



PROTOCOL

CONTROL

PROTOCOL BOOK ONE

LASAIRIONA LEWIS

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*For Matthew, the most special little boy I know, his mama,
Lisa, who is my hero, and anyone who has ever been “weird,”
“different,” or felt like they didn’t fit in.*

Content Warning

This book contains certain subjects that some readers may be sensitive to, including but not limited to: Mention of sexual assault in passing (not explicit). Missed safe word in a scene (on page). Child abandonment (on page). An MFM scene (Dom steps in to help out in a scene and touches the female main character with a toy but there is no penetration outside of the main couple during the book).

As with every book with content warnings or potentially sensitive subjects, please be cautious when undertaking this story and take care of your mental health.

Timeline Warning

For those of you who have read Austin and Mackenzie's story in *Two for Boarding* – please don't try to make it work. Just roll with it, mmmkay? I'd appreciate it if you just pretended it all fits together like a perfectly crafted jigsaw puzzle.

And no, dear reader, you don't have to read any other books before this one, this is book one in a brand new series – BUT, if you get to wanting Austin and Mackenzie's story as you read Thor and Adi's story, it's ready for you to read as well: *Two for Boarding* by Lasairiona McMaster.

CHAPTER 1

Addison

PERSISTENT AS FUCK.

If an intelligence agency had a file on me, I'm pretty sure that would be stamped across the cover.

"Bitch doesn't quit" might be on there instead. I know what I want. At least when it comes to men. I'm not subtle about it. And I pursue it with all the determination and ambition of a cat chasing a laser pointer.

I *will* catch that red dot—even if I fall ass-over-tit and embarrass the shit out of myself in the process.

So when I spy the tall drink of man-bun-ed, delicious-assed bartender I met last month at the kink club we took our bestie to for shits and giggles, I lock onto him like he's the motherfucking dot.

In case it's unclear, I'm most definitely the cat right now. A really horny cat. And I'm ready to pounce and climb this man like the lickable tree he is.

It's been too long since my Love Box got any action.

Tonight's *definitely* the night.

We had a moment when we met. He was working—making the most delicious virgin cocktails I've ever tasted in my entire life—and our gazes connected over the bar at Protocol, the local BDSM club.

It wasn't some Disney fairytale shit. It wasn't a "til death do us part" loving gaze with rainbows and singing wildlife surrounding us in a haze of pastel colors. It was an "I wanna

fuck you until you can't sit comfortably for a week" kind of eye-fucking.

And it was Hot. As. Fuck.

So hot, that not even my arsenal of battery powered vagina weapons can cure this ache. Believe me, I've tried. Repeatedly. Daily, even. It's just not going anywhere.

Lady V will not settle for anything less than Thor the Viking's giant package delivering a screaming O. He has to be well hung, right? God wouldn't do that to him. Or me. She couldn't do that to me. Someone who looks like *that* can't have an incy wincy teenie peenie. It would be a crime against humanity.

I don't even know if Thor is his real name, but he's every bit Thor of Asgard, Chris Hemsworth—the most delectable of the Hollywood Chris's—and then some. Okay, so he's more like Chris Hemsworth and Jason Momoa had a love child. Still delicious. Possibly moreso.

His dark-wash jeans hug his ass, and I wonder if the designer made them around his body. His bubble butt makes me want to bite into his tender skin and leave my calling card on his perky cheeks. He's wearing a skin-tight, round-neck black t-shirt that shows the definition in his arms. And he probably smells like sex, tequila, and chocolate. Three of my favorite things.

Every time he lifts his glass, his muscles ripple. The very definition of arm porn. Dude works out. Probably multiple times daily, and if he wanted to pick me up and put me down for back to back sets of reps, I'd let him.

What can I say? I'm a giver.

Am I running a little hot because I got fired from my job today? Sure. Can't say it was my favorite Friday ever. Fri-yay my ass.

Are my dreams of attending Paris Fashion Week circling the drain? Also yes.

Do I want to distract myself—from the fact I have no savings, no prospects, and I've been block-listed from most of

the fashion houses in my industry—by mounting the metro-lumberjack sitting at the bar? So what if I do?

Clenching my thighs in a bid to calm the ache, I lick my lips. Because they're dry, not because I want to lick him.

Obviously.

“You're staring.” Paige, one of my two best friends, nudges me. “Scratch that, you've undressed him with your eyes, and you're now screwing him on the bar in your brain.”

“He's easy to stare at.” Shrugging, I pick up my drink and take a long, slow sip of the tangy margarita. The Topsy Llama—one of our local haunts—does the best margaritas in Minnesota. Sure, they have pool tables and dart boards, they have chess boards and decks of cards. And sure, none of us play any of those things, but we like margaritas.

“Do you think I could screw him on the bar and get away with it? I'm not averse to trying. For science.” I lick the salt off my lips before dragging my finger round the rim of my glass to collect some more.

“You'd have to leave an epic tip for the cleaning crew.” Kenzie—our resident Texan and expert on margaritas—smacks her lips as she drains the rest of her glass. “I'm going to get another round.”

I bound to my feet. “It's my turn.”

Paige and Kenzie both raise their brows. “It's Mackenzie's turn.”

Kenzie nods, pointing her empty glass at Paige. “She's right. It is.”

I haven't told them I got fired today. Partially because I'm embarrassed. What thirty-two-year-old woman gets fired from the job of her dreams? I wince. Fuck. Not good.

It wasn't even my fault. They'd understand if I told them... wouldn't they?

“What's that?” Paige points at my face. “That look, what is that look?”

Kenzie's brows pull together, and my super empathetic friend leans towards me. "What happened?" She holds her hand up, shaking her head. "Let me get drinks first."

My skin is hot, a prickling feeling sneaking up the back of my neck. "I can get them, but could I use your card?"

I hate the words as they fall from my lips. I hate myself for being this person. I hate the bitter taste at the back of my throat. But I need to stretch what I have for as long as I can, because I'm going to be homeless, destitute, and at best, living on one of their couches before the end of the month.

Bristling, I swallow hard. A small voice at the back of my brain tells me I could maybe, *possibly* call my mother. But I don't believe she'd help. Not again. And the pain in my face from clenching my teeth says I'd rather spend the rest of my days in a cardboard box on the street than admit to her that I got fired from the job she and Daddy helped me get.

I'm tired of being the screw up in the family. They wouldn't understand that it wasn't even my fault because *everything's* my fault as far as they're concerned. And I don't need to hear how I should have just shut up and taken the handsy crap from my boss, in order to keep the job that opened doors for me.

Without another word, or sound, without a single ounce of judgment or pity in her eyes, Kenzie hands me her card, and I make my way to the bar. Standing where the stud can see me, I lean forward, flashing my brightest smile.

People tell me I have a nice smile. In fact, that's not quite true. They tell me I have a pretty face. What they generally mean when they say that, is that I have a nice face—for a fat girl. It's not a term I appreciate, I prefer curvy, or chunky, or I dunno, smart, funny, strong, capable, passionate—something about me that isn't based on my appearance.

But my smile gets the attention of the bar man, and within seconds he's making us another round of drinks.

Score one for the pretty faced fat girl.

Thor catches my eye, his brow twitches, almost imperceptibly. The closer I get to him, the hotter he looks. He tips his drink at me, and I smile back.

He has no clue that he's going to be balls deep in my honey pot tonight.

The bartender offers to bring the drinks over, and when I reach out to hand him Kenzie's card, he shakes his head. "They're already taken care of."

If I wasn't already a redhead, the heat of Thor's gaze on the side of my face is enough to turn my hair the color of fire. Assuming that's who paid for our drinks, I thank the bartender, throw a more casual wink than I'm feeling at the Nordic giant, and head back to the girls who are watching me with amused interest.

Hopefully it looked like a wink and not an eye twitch. I wasn't prepared for the scorch of his stare to fry my brain.

"You good?"

Nodding at Paige, I hand Kenzie's card back to her. The bartender arrives, places our drinks on the table, doesn't meet anyone's stare and leaves as quickly as he arrived. Pretty sure if *he* bought our drinks he'd have at least given a flirty smile to one of us.

I'm avoiding eye contact with my friends while I sip on my drink. A million and one thoughts spiral through my brain. Most notably, what the fuck I'm going to do now.

That, and how much longer I have to hang out with my friends before it's considered acceptable to leave them and go screw the divine presence chillin' like a villain on the high-backed stool. Even with his back to me, his presence takes up space, his intensity burns, and anticipation hangs heavy in the air around me. Last time I saw him at Protocol, he was on the other side of the bar. Here... he isn't, and I can ogle how well his shoulders and back fill out that shirt of his.

I'm just getting hotter and hotter the longer I sit staring into the green drink in front of me. "Who wants to play pool?"

I need a distraction. Something to do that isn't clawing at the skin of his well-defined shoulders.

Kenzie wags her finger at me. "Don't think this gets you out of telling us what's going on with you."

It doesn't matter that it's something I suck so bad at that I lose every damn time, I need to busy my hands. And because they're my ride-or-die friends, they indulge me.

As Paige racks the balls, Mackenzie grabs the cues. Their silence opens the door to sharing, but there's a piece of me that still burns with embarrassment that at thirty-two-years of age I've lost my job.

"Why is it always the wrinkly old dude who gets away with whatever shit they pull? And the woman they damage has to pay the price for the fact they can't keep it in their pants?"

Both of them stop what they're doing, and pivot to face me.

Kenzie's "What happened?" is almost lost under Paige's "Who do we need to bury?" Her nostrils flare, her eyes are dark and shining with vengeance, and if she wasn't on my side, there'd be a puddle of piss at my feet right now. Bitch is terrifying.

"I lost my job." The weight of my admission forces my shoulders to slump. Dropping my head so I don't have to see their rage morph to pity in front of my face, I sigh. It doesn't feel better to have said it out loud.

Fuck. I hope they don't think I was fired because I'm an idiot. Their silence pulls my head back up.

Paige crosses her arms, her scowl deepening as she awaits my explanation. And because I'd rather they think I was a victim than incompetent, I fill in the blanks. "The head of the fashion house made a pass at me. And when I rejected him, twice, he doubled down and assaulted me." The voice that comes out of my mouth is calm, clinical, sanitized, a far cry from the raging lava coursing through my veins.

The horror on my friend's faces turns my stomach. It only grows when I tell them that I got fired, block-listed, and no

one in the industry will take my call.

I'm nuclear.

I'm not even sure this is a "just hang tight for a while and things will calm down" level DEFCON. I think it might be the DEFCON-IEST of DEFCONS that ever DEFCONNED.

Maybe I *should* have just shut up and taken it.

When I tell them I messed up and signed a lease for an apartment I couldn't *really* afford, they cringe. Then I tell them the person I was *supposed* to be sharing the place with has bailed on me leaving me holding the baby, and the contract, well, let's just say they're giving me the look my parents give me when they're trying not to outwardly call me a screw up.

It takes an entire game of pool before my friends permit me to change the subject and talk about something that isn't me and my dumpster fire mess of a life. I've been waiting for days to corner Kenz and get her to tell us everything about the delicious dominant with the pierced peen she's been dating. She's been evasive in text messages. Here and now, there's no escape.

"So hold on a second." Paige lines up the white ball on the pool table before striking it with her cue. The white strikes the tip of the triangle of colored balls, scattering them across the table. She spins to point an accusing finger at Kenzie. "You're admitting to dating him now?" I don't know how she hasn't figured this out before now, but she's finally on the same page as the rest of us.

Kenzie goes from creamy, clear skin, to red and blotchy cheeks and chest in a matter of seconds. "I... no. Yes. Maybe?"

"Oh. She's dating him." I snort. She's been dating him for ages. My money's on them moving in together any day now. We've known for a while she's *with* him, but she's been in denial.

"There's no way he gets her this befuddled if there wasn't something there." Picking up my drink, I raise it high. "And

this is where I say, ‘called it.’” I totally called it. Austin, the tall, dark, handsome, hockey playing dominant isn’t being subtle about his long-term intentions for our sweet, southern belle Kenzie. She’s seemingly so clueless that when it comes to flirting, he could walk up to her and smack her with it, and she’d still not see it.

“We haven’t even been on a date yet. You can’t claim ‘called it’ when you said ‘romance of the century.’ And don’t think I missed that use of befuddled.”

