring at my phone. It was night — my favourite time of day — and I was catching up on some work AKA playing online chess. The person I was playing now had me backed into a corner with a tricky queen move, but I could see a way out. If you looked at any problem long enough, there was always a solution.

Sure enough, five minutes later, a text came through from a contact of mine that consisted entirely of a phone number.

My solution to the problem of the Hamiltons.

Ten had been distracted by the virgin he'd bought — I still hadn't met her because for the past couple of days, he'd been as protective with her as a lion with its kill — and Caleb had his hands full with Ten's daughter, Isabel.

No. I had no thoughts about that pairing. Or rather, I did. They just weren't fit for public consumption. Not usually a concern of mine, but Caleb was a friend and though I knew he

didn't give a shit what I thought one way or another, there was no point being a needless asshole.

Anyway, the problem of the Hamiltons needed to be dealt with and so here was I, fucking dealing with it.

I put the number into my phone and waited for an answer.

"Mr Blackwood," Charlotte Hamilton answered eventually. "This is a surprise."

"Is it? You had a second sense that I would call or something?"

"Or something. You're not that mysterious."

I gave a short laugh. "You know why I'm calling then."

"I have an inkling. You want to protect our mutual friend."

"Ten is not your friend." I leaned back in my chair. "Last I heard."

"No, true. He's not best pleased with me right now."

I couldn't be fucked with meaningless small talk, so I got straight to the point. "I'll do it," I said. "You need a baby daddy, so I'm your man."

"A generous offer, Mr Blackwood. What makes you so sure you're suitable?"

I wasn't suitable, not at all, which was why this would work.

I lifted a shoulder. "Who else are you going to get? If you want a kid to bring up, linked to one of us, then I'm your only option."

Charlotte was silent a moment. Then she said, “Marriage is part of it.”

“Been there, done that.”

She gave a soft laugh. “I know you have. Which is why you might decide to back out.”

I frowned. “Oh?”

“Your wife-to-be is someone known to you. Does the name Rowan James mean anything to you?”

I went still, staring out the windows into the neon-soaked night beyond.

Rowan James. Daughter of Caitlyn, whom I married ten years ago.

“Hmmm.” Charlotte’s voice was full of amusement. “I thought it might ring a few bells.”

Rowan. My ex-stepdaughter.

Fuck.

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