“Yet.” Paige picks up her drink and takes a long gulp as I line up my cue and take a shot. The ball sails past the pocket and bounces off the green velvet edge of the table. “And I’m with Adi, befuddled is a great word.”

Paige lines up her next shot. “So you’re thinking about dating?”

Mackenzie nods, her face still rosy.

“She’s thinking about more than dating. She’s thinking about the bow-chica-wow-wow that comes after the date. Am-I-right?” I don’t need to ask the question, I’m definitely right. I just like the way her face goes a brighter shade of red.

“He wants you to keep a journal, with sexy things and not sexy things in it, right?” Paige pockets the ball with ease.

Whereas I, on the other hand, miss yet another shot. “I hate how good you are at this game, Paige.” I turn my attention back to Kenzie. “Like what? What kind of things does he want you to journal? Does he read them? Or does he just get you to empty your brain out on paper?”

“He doesn’t expect to read my journaling, but I let him sometimes. It’s nice to write down my fears and worries, like writing them down takes them away from the noise in my mind, and I can set them aside.”

I’ve never been in a dynamic like that before, but I have kinks, and I’m open minded. And I most definitely love a man with a strong hand. On my ass. Maybe even with a paddle, or a crop, or... something. Mmmm. One of my exes was pretty good at the spanking thing.

Now I'm distracted by the idea of being bent over this pool table while Thor spansks me with a paddle, or his hand, or a crop, or a cane, the fucking pool cue, anything that leaves beautifully colored mottled bruises across the soft flesh of my ass. Fuck. I need to come.

"You mean your competitive streak hates how shit you are at this game. He wants her to record shit like edging, plugging, nutrition, that kind of thing. Dude probably saw the graveyard of Big Gulp cups in her office and figured she needed a glass of water from time to time."

Kenzie is about eighty-three percent sweet tea. "Excuse you."

"I'm not wrong." Paige shrugs, leaning on the cue clutched between her hands. "A good dom's world often revolves around his submissive. Knowing she is properly cared for starts with her caring for herself."

She spins back to the table to take her turn. "If he doesn't know you're well hydrated and well nourished, how is he supposed to tie you up and make you his sexy slave for hours on end?"

Kenzie smacks Paige's forearm. "Would you shut up?" Another thwap. "People might hear you!"

I can't help the whoop sound that comes out of my mouth. Our girl is so vanilla that even the thought of him tying her up and making her come for hours is foreign to her. But I could totally see her leaning into it and giving it a shot. She's nothing if not curious. I am so excited for her. This is going to be a steep learning curve, but I know in my bones that she's going to love it.

"So what if they do?" Paige takes another shot, bagging yet another ball, and making me cuss under my breath. I hate losing. "The dude kissed you in the middle of the grocery store, Kenz. He talked through basic kink with you—and you didn't run away." She points her cue at Kenzie. "That means you're in enough to give it a shot."

Speaking of shots, I miss another one, which snaps something inside me. I stamp my foot before running my hand along the shiny wooden edge. “I feel like the table is uneven or something.”

“Here. Let me help you.” Thor’s voice is low and warm, with just the right amount of gravel to scrape across my skin leaving goosebumps in its wake.

“Thor.” My body is alert. Hot and throbbing. Aching for his hands on me, and his dick inside me.

Down. Girl.

“I didn’t see you over there.” We both know I totally saw him there. I didn’t just see him *here*. My attempt at playing it cool isn’t working all that well. But thankfully for me, he’s got a smirk on his face that tells me he’s down to play my game.

“If you had, you probably wouldn’t have thrown that adorable little tantrum you just threw, so I’m okay with that. Can I help?” It’s cute that he’s playing along, calling me out for my bullshit yet offering to help teach me the error of my ways. What a nice guy he is.

I fold my arms around the cue. “Depends what your idea of ‘help’ is. Are you going to mansplain?”

“I figured I’d do the stereotypical guy against your butt helping you aim thing. Skip the mansplaining and go straight to the man-doing.”

I definitely want to be done by Thor, so I purse my lips, squint my eye as though I’m giving it severe consideration before I nod. “I’ll allow it.”

“Your friend is right, you know, Kenzie.” He steps behind me, the heat from his body radiating into mine. The closer he steps toward me, the heavier the sexual tension ripples through the air, snapping and crackling like it could ignite at any time.

When his hands meet my hips, he presses with just enough force to bend me forward, pinning me in place with what I have no doubt is a raging boner in his pants. Leaning over my back, he places his hands over mine on the cool wooden cue. His large, warm hands engulf mine, and I’m trapped.

I'm surrounded by him. His breath tickles my ear, skimming across my skin and leaving a trail of goosebumps. My eyes flutter closed for just a moment, and I take in the measured way he's breathing as I force myself to breathe in sync.

My heart skips faster, as he lets his weight settle over me.

I was right, Thor's hammer isn't a micro-hammer. Thank you God. I knew she wouldn't let me down.

Wiggling my butt against his rod-hard dick, I bite back a groan, wishing we were in Protocol right now so no one would bat an eyelid if my jeans hit the deck, and he rammed his cock into me. Repeatedly.

"You're making it really hard to remain a gentleman here, Adi."

Giving him my best clueless impression, I look back at him over my shoulder. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I bet you don't." He takes a step back, and my body cries at his absence. Raking his hands through his now loose, long, light brown hair is so sexy, but it makes me cringe. If I did that with my curls it would be game over. Fuzz city.

"Can I say something and you don't hold it against me that I maybe, possibly, kinda sorta was eavesdropping on your hard-not-to-hear discussion?"

Rolling my eyes, I wave a hand for him to continue, since Kenzie is clearly praying for the ground to split open and swallow her whole.

"Okay, well, it sounds like Austin is invested in you as a person, and he's trying to navigate your..." He's struggling to find the right word.

"Vanillaness," Paige is quick to provide.

"Exactly. It can be tricky for a dom with a vanilla partner. Educate but don't terrify. Be honest, but not all at once so you don't scare the bejesus out of them. It's a fine balance. But ultimately, the power is all yours. You can submit to him as

much or as little as you want. Hell, the way the man looked at you at the bar that night, I'd say he'd agree to no kink at all with you if you said so."

He could read my favorite Chinese takeout menu, and I'd turn to a puddle of need on the floor. I bet even the words he's saying are turned on by just existing inside his mouth.

"Please note the grammar police allowed 'bejesus' but flagged 'befuddled.'" I shake my head.

Kenzie isn't meeting anyone's eyes, and she shifts her weight from foot to foot clearly uncomfortable as fuck, but Thor isn't wrong so I don't get in his face for making my girl feel feelings.

"Befuddled. Great word." Thor holds out his fist for me to bump. When our knuckles collide, there's a quick bite of pain but the energy skirts along my skin landing straight in my core. Direct hit.

"Right? That's what I said."

Kenzie holds up a hand. "Austin wasn't looking at me in the bar."

Thor scrunches his face up. "Oh. He wasn't? Okay then. Let's swim in this little space called denial." He makes swimming motions with his arms.

I don't know who's fighting to hold back laughter more, Paige or me, but somehow neither of us breaks.

"Lady, I am an observer of every person in my bar. I see, I listen, I dole out advice... night after night. And that boy was staring. At you. Like it was Christmas morning and you were wrapped in a goddamn bow." He steps up behind me, grinding on me again as he helps me line up the shot.

I'm impressed at his confidence. He hasn't backed down, or run away scared. I've known more than my share of men who are intimidated by my no fucks given attitude. I guess the fact I turn into a puddle of goo every time I see him helps round off my edges a little.

“So what do I do?” Kenzie gnaws on her lip, her face still pink.

“Figure out what you want and go for it.” I score. Or whatever it’s called when you sink a ball into the hole, squealing with delight that I finally scored one. Dropping the cue on the table, I spin to face the hunk whose body heat is warming my spine.

The moment stretches out between us like Route 66 at golden hour, charged, shimmering and full of anticipation and promise. Smacking both of my palms on his face, I jerk him toward me, and lay one on him.

CHAPTER 2

Thor

WHEN MY HANDS HIT THE BASE OF ADDISON'S SPINE AND slide up toward her shoulders, I expect resistance. She's a force to be reckoned with, and considering I barely know her, those vibes are pretty strong.

But when her body softens, her head tilts back, and her lips part, it's clear she's not going to fight this.

Thank fuck.

The kiss isn't frantic and sloppy as I expected. But it's not soft, or slow either. There's an undercurrent of hunger and promise with each swipe of her tongue against mine. She wants me, and she's not afraid of me knowing it.

That's hot as hell.

In the kink world, many women are sexually empowered, open, and free to express themselves however they choose. It's kind of the whole point: be who you are, embrace your fantasies, and fuck, as often and wholeheartedly as you like. With as many partners as you want—as long as it's consensual of course.

I haven't seen Addison around the club more than a few times with her friends. I live and breathe the scene. If she was kinky, surely I'd know about it, right?

She lives fairly close to me, I've seen her a few times at my local cafe Brew'd Awakening, but this is the first time I've seen her on a night out while I wasn't working the bar at Protocol.

I try to stay away from vanilla people. It's like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. I am who I am, I know what I like and don't, and I don't generally have the time or patience to train someone who is vanilla into the lifestyle.

At work, they're at least kink-curious. Was Addison at the club because she's kink-curious? It wasn't because her friends dragged her along for the ride, that's for sure. Though from the sounds of it poor Kenzie got pulled into Protocol without knowing what it was.

I don't do relationships, but I take pride in knowing the most beautiful kinky women in Minnesota. If she's kinky and I had no idea... well, my ego might take a ding because I've wanted her from the moment I saw her. Maybe she's kink aware, kink curious, perhaps even kink... fearful?

Long, wavy auburn hair, green eyes that sometimes appear gray in different light—but only if you're paying attention—a smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose. She has tits I want to bury my face—and other body parts—between, and a plush ass I'd love to leave a handprint or two on. She's captivating. If I had the honor, I'd worship her like the queen she very clearly is.

The whimper that escapes her as my tongue caresses hers makes me painfully hard. She softens in my arms. Instead of the confrontational kiss I expected from the spunky redhead, she lets me lead, submitting to me through her kiss. It's heady, and addictive, and I want more. No, I need more.

When our kiss finally ends, she looks up at me with those wide, green-gray eyes and has the audacity to bite down on her swollen lip. Her bright lipstick hasn't smudged at all. That's some pretty damn good staying power. It should be smeared all over her face. And mine. If I was less of a gentlemen I might permit my thoughts to wonder to other body parts that could be smeared with her lipstick, too.

“Wow.” Her chest heaves with effort, her breasts brushing against me with every labored inhale and exhale.

It's taking all I have not to bend her over this pool table and fuck her senseless. While exhibitionism is my jam, I have

no idea what makes her blood burn and her clit pulse so rapidly she'd come on demand for me.

At least not yet.

I'd like to, though.

Fuck. I'd really like to.

"This isn't over." I damn near growl in her ear. Glancing at the graveyard of margarita glasses on their table, I hedge my bets. "But if you want a good fucking tonight, Addison. I suggest you slow down on the tequila."

I half expect her to claw my eyes out with those perfectly manicured, match-her-eyes nails. Or tell me to go fuck myself with a rusty nail. Those not in the lifestyle don't generally understand the concept of safe, sane, and consensual sexual relations. They don't care if they're drunk or not. But I care.

Consent isn't something I fuck around with. And I won't sleep with someone if their inhibitions are influenced by alcohol. It's a standard rule for Slade and any of the house doms he hires for the club.

But instead of shredding my balls from my body, her breath hitches, and she pinches the lip between her teeth a little harder before releasing it. "Yes, *Sir*."

Fuuuuccccck. I know she's being playful, but those words from those pretty, plump lips would sound even sweeter if they were wrapped around my throbbing cock. There goes being a gentleman.

She knows that I'm a dominant. She's pushing that button on purpose, and those words vibrate in my core, making my already-hard dick pulse.

I go back to my seat at the bar. Nyx is working tonight, and we shoot the shit. Bartending at The Topsy Llama bar is their second job when they're not pulling shifts at Protocol. More than once they catch me watching Adi, and raise their eyebrows in question.

"Can it be? There's one woman in the great state of Minnesota you haven't banged yet?" Their shoulders shake

with laughter, causing their long, straight, brightly colored hair to fall forward. “Is that longing I see on your face, Thor?”

Maybe.

“They almost always fall in your lap.”

Precisely how I like it, especially if their mouths are open.

In truth, the fact she hasn’t abandoned her friends and downed a gallon of water, ready to kneel at my feet only makes me want her more. I like the chase.

“Has the hunter finally become the prey?” Nyx laughs.

I tip my beer their direction. “I haven’t slept with you.”

“That’s because I know you too well.”

Ouch.

They wipe down the bar with a cloth. “We both know I’m not a one-night-stand kind of person. I’m waiting for my Disney prince to appear. Or princess.”

“I could be a Disney prince.”

They snort. “Sure. Like, a start-of-the-movie Disney prince. Aladdin before he meets Jasmine, Flynn Rider—” They open their mouth to add another name to the list but I hold up my hand.

“Don’t. If you say I’m like Gaston, I’ll cry.”

They shrug, amusement dancing in their eyes. “If the shoe fits.”

So I like women, and women like me. Big deal. As long as I’m up front with what I want from a sexual encounter, I don’t see what the problem is.

Nyx jerks their chin in Addison’s direction. “Just don’t play “what’s your number?” with Red over there.”

“You don’t think she’s played the field?”

Another shrug. “She might have. I have no idea. But I don’t know a single person in the whole world who has played the field more than you have, my friend. I’m concerned *your* number might scare her off. She seems kinda... wholesome.”

They hold their hands up. “No judgment. Enjoying sex is healthy, and to my knowledge you haven’t left a trail of broken hearts in your wake. Safe, sane, and consensual, right?”

I nod, but their words slither under my skin, prickling at something deep inside that I don’t want to give a name to. Mom always wants me to “find a nice girl and settle down.” It’s hard to tell her that I had one once, and that didn’t go quite to plan, so I just grit my teeth, nod and smile, and wither a little inside.

Nyx leans forward, resting their forearms on the edge of the bar. “Huh. She’s not abandoning her friends and falling at your feet like the rest of them do. That’s gotta be bugging the shit out of you, right?”

When Addison refills her margarita glass from the fresh jug one of the other bartenders placed on their table, my stomach sinks.

“Damn. No sex for you.” Nyx rolls their lips, very clearly trying not to laugh at me. I thought Addison and I connected, I thought for sure I was getting laid tonight. She responded to my kiss, to my request not to drink more alcohol if she wanted more...

Sighing, I shake my head. I guess I misjudged the situation... until there’s a warm hand on the small of my back, and the scent of strawberries in my nostrils. “I’m here with my girlfriends, lover boy. If you think I’m deserting my squad for some—albeit fine—dick, you don’t know the first thing about me. My girls will always come first.”

I think I just came in my boxers. There’s literally nothing more attractive to me than a strong, independent woman who doesn’t fold on her ideals for a pretty face.

And I happen to have a fairly pretty face. I’d like to think if Addison was going to fold on her ideals, it’d be for my dimples. I’m told they’re adorable.

She presents me with her cell number on a piece of paper, with a heart over the I in her name. “I’m free tomorrow, we can have a chat before...” Her gaze skims down the front of

my body. The mere fact she wants to meet before we *meet* makes me think she's kinky. Or maybe one of her friends told her that's generally what happens in the lifestyle. Or at least with me. Women talk.

Tapping the paper in the palm of my hand I meet her gray eyes. "You want to chat about...?"

Her cheeks heat, probably a combination of embarrassment and tequila, it's adorable as fuck considering just how strong and outspoken she has been so far. She leans closer to me and the strawberry smell intensifies. "Aren't you...? You know..." She rolls her eyes like she's fighting an inner battle about what she wants to say versus what she should say. Is her bravado all a front?

"Use your words, Addison."

She bristles, her breath catching probably at the stern undercurrent in my voice. I'm going to have a lot of fun making this woman come undone.

"So bossy." She swallows, straightening her spine just a little, just enough for me to wonder if she has a little brat in her somewhere, desperate to come out to play. I could help her with that. "I heard through the grapevine that kinky people don't like to fall into bed without prior discussion of kinky events that may or may not come up during the... kinkfest."

She rolls her eyes again. Biting the inside of my cheek so I don't burst out laughing at the seriousness in her voice, I force a breath.

"Don't." She wags her finger, and I'll be damned if I don't want to nibble it.

"Kinkfest?" I grin at her. "Is that what's in my future with you, Addison?" I reach out to brush her hair behind her ear but she smacks away my hand.

"Don't touch the curls."

"But—" My fingers itch to wrap the curl around my finger and tug her toward me, to bury both hands into her unruly mane as she sucks my dick.

Don't touch the curls my ass.

She gently brushes the curl behind her shoulder and out of my reach. "Straight haired people like you don't understand the lengths we curly girls go to to get our curls so curly. They take a lot of work."

She's stalling.

Clapping my hands makes her jump. "Back to the kinkfest. What, *exactly* is involved in a kinkfest? Just so I'm prepared."

She smacks my shoulder. "I have no idea, isn't that what the pre-kinkfest discussion is for? To figure out what we want to do when we get naked?"

There she is. Her brazenness is intoxicating. Fucking love a woman who knows what she wants.

"Yes, Addison. I want to get you naked. Yes, I'm a dominant. Yes, I generally only sleep with other people in the lifestyle, and I'm not looking for anything long-term."

She assesses me with an appraising stare. "Dominant, kinky, one night stand." She taps her bottom lip with her index finger. "I could work with that."

"So you want to get together to talk about our kinks before our kinkfest?"

She nods, her freckles darkening when her cheeks pink up again.

I offer her my hand to shake. "I look forward to our pre-kinkfest negotiations, Addison."

Her nostrils flare as though she's fighting an eye roll, and I can't help myself. "Ever seen *Fifty Shades*?"

"I have." She rolls her plump bottom lip between her teeth.

"Do you remember what happened when Ana rolled her eyes at Christian?"

Her breath catches yet again as her stare intensifies, and it might be my new favorite sound. She leans toward me, her shirt falls forward, and it takes every ounce of self-control not to ogle her tits. "Maybe I want you to spank me."

With that, she sashays back to her friends and doesn't give me a second glance for the rest of the night. The three of them get tipsy, but not drunk to the point they won't remember the evening.

When they gather their things to leave, Addison steps away from the table leaving her phone next to her half-finished drink.

Snagging it, I dart toward the exit to intercept her on her way out. "Addison."

She spins to face me, swaying a little as she does, and I wave the phone at her. "We can't talk about our kinkfest tomorrow, if you leave this here."

She licks her lips as she takes the device from me and tucks it in the ass pocket of her jeans. "And we can't be having that now, can we, *Sir?*"

With a final grin, she's out the door, and I can't wait for tomorrow.

CHAPTER 3

Addison

SOS.

Addison renamed the discussion “Sub Club”

PAIGE

Is this an “I can’t find my glasses and they’re on top of my head” type of emergency? Or, you know, a real one?

Also, I’m a switch, so your chat name isn’t completely accurate.

You’ll survive.

It’s a real problem. What do I wear to this kink negotiation with Thor?

Why do I even need a kink negotiation with Thor? It’s for one night, surely we won’t get up to enough to warrant talking about it first.

PAIGE

You know why. We’ve been through this before. Communication is the most valued trait in the kink world. Thor runs a tight ship for his dick. He doesn’t dip that thing anywhere without knowing the person even a little first.

And suddenly you’re an expert on Thor-the-bar-guy?

OKAY, SURE, I'M FEELING A LITTLE JEALOUS AND A LOT possessive. I have no claim to this man other than the fact I gave him my number, and I want to give him my panties. But the fact that my bestie claims to know him, maybe even intimately, grinds my gears more than it should.

KENZIE

Sub Club? Y'all... if this club grows beyond the three of us we're going to need a new group chat. No one can see what we've talked about in here.

PAIGE

No one can know where the bodies are buried.

KENZIE

Exactly. Now, what'd I miss? Seems Adi's getting a lil pissy that you know her will-be-boy-toy.

PAIGE

Right? It's not just me? I thought maybe I was reading her text tone wrong.

KENZIE

Not wrong. She's not madder 'n a wet hen mad, but she's definitely disgruntled.

I sigh, rolling my shoulders and turn over to groan into my silk pillowcase.

You know I can see what you're writing, right? I'm literally right here.

PAIGE

Yeah, and you'd better loosen that silk bonnet of yours and let your brain breathe for a minute girl. I'm not interested in your boy-toy.

PAIGE

I'm just saying that communication is king for the kinky peeps. Thor will likely want to know exactly what makes you tick before he goes anywhere near your lady garden. Not, like, spreadsheet of desires level interest like Austin did with Kenzie, but he'll at least want an idea.

I can just imagine our friend going scarlet. Any time we bring up her sex life with her hot dom Austin, she goes bright red. It never gets old.

What. Do. I. Wear?

KENZIE

He looked at your ass a lot last night in those jeans...

PAIGE

+1 for wearing jeans. Casual, and your ass really does look good in them.

KENZIE

It really does.

PAIGE

For what it's worth, Thor has an excellent record among the community for being a great dom. He's not a commitment kind of guy, but he's respectful, plays in bounds, and takes care of the submissives he plays with. He's solid for aftercare too.

That helps put my mind at ease. I haven't had much experience in the kink community, and it's kind of daunting.

PAIGE

Just be honest with him, and it'll all be fine.

And remember, you can revoke consent at any time. If you don't want to go through with it, or you get The lck, you can always, always say no.

I have no concerns that Thor will hurt me. I'm more concerned that my inexperience with kink will send him running for the hills. I mean, I know I like a good spanking, but that was with my toxic ex, not an experienced dominant.

A shiver slithers up my spine, bringing waves of goosebumps along with it. The idea of Thor spanking my ass definitely makes me feel *feelings*.

Before I know it, I've wasted the two-hour lead time I had ahead of meeting Thor. I'm now picking through my wardrobe trying to find something to wear in the five minutes I have left before I need to leave to meet him.

He picked a cafe close to the club for us to meet. I still have no idea where he's located when he's not at work. Would be nice if he lived nearby. Having him close would be fantastic if we could work out some friends-with-benefits kinda vibe.

Mom always tells me I put the cart before the horse. We have barely kissed, and I'm already fucking him repeatedly when the need to scratch an itch arises.

My pussy flexes. Despite feeling like a born-again-virgin, I keep my downstairs kitty cat waxed and smooth, so I'm not concerned about having an overgrown bush he'll need gardening shears to cut through to find my clit.

It's going to be fine.

Silencing my phone when another text pings in the group chat with my sisters, I huff out a long, slow breath.

So what if I'm not a Doctor like my sister Izzie, or have a family like our other sister Sarah? So what if I don't own my house? Or have a car that was made in this decade?

Okay, that one's a sore point right now considering I just spent all my savings on fixing up that piece of crap. \$2500 poured into it, and the very next day the friend-of-a-friend I'd

planned to move in with bailed on me and left me high and dry.

I can't get my \$2500 back to put it toward my apartment, and I'm now in the market for a new potential roommate. And fast.

Sweat beads on my forehead. It's not a cheap apartment. They want first and last month's rent as well as a security deposit, and even if I tried to sell my car I wouldn't get the \$2500 I just sank into it, for whatever the hell the mechanic told me I needed.

Why would I have questioned it when I was adulting like a boss?

And now I'm fucked. Utterly fucked.

But none of that matters right now. Right now, I'm about to go talk to a Norse god who wants to bang me five ways to Friday.

Then I'm gonna let him.



MY PALMS ARE SO SWEATY I ALMOST DROP THE MUG WHEN THE barista hands it to me over the counter. She rolls her eyes like I'm a complete idiot as droplets of my precious caramel macchiato splash over the side of my cup and onto my fingers.

I'm not sure if I'm nervous because I've never pre-negotiated sexual intercourse before. Or because it's Thor. Or because it's been so long since I've had something inside me which isn't made of silicone, and I'm afraid I'll forget how a penis works and what to do when there's a man attached to it. But my palms are sweating.

Thor's already sitting at a table, casually slouched back in his seat, ankle of one leg resting on the thigh of his other,

glasses perched on his face. He's turning pages of a book, the cover of which I can't see from here.

He's wearing another jeans-and-tee combo that poorly hides his well-defined muscles. His brown hair hangs loose, framing his face, looking so silky that my now-sticky hands are itching to glide through it.

I'd never even consider it if he had curls, but it's bone-straight, looks like something out of a hair product commercial. At least three people have swooned in his direction since they walked in.

When potential suitor number four walks in in five inch stilettos and a pencil skirt and beams in his direction, something warm flickers in my chest. He's here to talk to me, about rocking my world for a night. That feels kinda nice.

I'm not sure he's spotted that I've arrived, he's too engrossed in his book to pay attention to his surroundings. Either way, I steal another long, intense look at the beautiful, reading man before I approach his table.

"Addison." His face lights up as he lowers the book to the table, not pausing to place a bookmark, or—gag—turn down the corner of the page he's on like a sociopath. How will he remember where he is in the book?

He slips his English-professor-hot glasses from his face, folds them in slow motion, and puts them on top of the book. I feel like I'm in some kind of romantic movie where the heroine sees the hero in painfully slow motion and thinks damn near everything he does is erotic.

I'm not normally this one-track minded. I was an important person, in a big-business industry. I created fashionable masterpieces for some of the top fashion houses in the country despite not living in a major city like New York. And now, I'm staring at this big-ass hunk of a man like he's a prime steak and I'm some brain-dead sex-crazed lunatic.

I feel like one.

He stares back at me with a lop-sided smile. Kicking out the chair across from him, he gestures at it with his chin. "Are

you going to negotiate while standing? Or would you care to take a seat?”

I’m a certified idiot. Dropping onto the chair, like I was going to do that regardless of whether he suggested it or not, I place my mug on the table in front of me. I’m not letting this delicious man throw me off guard.

Okay. Fine. I’m not letting him throw me any *more* off guard.

We sit in amicable silence for a moment. I pretend I’m not staring at him, and that I don’t notice the attention of the women in the cafe on him. While I can’t blame them, he is breathtaking to look at, it makes me uncomfortable.

He takes a sip of his frozen coffee. I’m not sure what it is, but some kind of syrup trickles down the outside of his reusable cup, and when his tongue snaps out to capture the sweet liquid, I melt in my chair. Can I pretend my clit is a coffee cup just so he’ll flick my bean just like that?

“You want to start?”

No. No, I do not. But I’m not backing down from this challenge, even if it’s outside my comfort zone. “I’m not an experienced submissive.” I clear my throat, reaching a finger to the rim of my mug for something to do. Following my finger around the lip of the mug with my eyes, I keep going. “But I know what I like. My ex was... well, he wasn’t a dominant, but he was into stuff. And being friends with two submissives, I’ve learned some things.”

“Like pre-negotiations.”

I nod.

“Paige is a switch.”

I nod again, swallowing down the retort bubbling at the back of my throat. Have they slept together? As though reading my thoughts, he continues, his facial expression unreadable.

“She comes to the club. I pay attention to the bands people wear.”

I'm not sure if he's making my bubbling jealousy better or worse, but I appreciate the effort.

"So you're not vanilla, but you've not yet joined the dark side." He ponders this for a moment while I take a sip of my drink.

"Will that be a problem? I know you tend to sleep with people in the lifestyle, so I won't be offended if that's not okay for you." It's true, I won't be offended, but I'll be disappointed as fuck. Paige gave me the full rundown on him again this morning while I stared at my closet. He's a one-and-done guy, not a happily ever after kind of guy.

Shaking his head, his light brown locks swish back and forth. "I don't think it'll be a problem. But we'll need to be very clear on what kinds of things you're interested in doing, and what your hard limits are."

"Just how adventurous are you planning to get with me, Thor?"

"Just how adventurous do you want me to get with you, Addison?"

Well, shit. My composure is quickly unravelling at the seams, and my panties are wet. He leans further forward, bowing his body toward me over the top of the table.

"I kind of wish you'd worn a skirt so I could touch you right here in the coffee shop."

My mouth goes dry. I think it's because every molecule of water in my body has gone straight to my crotch. "You wouldn't." My voice is croaky, hoarse, and there's more than a little surprise lacing my words.

"I not only would. But we'd both enjoy it."

"Are you always so cocky?" Why is my voice so damn breathy?

"I prefer confident. Cocky suggests I can't follow through on my promises."

My heart skips faster as he regards me with such a heated stare I'm afraid he's burning holes in my clothes with his

eyeballs. He'd really touch me in front of all these people?
"Exhibitionist?"

It's his turn to nod. He picks up his drink, and I can't help my lingering glance at his lips as he sips from the cup. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Falling quiet for a moment, I contemplate his words. My instinct is to say "fuck no, it won't be a problem" I don't want to bang him anywhere where someone might see. Exhibitionism is not my thing. But the fantasy building in my head sends fissions of excitement through my nerves, and I wonder if there might be something there. Something he could perhaps help me explore.

I'm comfortable enough in my own skin, not averse to people watching him do things to me, but it's maybe the thrill of being caught that has me intrigued. I'm not entirely sure.

"I don't think so." My voice has dropped to a whisper.

"Good. I'd hoped not. It's super important for us both to be honest throughout this discussion, okay?"

That sounds like there's a story there, something that has him being so emphatic, but before I can open my mouth to ask, he keeps going.

"I've had bad experiences in the past. Clear communication is vital. You have to be transparent with me. And I'll reciprocate. We can't build solid trust if there's poor communication."

I nod, not sure what to say.

"Do you want to start with your hard limits?"

It's probably not a bad plan. It's always good to know what lines you shouldn't cross. But considering I'm pretty new to this entire scene, I don't know what I don't know.

"I don't like having anything around my throat." That one's a hard limit for sure. My ex tried to choke me once, and things got just a little too out of hand. I passed out. Woke up to him freaking out and on the phone to his brother—a doctor

like my sister Izzie—and vowed never to let anyone touch the front of my neck again.

Never.

Shuddering, I examine his face. I expect curiosity, probing eyes, a question hanging on his lips about my why. But he doesn't so much as bat an eyelid. "Nothing around your throat. Okay. I can respect that."

Knots in my shoulders unwind. The fact he's not making me explain myself warms something inside me. He knows I don't owe him an explanation, and if he's curious, he's showing no outward signs.

"I don't know if I'm into anal." My face heats as the words tumble clumsily from my mouth.

"Never tried it? Or never tried it successfully?" There's no judgment or mocking in his tone. He's asking me about butt stuff like he's taking my breakfast order.

"Never tried it."

"Curi-ass? Or not at all interested?"

I burst out laughing at his terrible joke, drawing looks from people seated at the tables around us. For half a second I forgot we were in public, surrounded by people living their lives. To compensate for my obnoxious laughter, I take a long sip of my macchiato, which goes down the wrong tube and makes me cough.

You couldn't write this shit. Thankfully cream and syrup don't come out my nose, and I don't spray the front of Thor's shirt with regurgitated coffee. "I think I'm curi-ass." I choke out between coughing fits.

My face is undoubtedly red, my eyes watering, and I'm more than grateful to the creator of smudge-proof mascara or I'd look like a fucking panda to boot.

He nods, taking another mouthful from his drink. "Anything else you can think of off the bat?"

I already want the ground to swallow me whole, there's every chance someone around us can hear every word. And

while I'm down for a little exhibitionism, I don't really want to inflict my sex life on the unsuspecting general public.

“What is it?”

“What is what?” I'm not sure I can tell him about the thoughts charging around my brain.

He leans toward me, dropping his voice. “Whatever dirty little thought just crept into your head.”

Shaking my head, my heart smacks against my ribcage. “I can't.”

“Try me.” He shrugs like it's no big deal.

I can't meet his eyes as I lean forward to whisper. “I've always wanted to... I...” Christ on a cracker why is it so hard to just spit out our fantasies to a complete stranger? Tugging at the neck of my shirt, I pray for a gust of cold air to blow through the cafe. “I've always wanted to try things with more than one guy.” I cover my face with my hand, waiting for him to... I dunno. I don't think he'd kink shame me, but most guys aren't really down for sharing, even if it's just a one-and-done kind of deal.

“Is that so?”

I nod, heat consuming my whole body.

“As it happens, that's something I quite enjoy doing. Generally with Slade, since we're sharing. He's a safe and experienced dominant to make something like that happen for you. Maybe we can look into setting something up with him. But if it's okay with you, I'd like some one-to-one time with you. I don't feel like sharing.”

The way his eyes undress me, makes my skin burn hotter still.

“What about bondage?” How can he seem so wholly unflappable?

“Like handcuffs? Or rope play? Or...?”

He shrugs. “Any or all of the above. I suppose the better question is how do you feel about being restrained?”

My finger finds its way to the edge of the mug again and traces circles as my mind runs his question over and over. “I’m definitely open to the possibility with someone I trust.” If he was a stranger off the street I’d say hell no, not any time soon. But he’s a well-known figure in the kink community, I know I can trust him.

A smile pulls at the corners of his lips as though I passed some kind of unspoken test. “Wax play?”

“Never tried it. Sounds kind of painful. I’m not against trying.” Considering I love the sting of a palm on my ass cheeks, it stands to reason I’d like the sting of wax on my skin. There’s definitely a theme developing here. I’d love to try a bunch of things. And I’d love, even more, if he’d let me try them with him.

“Impact?”

“I like being spanked.” Another glance over my shoulder to make sure no one around me hears those words come out of my mouth. While I don’t mind Thor knowing about my desires, I don’t want everyone in this zip code having the same information.

His eyebrow twitches. Mr. Thor may be more of an open book than I had originally thought.

“You like spanking?”

He nods at my question. “Have you tried instruments? Or just hands?”

“Just hands.”

“Are you open to trying instruments?”

The excitement in his voice is hard to ignore. “What kind of instruments?”

He grins. “I love how curious you are. It’s not a straight-up no. It’s a maybe, depending.”

“I can’t know I don’t like something if I don’t try it, right?”

He nods. “Paddles, hairbrushes, crops, canes, spatulas, wooden spoons... any implement you can think of to spank someone with.”

Heat creeps up my spine, and suddenly my body is too hot to be encased in these clothes. “I—” My voice gives out. I clear my throat a couple times, but the words still don’t come out smoothly. “I’m open to trying some of those things.”

He doesn’t say anything, or prod further, but his stare lingers on my lips for just a beat before it flickers to meet my own. “What about aftercare?”

“I think I’m good.”

He rolls his beautifully blue eyes and clucks his tongue. “And we were doing so well.”

“What? I figured you’d be happy that I was low maintenance.”

“Being a submissive isn’t about giving me everything to make me happy.” He grunts before draining the last of his drink and scooting forward onto the edge of his seat. “Think of it this way. Maybe I like taking care of someone after I’ve spanked them so hard their ass is purple and they can barely sit down the next day.”

My jaw hangs open. I don’t even know what to do with that.

I don’t know if I’m turned on or terrified.

I think I’m both.

He grins, clearly enjoying the shock factor his words carried. “My main role as a dominant is to make sure my submissive is sexually fulfilled and taken care of. Maybe that’s part of my aftercare, taking care of you. In fact, maybe I just want you to lie back and take whatever I want to give you without expectation of reciprocation. Did you consider that?”

I hadn’t. And I make a mental note to talk to Kenzie and Paige about their experience with aftercare, both their own needs and their dominants. It’s hard to deny, lying back and taking it sounds amazing. “I hadn’t, no. I figured you’d just

want me gone and out the door of the club once you were done.”

“I love aftercare.” He shrugs, and if I wasn’t paying such close attention to his stunning features I’d have missed the tiny blush creeping into his cheeks. “It’s one of my favorite parts.” A pause.

“After the spanking.” I trail my index finger over my bottom lip. It’s getting harder and harder not to vault over this coffee table between us and grind against him until I fall apart. The carefree way he talks about sex and what he likes, lights me up.

“After the spanking,” he confirms. His blue eyes sparkle at me, and the temptation to take my panties off and lie on the table for him is overwhelming. I am so desperate to quiet the noise in my brain, the job, the car, the epic fuck up in adulting, the inevitable “we told you so” from my older sisters. I groan. From my *mother*.

Ugh.

It’s all lingering in the back of my mind, and I know, I just *know* that a few smacks on my ass will slap those thoughts right out of my head and bring me a calm and clear mind.

“Is there anything else you want to talk about before our play session?” I need to get away from this man before I fuck him in the parking lot.

“Don’t you mean kinkfest?” That smile of his will be my undoing. “I don’t think so. Hard limits and aftercare are my main ones. We’ll run through things again tonight before we start, just to make sure nothing has changed as you’ve mulled over it throughout the day.”

“Tonight?”

His grin turns wolfish. “Well. If you’re not down to let me bend you over this table and spank you in front of all these people, then yes. I’d like to see you tonight.”

My head nods, but no words make their way out of my mouth. It takes what feels like a full two minutes before I find my voice again. “Meet at the club?”

“The club is closed tonight for newbie training. We could meet at the club tomorrow night.”

“I don’t want to wait.” Not because I don’t want to give myself time to change my mind, but because I need this man inside me. STAT.

“If you’re okay with it, you could come to my place.”

“Y-you have a sex dungeon?” My usual confidence has been replaced by a stammering fool who has lost command of her voice because she’s so focused on being smacked on her ass so hard she can’t sit down. Of course he has a sex dungeon. The guy’s a sex god.

“I have a sex room. The club is actually the perfect place for new people to play, and it’s generally considered the safer option than going to someone’s private sex dungeon in their house. But if you’re okay with it... I’ll send you the address to my place.”

He walks me to my car like a real gentleman, opens the door for me, and waits for me to click my seatbelt as though we didn’t just talk about him playing with my badonkadonk.

He stands watching me, waiting for me to pull out of the parking lot. The more he stares the more I just want to open the door, fling myself at him, and have him drag me to his kinky room to have his way with me. But he said tonight for a specific reason. He wants me to think it over, he’s giving me time and space to process, to say no if I want to, and it’s kind of nice.

I get that it’s his process, it feels smart, like... maybe I should consider implementing this process before I fall into bed with anyone else for the rest of my life. It might have prevented me from making some big mistakes throughout the years.

When I get back home, I ignore the boxes piled high around my space and collapse onto the bed with a frustrated grunt. I shoot off a text to Sub Club telling them that project “Mount the God” is a go, and that if I disappear tonight, never to be heard from again, don’t avenge me. Let Thor keep living

his sexy god lifestyle, killing women with ass smacks and countless orgasms. If I'm gonna die, that's how I want to go.

CHAPTER 4

Addison

“COME IN.” THOR STEPS BACK, PULLING THE DOOR AS HE moves, giving me space to enter his home. It’s a beautiful property, and I can’t help but wonder how he can afford such a lovely family home on a bartender’s salary.

Also, I can’t deny, I’m jelly as fuck. I’m struggling to afford an apartment a couple miles from here. I need to find someone to move in with me, and here’s Mr. Single Dude, with all this space he doesn’t even need.

Where’s the justice?

And we’re in Minnesota, it’s not like San Francisco, or New York City. I’m aware that housing is generally more affordable here than in many other states. But I’m salty as fuck about the chips I’ve been dealt recently.

I had put on my big girl pants and was adulting like the boss bitch I am. Finally. For the first time in my whole life I was standing on my own two feet. Except it’s all come down around my ears, and I’m not sure how to find my way forward through the debris.

I’m struggling to find my fucking joy.

Maybe Thor will find it in my panties.

“Are you coming in? Or are you just going to stand there?” Thor quirks his eyebrow in what I’m coming to learn is his signature move. It seems to denote anything from mild amusement, to surprise, and everything in between.

He's staring at me with those twinkly blue eyes that make my clit tingle. Damn straight I'm coming in, and if he keeps looking at me like that, I might straight up come before I even cross the threshold. Orgasm right here on the porch in the street for his neighbors to hear.

I step into his space, enjoying him deliberately brushing up against me as he closes the door. When he turns to face me, he seems to want to touch me again. I swallow, resisting the urge to lick my lips. My body pulses with anticipation.

I have no idea what's about to go down, but I know it's going to be good.

You don't practice your craft as much as him and not get really, *really* good at it. I have high expectations, and my vagina is ready to be changed forever.

"You want to sit?" He gestures at the table in the open-planned space behind me but I shake my head.

He leads me through the clean, minimalist house stopping at a non-descript door. "You still okay?"

My whole body trembles. I have no idea if it's from nerves, or excitement. My mouth is dry, my pussy soaked, and when he frowns at my nod, I somehow find the word "yes" lodged at the back of my throat.

"If that changes when we get to the bottom of this staircase, that's okay. Okay?"

I've never been so acutely aware of having complete advocacy over my entire body until I met this man. The feeling of being totally in control, of knowing I can withdraw consent at any time, is a heady rush that tingles all over. He's not bullshitting me either. I believe him one hundred percent.

At the bottom of the stairs we enter a huge room. A giant cage-type bed stands in the middle of the room, a mix of metal and wood with a literal cage underneath the mattress and wooden beams overhead with various hooks and appendages.

Whips, crops, and floggers hang from free-standing metal displays. A unit with a number of drawers is within arm's reach of the bed. He has a dancing pole, a sex swing, and a

Sybian placed around the room along with a curved erotic chaise, and a black leather-padded bench with restraints for arms and legs.

A St. Andrew's cross stands near the wall to the left of the bed, and a red leather studded couch to the right. Paige took Kenzie and I for a tour around Protocol one afternoon before it opened and showed us all of the toys and apparatuses. I don't remember all the names, but the Sybian and the St. Andrew's cross both made an impression.

Standing, taking everything in around the room, my body thrums. This room is an extension of the decor upstairs, black and silver with scarlet accents adding a pop of color here and there. But it's clean, simplistic, yet somehow manages to exude class.

The bed holds my attention, my legs both fixed in place and shaking with desire to close the ten feet of space and bring me where I ache to be.

"What do you want to do, Addison?" His voice glides over the back of my neck as he brushes my hair to one side.

He's closer than I expected, and it sends a shiver through my muscles making my body jerk. Heart thundering, pulse skipping in all my pressure points, and mind racing, I try to focus and listen to the frantic urges bubbling under my skin.

"I want you to spank me." I really do. Even the thought of it has my already-moist panties getting hotter and wetter. So much for that needing-to-build-trust thing. If this man asked me to get on my knees right now I'd do it without a second thought. I'd be ashamed of myself but I'm too fucking horny.

Without another word, he turns me to face him, grazes my cheekbone with his fingertips before catching them under my chin to tip my head back. "You're such a stunning woman Addison."

He doesn't give me time to respond before his lips are on mine. It's a different kiss from the one in the bar. This one is powerful, hungry, consuming. Dominant. He silently demands

access to my mouth, and as soon as I start to part my lips his tongue presses inside.

My body sags against his as his tongue assaults my mouth. There isn't a millimeter of the space he doesn't know within seconds. His hands slide up my face, his fingers spearing into my hair. A barb of pain radiates across my scalp as he jerks his hands downward, snapping my head back and giving him access to my neck.

“So fucking beautiful.” His murmurs against the skin on my neck and the edge of my shoulder make me quiver. Does he say this to everyone he brings here? Or does he really think I'm beautiful?

I'm not given a chance to dwell on those intrusive thoughts because while one hand grips my hair with a sharp bite, the other is moving south like he can't wait to explore me. When he gets to the swell of my breast I purr into his mouth.

Every part of my body that his hands travel over comes to life like he's flicking on a string of tiny fairy lights with the movement. They're lighting up one by one.

I should move my hands, I should explore the soft cotton of his shirt, I should cover his arm with my hand, push it where I need his fingers to be, but I can't. I'm frozen in place, letting him do whatever he wants to me.

By the time he reaches the waistband of my jeans, I'm panting. He tucks his finger into the fabric and moves back and forward, his knuckle grazing the skin of my stomach.

I'm going to die.

This slow and painfully tormenting process isn't at all what I expected, and this pressure within my body needs to be released before I detonate.

He pops the button at the top of my jeans.

My chest flutters as my breath catches.

He slowly tugs the zipper down.

I whimper.

When I regain control of my limbs and dig my nails into his forearm in a bid to make him go faster, he chuckles. Chuckles! He knows I'm dying, and he wants to prolong my death.

I've never been undressed as slowly in my entire life. I'm trying to be patient but it's hard. Damn near impossible. From talking to Paige and Kenzie, and from what I've picked up at the club, dominants want to be in control. It's their entire *raison d'être*, and if you try to mess with their flow, or rush them, it'll come back to bite you in the ass.

And while I most definitely want him to bite my ass, I also want to impress him. He's been with submissives far better trained than I am, and while it's only a one night stand, I still want to give him what he needs as well.

The denim scraping my legs as he pulls my pants to the floor sets my nerve endings on fire. I'm hypersensitive, every touch felt somewhere deep inside. He braces my hips as I step out of the pants pooled at my feet.

When the palms of his hands skim the outside of my legs from my ankles to my ass and back down, I bite my lip. I'm covered in goosebumps. It almost feels like I've been blindfolded, and my other senses are on overdrive. The silence in the dimly lit room amplifies the sounds of my ragged breath echoing around the space.

On his second pass up my legs, he moves more slowly, and when he hooks his thumbs into the band of my black lacy thong I'm pretty sure I melt.

In a matter of seconds the underwear is tossed onto the jeans, and he encourages my legs to open. He looks up at me from where he's kneeling at my feet, and I feel like a fucking queen.

“What's your safe word, Addison?”

Tipping my head back, my eyes roll in my head. His fingers are gliding along the very edge of my pussy, taunting, teasing, promising more. I shiver, swallowing down the plea lingering on the tip of my tongue.

He pauses. “Addison.” My name is a harsh bark in the low-lit room.

“Black.”

“Black means?” His fingers re-start tracing along the lines of my soaking lips.

“Stop everything.”

“Good. What else?”

“Red means stop what you’re doing and change activity.”

He hums at my answer, and I shuffle my feet further apart.

“Yellow means approaching the limit of my tolerance.” My voice cracks, my breath snags in the back of my throat as one finger dips just a little between my lips making my knees shake.

“Green means I’m okay.”

His finger slips a little deeper. Legs threatening to buckle, I grab his shoulder to steady myself. “Good.” He stops again. “You still want to continue?”

It takes every ounce of strength I have not to beg outright. But at the expectation on his face, it’s tempting as hell. A growl escapes me, making the corners of his mouth twitch before tugging into a smirk.

“Struggling to be patient, Addison?”

I grunt. Talk about an understatement. His grin broadens, snapping something inside me. My fingers twitch to move to my clit, but he grabs at me with his free hand. “Don’t.”

Torn, I’m not sure which voice to listen to. It’s like I have a kinky little angel and devil on my shoulders, and the devil is telling me not to listen to him. Maybe if I disobey him he’ll give me what I need faster.

“Take off the rest of your clothes.” His voice is clipped, strained, rough.

Giving in to his request I pull my shirt over my head, unclip my bra, and toss both onto the pile of my clothes. In

any other circumstance I'd feel self-conscious right now. My lumps and bumps being on display causing discomfort, my squish, my curves, the stretchmarks on my stomach and legs, especially in contrast to the ripped man on his knees in front of me.

But I don't.

I feel powerful, strong, desired in a way I've never felt before, and it's a potent sensation as his eyes rake over every inch of my body. He doesn't linger on my muffin top, or the fact my boobs aren't as perky as they were when I was in my twenties. He doesn't seem to notice my double chin—God knows it's probably a triple chin from the angle he's looking up at me.

All I see when I look down at him is lust. Desire. A glint of mischief that he's been driving me wild with since I arrived on his doorstep.

He even licks his lips before he places them next to my left knee. His tongue darts out and leaves an agonizingly slow trail up my inner left thigh. When he skips over my pussy and drags his tongue down my inner right thigh, the growl that bursts from me is animalistic.

I'm done. My hand moves to my pussy, my buzzing clit breathing a sigh of relief at the contact. Thor stops touching me, he rocks back onto his ankles, and folds his arms. "You're going to want to stop doing that, Adi."

My hips buck against my slick fingers, moving quicker and quicker as I chase the already building release that threatens to make me collapse on the floor.

His eyes darken, clouding with frustration and a thinly veiled threat. If I keep going I'm going to regret it, but part of me wants to.

"Addison." He snaps my hand away from my crotch, and bends me over his shoulder. When he stands up, he smacks my ass, hard, making me squirm. "So responsive." He hums. "It's a shame you're such an impatient brat."

I've never considered the fact I might be a brat. Headstrong, sure. Maybe I'm just impatient and reached the end of my tolerance for being driven mad by a strikingly gorgeous man.

He smacks me again, barely giving the first stinging smack still radiating through my ass cheek a chance to dissipate. I don't bother wriggling in his arms, he's got such a strong grip on me, I know it's fruitless without even trying.

"If I can't trust you to keep your hands to yourself, Addison, I'm going to have to do something about that." He throws me onto the giant bed, the cool, black, silk sheets against my bare skin making me squeak. His hands clamp around my ankles, and he tugs me toward him before flipping me onto my stomach.

Pussy dripping, clenching with need and excitement, I roll my hips against the silk, desperate for traction, for touch, for something, anything.

There are restraints right in front of me. I'm not afraid if that's where this is going. I don't trust him completely, it's very early days. But he's a public and active figure in our local kink community. He wouldn't risk messing up with me and having his reputation tarnished. I trust *that*. I could ruin his reputation if I have a bad experience with him. Give him blue balls for life if I get him block-listed at his club. I trust his desire to fuck beyond tonight.

"Can I cuff you? If you feel even a little uncomfortable, I'll release you without hesitation."

Considering how careful he is, and because I flat out told him I would have to get to know him first, I'm surprised he would even ask at this point. But I really, really want him to restrain me so I nod, which draws a low groan from him. "Use your words, Addison."

"Yes, that's fine, you can cuff me."

"Good." He grunts. "I can't risk those hands wandering where I don't want them to again."

He places my wrist into one of the cushioned restraints in the bottom of the bedframe.

I'd object to being manhandled like this, but I can't deny this brute of a man throwing me about like I weigh a hundred pounds when wet—and I am—is so fucking hot. He can toss me around like I weigh nothing, pick me up and carry me across the room without breaking a sweat. I'm totally here for it.

When he clamps my other hand into the restraint, I give a tug, just to test my limits. I'm face down on the bed. My hands are cuffed in front of me, at face level, and my ass is in the air, presented to him with what has to be two very red handprints on my plump cheeks.

“Check in.”

“Green.”

“You're sure?”

“I'm sure.”

“If that changes, you need to speak up.”

“I will.”

Is he this attentive to check ins with all his play partners? It seems incredibly thorough, which serves only to make me feel even more comfortable with him, despite not having full use of my hands and arms.

His palms caress my still-smarting skin. “I usually warm the skin up before I start.” He rubs the already hot skin back and forth, circling over and over. “I apologize.”

I really don't care that he smacked me cold. In fact, I want him to keep smacking me. This warming circular motion over my skin is just making me ache even more for a good smack. He squeezes, I purr. He pauses, there's a rustling of fabric behind me but I can't twist to look back to see what the hell is going on.

When his naked, stiff cock presses against my ass cheeks, it clicks that he's stripped off. Wiggling my hips only makes him take it away from me, so I still.

“You still want to be spanked, Adi?”

“I do.” I’m purring again, and I kind of hate myself for it. But it seems to do something for him. He glides his thumbs between my ass cheeks, pausing at my ass hole exerting just enough pressure to give me pause. I tense, not ready for where that path leads.

“Shhhhh. Easy, Red. I won’t be going here today.”

Is that disappointment stirring in my stomach?

There’s no time to analyze before I get another ass cheek squeeze. “I’m going to slap you eight times on each side. One slap on each side for each second you fingered yourself without my permission.”

I bite my lip.

“I’m going to slap you with the same intensity each time, unless you tell me to go harder. I’ll slap once, and that will be ‘one.’ If you want me to increase to two, you say two. If you want to stay on one, you repeat one. Understand?”

“Yes. It’s like turning up the volume on the radio. Each number makes it louder.”

“Exactly. Each number will make the slap harder, hurt more, mark more.” He pulls his hands off my skin. “Are you okay with being marked?”

I can’t help laughing. “If you don’t mark me, did you even try?”

He growls, it vibrates so low I feel it rumbling in my g-spot. The first smack lands without warning, shunting me forward and making me yelp. “One.”

“Two.” I counter.

He slaps the same cheek, harder, the bite of pain quickly giving into warmth that radiates out from the impact. “Two.”

“Three.”

“Check in.”

“I said three.”

“Check in, Addison.” His teeth are gritted, so I answer quickly.

“Green. Th—” The third smack rings out around the room before I can finish my thought knocking the air out of my lungs. I haven’t had much experience with spanking, but it gets me wet as fuck. I don’t even really know why. It just does. Isn’t that enough of a reason to do something?

“Three,” he snaps.

“Four.” Gritting my teeth, I prepare for the impact. There’s no way I’m leaving here without bruises on my ass, and to do that, I’ll need him to hit me harder. I want to see what the deal is with getting marked. There’s a tiny voice in my head screaming that I want him to mark me. I want to see his marks in a few days. A secret way to relive the experience I had. It doesn’t matter if it’s from someone I’m deeply connected to, or if it’s a brand new play partner I may never play with again, I want that thrill every time I see the mottled skin.

His hand rubs at the space where he’s been slapping me before he unleashes a smack that stops my breath in my chest. “Four.”

“Five.”

“Addison.”

“Five,” I repeat.

“Check in.”

“Green. Five.” I wiggle my hips, desperate for another slap, aching for the sting, the burn, the rush of adrenaline that comes from the smack of his hand against my skin.

Another crack. This one makes me scream. I’m probably dripping arousal onto his expensive sheets. My eyes roll back in my head, and I’ve found my happy place.

“Five.”

“Five.” I repeat.

“Three more.”

His hand cracks two more times in quick succession, ripping screams from deep within me with each strike.

“Check in.”

I’m biting my lip so hard I’m not sure I can form words. The blunt head of his dick slides through my folds. “Addison. I can’t fuck this pretty pussy until I’ve given you all your slaps. Check the fuck in please.”

“Green.”

His last slap drives me closer to the edge, and by the time he’s repeated the process on other side, I’m a hoarse, quivering, burning mess, begging him to fuck me.

He insists we take a short break, rubbing my cheeks with such tenderness I can’t help but smile. “Do you want to try a crop?”

My answer tumbles from my lips without hesitation. “Yes.”

“One slap, each side.”

“For now,” I grumble into the sheets.

The weight on the bed shifts, a drawer squeaks open, and when he returns, he moves the crop within my eye line. “Do you want to touch it?”

“Just hit me with it, Thor.” My impatience is fraying at the seams. I’ve never experimented with spanking implements before, and now he presented the option, it’s like a red rag to a bull.

The impact is much different from a hand, concentrated in a smaller space. I’m sure it has to leave a mark. “Again, please, Thor. Again.”

He gives me another thwap on each side. Fists clenched I beg for more, and he obliges with another one on each cheek.

Dropping the crop onto the bed next to me, his fingers trace my ass cheeks. “Such delicious marks, Addison. You’re doing so well.” His praise creeps along my skin, warming the rest of my body, and I finally understand why submissives live

for their dominants to say the words “good girl.” Even if all I get is tonight, I want to be his good girl.

I’m an incoherent mess when he presents the paddle to me and offers to smack me with it. I nod, but he doesn’t move. “Words, Addison. Out loud.”

“Yes, please. I’d like to try it.”

My ass is burning, throbbing, hot, and I know the skin is mottled without having to look at it in a mirror. Thor took my challenge to mark me and ran with it. The satisfaction runs deep knowing that it’s going to hurt to sit down tomorrow. I can’t fucking wait.

“Check in.”

“Yellow.” I need to make sure my curiosity doesn’t trump my tolerance. And I need to maintain strong channels of communication with Thor.

I’m pretty sure a smack of the paddle will tip me over the edge, but I really, really want to try. I’m not sure I’ll get another chance to experience this in such a safe and comfortable environment.

We agreed it would be a one night stand, and from what I’ve learned about him he rarely goes beyond that. But I think if I show that I’m good at being honest, and I’m not a clingy clinger who clings, tomorrow and beyond, I could maybe convince him to explore a few things with me. Maybe.

Maybe I’m just being hopeful.

“I’ll go easy with this, just so you can try it. Thud or sting?”

“What do you mean?”

“Different wood types result in different sensations. For a deep thud, you want a thick, heavy paddles. Red oak is thick enough for the weight alone to create a thud, though if the edge lands you’ll definitely feel a sharp sting. Other types of wood result in a sting.”

“Which one is in your hand?”

“Sting.”

“Do it.”

His chuckle is almost as hot as the skin on my ass. “So scrumptiously hungry, Addison. I love it. Okay. Stingy paddle. One slap on each side.”

I brace myself, tightening my core. The cold wood feels amazing against my warm cheeks, and it takes a beat or two for the prickle to kick in. “Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.”

The second smack lands as quickly as the first and when the paddle falls on the bed next to the crop, I’m half tempted to beg him to pick something up again.

He dots soft, cool kisses on my ass cheeks, and it’s the most gentle, sweetest gesture I’ve ever witnessed. I fucking love it. “Such a good girl, Addison.”

He chuckles. “Did you just squirt at me? Enjoy being told how good you did, Red? Enjoy being told you’re such a good girl?”

I’m mumbling into the sheets, clenching my thighs together in a desperate bid for friction. I want to come more than anything in the world. I want the spreading heat from my ass cheeks to last forever.

My skin prickles, sparks of excitement flash low in my belly. Restrained, helpless, my consuming need for orgasm burns as hot as my ass cheeks. My core is tight, primed and ready for release. The scent of sex in the air makes me need it more. Nothing else matters.

“Check in.”

“Red.”

“You sure don’t want to stop? You’re sure it’s not black? We can skip straight to the cuddling if that’s what you want.” His words fall from his kissable lips between more kisses on my tender ass.

“What I want is for you to fuck me, Thor.”

The undeniable tear of a condom wrapper precedes a moment of silence before his cock slides through my folds. We talked safe sex at our negotiation, sure, but the fact he's respecting it and doesn't need to be reminded is hot as hell. "I'm so fucking proud of you." His hands skate over my aching skin. "You took that so well."

I'm about to mutter a "thank you," maybe even adding a "Sir," for good measure, but he thrusts into me without warning, or hesitation.

He's girthy, a nip of pain shoots through my pussy as it stretches to accommodate his dick, but it feels delightful. He groans when he's seated, balls deep, and I clench my muscles around him.

When he pulls almost all the way out, he grazes against my front wall, and I almost lose myself to an orgasm so close I can taste it.

He squeezes one cheek with his palm, stroking the other with gentle fingers. "That okay?" He moves again, and my legs tremble and eyes flutter closed.

Clenching my fists to try to fight the building pleasure in my core, I bite my lip. When he thrusts again, I grip the cold metal frame within reach.

"I asked if that was okay, Addison."

"It's... fuck... I'm going to... Thor, Thor don't stop, please."

My pleading seems to shred the leash he's been connected to, or whatever has been holding him back because he starts fucking me in earnest. His balls slap against my skin, his fingers biting into the soft skin of my hips. He's grunting, driving harder and faster with each movement, rutting into me like a man possessed. Each movement presses against my g-spot, my body slides on the soft sheets, my mind getting lighter by the second.

"So fucking proud, Adi." He holds me tighter. "Such a good girl."

My orgasm crashes into me without warning. My body tightens, my core explodes, stars dancing behind my eyelids. The intensity of my release has me gasping, pleading with him not to stop, or at least that's what I'm trying to say, whether words are even coming out of my mouth or not is anyone's guess.

He fucks me long after my orgasm wanes, wrapping his arm around my waist and fingering my clit as he charges closer to his own release. I fall apart on his cock and fingers one more time before he growls and comes right behind me.

Breaths heavy, skin sweaty, he removes his condom before unclasping my hands from the restraints. He rubs at my wrists, helping to warm them back up a little before kissing a trail from my middle fingertip up my palm and wrist on each hand. He picks me up enough to strip the sheet and what seems to be a protective layer from underneath me.

Under the plastic sheeting is another sheet, he positions me on top of it. I'm dozing in and out, but I'm pretty sure a warm washcloth was dabbed over my pussy and thighs, and a straw appears in my mouth with a demand to drink.

First water, then a few sips of orange juice before he accepts my current jelly fish state. He lets me hang out in corpse pose and stops trying to make me do anything that involves movement or higher brain function.

He hops off the bed, and I'm not sure how long passes before he climbs back on the bed next to me, covers us both with a blanket, and pulls me against his chest. "Sleep, Addison. You did so well for me. Such a good girl." He kisses my forehead.

The last thought in my mind before the blissed-out post-orgasm haze pulls me under, is that while there is a great deal of uncertainty in my life right now. One thing I know for certain, is that I'm not ready to be done with the man who smells like sunshine, whose chest I'm drooling on, and who only deals in one night stands.

CHAPTER 5

Addison

THE WEIGHT OF SOMEONE STARING AT ME IS HEAVY BEFORE I even open my eyes.

“I know you’re awake. Your breathing changed.” Thor’s morning voice isn’t as rough as I’d expect it to be. It’s smooth, like spreading butter on hot toast.

That should feel kind of creepy, but it just makes me smile. “You’re staring at me.”

“If you were me you’d stare at you, too.”

I make a satisfied hum, eyes still closed, as his hand bands across my stomach. When did I put a shirt on?

My eyes snap open to meet Thor’s bright blue stare. How long has he been awake? He looks way too perky to have just woken up.

“I wanted to do more than stare at you but we didn’t discuss consensual non-consent before we passed out. I’ve been waiting very impatiently for you to wake up.” His words skim across my skin, starting up my engine and breathing life into all my most private spaces.

“You could have touched me. I’d have been okay with it.”

A small stitch pinches between his eyebrows. “Not without your prior consent.”

“What did you want to do to me?”

His grin is downright wicked. “I wanted you to wake up on my tongue.”

Fuck. I'd have loved that. I roll toward him. Stroking the smooth skin on his chest I wonder if he shaves or waxes. There isn't a single tuft of hair on his torso.

As my fingers trail lower, they encounter resistance at a pair of boxer briefs. "You got dressed." I glide over the band of his briefs, deliberately ignoring the bulge trying to call for my attention. "In fact, you got both of us dressed."

"Seemed like the polite thing to do. I didn't want you needing to get up in the middle of the night not knowing where the bathroom was, and having to wander the house with no clothes on." He strokes my arm before placing the sweetest kiss on my temple. "I wanted you comfortable here."

I was. So comfortable, in fact, that I got a better night of sleep than I can remember having in a long time. Sunlight streams into the room through a large window. It takes another moment of staring up at the strikingly white ceiling to realize we aren't even in the kinky dungeon in the basement. "You moved me?"

I must have been dead to the world to have slept through him carrying me up two flights of stairs. If I'd been faced with carrying me up to the bedroom, I'd have left my ass downstairs. Or maybe put me on the couch in the living room if I was feeling adventurous. This guy must workout every damn day.

Did I drool on him? Oh, god. Did I snore?

He buries his nose in my hair, planting another kiss. "I didn't want you waking up down there and thinking I expected anything more from you."

Who even is this guy? Is he just the perfect man for every woman? Fucking his way through the female population, leaving a trail of broken vaginas in his wake?

"I never knew consent could be so hot." I almost fan myself, but my muscles are soft, warm, and moving sounds like it would be a lot of work. "And if I want your tongue?"

"It's right here." He sticks it out at me. "Just tell me where you want it."

He's circling my bellybutton with such a light and tickling touch I barely feel it, but my core throbs with overwhelming desire.

"I feel like you already know where I want it."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to hear you talk dirty to me, Adi." He slides down the bed, nestling himself between my thighs.

"I want you to lick my pussy." I pause. "Please." Manners are important, even when you're being dirty.

"Can I restrain you again?"

The gentle rhythmic beat in my chest starts galloping as I nod. He leans over the edge of the bed, gropes on the floor for a few seconds before producing two sets of purple handcuffs. "These are unlined, just leather. So they'll chafe if you squirm and tug, okay?"

Challenge accepted. But why does he need two sets?

It takes about three seconds to realize the why. He cuffs my ankles to my wrists in a way that presents me to him, splayed out, pussy right there in what feels wholly unladylike, but I can totally see the appeal.

That wolfish grin of his is back, and I'm already arching my pelvis. I can't wait for him to devour me. He *will* devour me, right? He's not just going to cuff me like this and leave me here in some form of epic, horrible tease? Right?

His palm spreads across my stomach as he takes up position in front of my pussy. "Easy, Addison. If you're uncomfortable, I'll let you out of the cuffs. But I'm here, I'm not going anywhere, and I'm going to eat you until you soak my face, and the bed, and the neighbors come over to plead with me to stop making you scream. Okay?"

Letting my head fall back onto the bed, I sigh. What did I do to deserve this? Have I died and gone to heaven? Can I stay like this forever please? Is this a thing? Just being worshiped by a guy like you're some kind of goddess?

“You still okay? I need you to check in before I lick this stunningly glistening cunt, Adi.”

Oh. My. God.

He just said the C-word.

Out loud.

It’s not something I think I’ve ever said in my life, and Mom always said it was literally the worst word someone could say. But the way he said it, charged with desire, laced with promise. Shit. That was hot as fuck. And I want him to say it again. And again. And again. Preferably as he laps at my clit like a man possessed.

“Addison?” A smack lands on my pussy, making me bolt upright in the bed with a squeal, then fall back down because, hello, I’m cuffed. “I need you to focus, kitten. Check in.”

I’m sure he calls everyone kitten, so I try not to let it take hold in my chest. But it’s really hard. Why does every word that he wraps his tongue around sound so hot?

“Green.” My chest rises and falls with the heavy effort of breathing. “And can you spank my pussy again please?”

As my back hits the smooth sheets, the second smack lands. I’ve never had my downstairs kitty cat spanked before, and the sting vibrating through me is utterly delectable.

He barely waits a beat before his tongue glides through my already-swollen lips cooling the sting of his hand. He doesn’t want to tease this morning, he wants to please. And I’d be fucking foolish if I didn’t let him.

His tongue flutters against my clit as he slides two fingers inside me, skillfully finding my g-spot with ease and sending shivers through my whole body. My back arches more, desperation pressing my pussy against his face. I want to hold his head in place so he can’t move or stop driving me closer to the edge, but every time I try to move my arms, the chains on the cuffs clink, reminding me I’m at his mercy.

The slurping sounds he’s making from anyone else would make me cringe. But once again, Thor makes them sound sexy

as hell. He's humming and mumbling against my clit between licks but I have no idea what he's saying. My head is thrown back into the pillow, my eyes rolling back in my head, and I'm hurtling toward what promises to be a bone-shattering orgasm.

"So delicious, Addison. You taste amazing." Burying his face back into what has to be a sopping wet mess, he hums again. I've never seen a man look so happy to be slowly suffocated between a woman's thighs before.

His pinky grazes my asshole as his fingers continue their onslaught on my g-spot with such precision I'm already at the edge. It feels like it's barely been sixty seconds of him going down on me, and I'm taut and ready to blow.

I want more of his pinky in my ass. I'm so curious as to how it'll feel. But I'm panting too hard, and pleading with him not to stop over and over and over and over again that I'm not sure I can make my brain form any other words but "please don't stop."

As though he's reading my mind, he slides a little more in, sending a tremor through my whole body. He's probably only up to his first knuckle on his little finger, but it feels different, fuller, the pressure mounting.

"Check in." His words are wet and mumbled, but still clear.

"Green. Gr-green. Don't stop."

That's it. I'm licking this man and claiming him as my own. I want to come like this every single morning. Ankles cuffed to wrists, fingers in my ass and pussy, and this whip-quick tongue brushing precision strokes against my clit.

I'm definitely in heaven.

When he slides another bit of his finger into my ass, I fall apart, the orgasm crashing into me like the untamed sea. A feral scream rips from my body as I start to twitch and judder all over. Every muscle obeying his expert touch.

A sharp tug on my nipple brings my focus back to the here and now. I had thought I was done, thought *he* was done as aftershocks of the orgasm roll through my satiated body. He

twists my nipple with his free hand as he presses harder on the magic button inside my body. As he pushes harder on my g-spot, he slides the rest of his pinky in my ass, and my hips arch on instinct.

“Hmmm.” He hums against my pussy before his head snaps up, crystal blue eyes meeting mine. “Someone likes having my finger in her ass.”

My face heats, and I try to look away.

“Don’t be embarrassed, kitten. Enjoying things in your ass is nothing to be ashamed about. And I’m so fucking proud of you for trying new things.”

Those words, that praise, it sends warm shivers coursing through my body, giving me confidence to ask for more.

“If you want more in your ass, Adi, we’re going to need lube.” The withdrawal of his touch leaves me aching. A deep need claws at my chest as I try to wait patiently for him to reach into the bedside drawer.

“I don’t have a lot up here, but I have some things.” He produces a shiny, small plug that doesn’t look too intrusive, and a little foil packet of lubricant. “You game?”

My head starts nodding as my brain catches up. “Yes. Please. Just... touch me again.” I know it’s been all take to this point, and I will reciprocate, I want to, I just... it feels so good. And he looks so fucking happy.

Ugh. I’m starting to love and loathe that roguish smile of his.

I expected a squirt of lube and cold metal being slid into my butt. But he settles back between my legs, tongue leisurely gliding through my lips, and his pinky back in my ass drawing small circles as he works me back up into a frenzy.

Tugging my arms, I fumble, groping to ball the sheets in my hands. Aren’t doms supposed to want you to do their bidding? What kind of dominant wants to make you come repeatedly on his tongue?

He pauses what he’s doing. “The pleasure kind.”

Fuck. Did I say that out loud? “Wh-wh-whaaaaaa”

His tongue is back on my clit with a renewed determination. I don't know how it's not exhausted. Does he just spend hours wagging his tongue and practicing doing this to women until they black out?

I'm putting a pin in asking him what a pleasure dom is, in lieu of just enjoying the ride. It takes less than thirty seconds for him to make me scream his name so loudly the lightbulb sways. Or maybe it's me that's swaying, I have no fucking clue.

Right as I crest the wave and my release hits, another squirt of lube hits my ass before the small, cold metal plug slides into the hole. He doesn't stop, he doesn't let me breathe, or relax, or my muscles sag, he just keeps going. Licking and sucking and biting my clit with his mouth while he taps on my g-spot alternating between light touches and hammering at it like it owes him money.

I don't know if the next orgasm that hits me is the same one that just finished, like, it never really finished, or a whole new one. But my legs tremble, and my body shakes so hard the bed is jiggling. I officially have no control over myself, and I'm sure there's a growing patch of moisture under my ass from all the squirting I'm doing. I can't stop coming.

This man is orgasm Satan. He's going to make me come until I die and join him in the underworld.

“Check in.” He rubs his thumb on my clit as he lifts his head to ask me how I'm doing.

“I can see sound.”

He chuckles. “Check in, kitten. I'm not done with you yet, and I need to make sure you're okay.”

My clit is swollen, raw, and if he keeps drumming at my g-spot he might punch a hole through my abdomen. But if he's not done, I'm sure as hell not done either.

If this is my one-and-done shot with Thor's tongue, I'm riding it all way to the end. And if my clit falls off when I get

there, then I guess it's just the price I have to pay for the best orgasms of my life.

“Green.”

“You sure?”

Nope. I'm pretty sure he's sucking my soul out of my clit piece by precious piece. Am I gifting my soul to the orgasm devil? Sure feels like it.

Will I regret it? I dunno, we'll find out.

“I'm sure. But I don't think I can come again.”

He beams up at me before licking his lips. “Challenge accepted.”

Two more orgasms and a nap on his chest later, I wake up somewhere close to noon.

“Pancakes?” He smiles down at me like he has all the time in the world to take care of me.

“Don't you want me to...” I'm not sure how to finish the sentence.

“Reciprocate? Suck my cock?”

I nod, needing to stretch out but a little afraid of what aches and pains await me.

“I told you earlier I was a pleasure dom, right?”

Another nod.

“I guess you could even call me a service dom. A Dom that mostly concentrates on the submissive's pleasure. Sometimes we're enthralled by it.”

My cheeks heat at the way his eyes bore into mine.

“If you wanted to just lie there and take it, I'd be down for that.” He wiggles his brows, but an icky sensation settles in my stomach.

I've heard about doms like this once before while Paige was describing a guy at the club. In some situations just lying there and taking it is an act of laziness—I've done my fair share of “just get it over with” over the years—but in others it

is a girl who lays back and is willing to take whatever her partner wants to give her.

“B-but... I’m not lazy.” I swear I’m not, even though all I’ve done is lie around and get spanked, fucked, and eaten out by him since I got here. “I’ll happily give as good as I get.”

Okay, maybe not quite as much. If I’d gone down on him for as long as he ate me out I’d have lock jaw.

He shushes me, brushing my hair from my face, his gaze full of fondness. “I know, Red. In this case it’s simply a submissive partner willing to give all control to her dominant partner. A mutual agreement so that we are both getting what we want. I want to worship you. Watching you, hearing you, feeling your reactions... that’s enough for me right now.”

After a beat of silence he grins. “Maybe when you regain the use of your limbs I’ll consider letting you get on your knees for me, but I don’t need it. You’ve satisfied me plenty.”

As someone who takes communication particularly seriously, I’d like to think if he felt differently he’d let me know. His face shows no sign of deception, and I know for sure he came last night.

He brushes a kiss on my skin. “Do you need a hand getting into the bathroom?” He hooks his thumb toward what I assume is the direction of the bathroom.

“I think I’m good.”

He frowns before kissing my forehead. “That was a lot, kitten. Let me help you.”

He pulls me to a seated position, my back resting against the headboard. He hands me fresh orange juice, and points at the bedside table. “Tylenol and ibuprofen, just in case.”

“I need a shower.”

He nods. I bend my knees, bringing them up to my chest and wince.

Even on the soft mattress, my butt protests at weight being put on it. It’s going to smart when I try to sit on something harder. Every muscle in my body grumbles at having to move.

Yeah. I feel like I've run a marathon. And as we've just established, for the most part all I did was lie there and take it.

Repeatedly.

He smirks like he can read everything on my face and in my movements. "Maybe next time you'll let me spank your breasts." He winks before pushing the glass of orange juice up to my lips.

"Next time?" I arch a brow that was perfectly manicured when I got here yesterday, but after being thrown around like a rag doll, it's probably sticking out in all directions. "What happened to King of the One Night Stand?"

"If you'd rather not repeat it, I suppose that's okay. But you're intrigued to experience some things in the community, and I'm a safe person to try those things out with. As long as we are very clear about our boundaries and expectations... I see no reason why I can't help you fulfill those desires."

That stirs something dangerous in my chest. I know this man isn't mine. Nor will he be. I know he's only cracking a window to allow me access to a series of experiences, expanding my kinky repertoire, helping me practice safe, sane, and consensual kink. But damn, if that intense concern in his eyes doesn't make my heart skip.

He hands me a cereal bar. "I'm going to make pancakes and bacon, but I'd like for you to take a bite or two before you try to stand up. Would you like a bath instead of a shower?"

It's tempting, but I don't want him to think I'm just extending my time here. I don't want him to think I can't take care of myself, that I need him.

"Addison?"

"Hm?"

"Can you tell your brain to pipe down a little please? It was a simple question. If you'd rather a bath so you don't have to stand up to shower, I'm happy to run one for you."

My ovaries might burst at his thoughtfulness. "A bath would keep my hair dry. It needs to be washed, but I didn't

bring any of my products.” Gesturing to the birds nest framing my face, I give an embarrassed smile. “I could do with a hair tie though.”

“Hair tie, bath, and another drink.”

I’m starting to feel less hazy now the orange juice is seeping into my body. A few bites of the cereal bar while he’s filling the tub, and I’m almost feeling human again.

He gestures to a bookcase at the bottom of the bed. “Help yourself if you want to switch off and chillax in the tub. I’m guessing you left your overnight bag in your car. I’ll go grab that while you’re soaking. What do we think? Forty-five minutes?”

Shaking my head, my stomach gurgling answers for me. “Usually I’d say an hour, maybe even ninety minutes. But considering how hungry I am, let’s say thirty.”

He chuckles. Outstretching his hands toward me, he waits for me to put the glass down and take his hands before helping me to my feet. My legs are a little wobbly, but nothing I can’t handle. I think.

He doesn’t move, just stands waiting for me to find my footing. “How are you feeling?”

“My butt hurts.”

The smile he gives me in response is bright enough to power the lights throughout his house. “Good. I like that.”

I do too. He walks behind me to the bathroom, his huge presence filling the doorway as I turn to face him. “You want me to help you in?”

I glance at the height of the side of the bath. The proud, independent woman in me wants to shoo him away and tell him I can do it myself. But the pain in my butt, and the exhaustion weighing down my limbs tells me I could end up on my face. Drowning with my pride at the bottom of his tub.

“I can cover my eyes if you need me to.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “You saw every inch of me last night, Thor.”

He shrugs. “Doesn’t mean you want me to see any inches of you today, kitten.” His fingers skim what has to be a blush blooming in my heating cheeks.

I take off the over-sized t-shirt he put me in to sleep last night and toss it onto the floor before he essentially picks me up and eases me into the hot, bubbly water that smells amazing. He kisses my hair before handing me my phone. I have no idea where the hell it spent the night, or how it’s fully charged, but he seems to have thought of everything. “I’ll be right back with a bottle of water.”

I could absolutely get used to this. The tenderness and attentiveness of this man is unparalleled. It’s unsurprising that he has a great reputation in the kink world. He comes back with two bottles of water.

“Room temp for now, the colder one will warm up throughout your bath. I’d like you to have both drank by the time you’re dry and come downstairs.”

“Yes Sir. I’ll drink the water.” I blow him a kiss before opening the tepid water and taking a drink.

“Good girl. I’ll see you downstairs. Coffee?”

“Black. Like my soul.”

He shakes his head, but doesn’t answer me. I have about thirty unread messages on my phone in the Sub Club chat. When I get done telling the girls the cliff notes from the night before, they’re both demanding we get together for a full dirty debrief. They want every painstaking detail. I don’t blame them. It’s what we do. I’d want the juicy gossip on every single orgasm from either of them if the tables were turned. And I’ve gotten them in the past. We know the good, the bad, and the ugly from each other’s sex lives. Ride-or-die.

When I get out of the bath forty minutes later, my skin is hot, sweaty, and wrinkly. There’s a towel on the warmer that I could easily wrap about myself twice and still have fabric leftover. Where the fuck does this man find giant-sized towels?

On the bed, he's opened my overnight bag and laid out my clothes, and a tube of lotion I didn't bring with me. I've never been so taken care of. Much less by someone I barely know, who just wants something physical, no strings between us.

By the time I get down to the kitchen, I'm salivating. The smells permeating the house are just... I can't even put words to how delicious everything smells.

"Any allergies? I should have checked before I started."

I walk up behind him to steal a strip of bacon resting on the paper towels. "No allergies. And I love food. I didn't get this ass from eating celery."

He scowls at me over his shoulder, frying pan in one hand, spatula in another. "You're lucky my hands are full or I'd spank you for that kind of shitty self-talk, Addison."

His voice is hard, punctuated with gritted teeth and a muscle feathering in the side of his face. Dude is pissed.

The doorbell rings, breaking the silence and our stare down. "I'll get it." I need to create some space between us so he can't torch me with his eyeballs.

When I pull open the door, my stomach drops. A young boy, maybe ten or twelve years old stands in front of me surrounded by bags at his feet. He's clutching a giant Chewbacca Squishmallow pillow. I only know because my niece has one as well.

There's no way this kid isn't related to Thor. He has the same wild blue eyes, the same shaped chin, and his hair is the same color. Despite the screaming voice in my mind telling me this kid is Thor's kid, I hold onto some kind of hope that maybe he's his younger brother. Or a nephew... cousin... something.

"Hi there." I step toward him, he steps back so I stop moving. "Can I help you?"

Wordlessly, he hands me over a piece of paper in his trembling hand. Part of me knows I have no business at all accepting the paper, or reading it, but the curiosity burns so deep in my gut that I shamefully accept the page and unfold it.

Dear Thor,

This is Matthew, or Matty. He's your son. He's autistic. And while he's an amazing child, I just can't do it anymore. Please don't try to look for me. I need a break. There's a notebook in his backpack with further information about him. Good luck.

Caz

I read the letter again before staring at the child. Then read it a third time. Fucking hell. It's the least empathetic, or sympathetic note I've ever read, especially considering she's just dumped her kid on a guy she probably hasn't seen in a while. Paige said he's been exclusively a one night stand kind of guy for as long as she's known him.

I swallow a few times before rereading the note in case I missed something on the first pass.

Nope, it's every bit as cold as it was the first time over. I guess when you're leaving your kid, you have to detach yourself from the feelings even just a little. Though I have no experience with it.

My sister's daughter is autistic too, and I've been around my sister and niece enough to know that it can certainly be challenging. But to abandon her son altogether?

It's so hard not to let judgment cloud my mind in this moment.

Thor's voice breaks the silence as he steps out onto the porch. "Who is it?"

Handing him the piece of paper, I avoid his questioning stare. "Your son."

CHAPTER 6

Thor

IF THIS IS SOME KIND OF SICK JOKE RIGHT NOW, ADDISON ISN'T funny. A pale, blond boy stands hugging a brown pillow to his chest watching the exchange between Adi and me. Frozen in place, bone-deep cold seizes every muscle, tight bands crush my throat and chest.

What the hell is happening right now?

Glancing over the letter in my hands I wrack my brain trying to remember who the fuck Caz is. I see it. This kid looks like me, so there's no clues in his features as to who his mother might be. Fuck. He looks like me. It's like looking at an old photo of myself as a child, right down to the gangly limbs and the dimples in his face.

This can't be for real. I can't have a kid just... dropped off on my doorstep. Who the hell just drops a kid off with a note?

Fuck.

"How old are you, Matthew?" How my voice sounds so steady is anyone's guess. It's like I've swallowed a dozen hamsters and they're all scrambling around in my body, trying to get free.

"I'm eleven."

Caz from eleven years ago. I've literally got nothing. At all. And this poor kid seems to have his worldly possessions scattered around his feet.

Fuck.

One fuck is not enough for this situation. But I can't spear my hands into my hair and scream like every cell in my body is yelling at me to do.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

What the fuck do I do with a kid?

I rake my hand through my hair, looking to Addison who won't meet my eyes. I don't blame her. She's watching my life come to a screeching halt in real time. She points to the house behind me. "I'm just gonna..." She takes a step toward the open door, but stops. "Let me help you get all of this inside."

She collects the pile of blankets to Matty's left and hurries inside. I'm never seeing this woman again. She looks like she might keel over. We went at it pretty hard last night, and the last thing I need is for her to pass out at the wheel as she's driving so I'm glad she's taking the initiative to self-care.

I'm not sure how I'm going to call or text her to check up on her later after all this. But I want to. I should. Dom Thor kicks in for a faltering second. But as much as I want to take care of her, I'm trying to focus on something, anything that isn't the damn near fully grown child ON MY FUCKING DOORSTEP.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Just keep breathing.

Addison's pale skin somehow looks paler as she piles food onto a paper plate, places another over the top of it, and hauls ass out of my house as though the building is on fire without looking back. I don't blame her. I'm tempted to walk out right behind her. But... this kid.

Again I say: FUCK.

"Did she leave because of me?"

“No, kiddo. She was going to leave anyway.”

“I bet she was going to stay to eat breakfast.”

Kid’s not stupid. I won’t treat him as such either.

“You’re right, she did leave sooner than planned. She probably just wanted to give us space.” Starting my relationship with my son off with a lie isn’t my proudest moment, but I don’t want him to feel any more uncomfortable than he already does.

He’s standing staring at his feet, or at the door, the ceiling, anywhere that isn’t at me. The silence is stifling. I’m not used to it. I’m never short on words. But standing here, staring at a child that is very definitely mine, who I had no idea existed—for eleven fucking years—and I’ve got zero words right now.

What the hell do I do with an eleven year old? At least they eat regular food, right? And not that liquid crap babies eat. That’s a plus. Mom used to say she couldn’t fill me when I was a child. I ate all the fucking time. And what kid doesn’t like pancakes?

“Are you hungry, buddy?” Pulling out the chair, I gesture for him to sit down. “We can sort out your space in a little while, okay?”

Shit. The door to the dungeon is still open. Scraping the back of my neck with my fingernails, I survey the kitchen. The stove is off, the knives are out of reach, and the food is all readily accessible. I can leave him for a minute to go and lock the door.

He eventually sits, still clutching the oversized pillow. I should probably take it off him before it ends up covered in maple syrup but if I was just dumped on a stranger and abandoned by my mother, I’d need a comfort item too.

Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck.

Father.

Shit. Fuck. Fuck.

I’m not cut out to be a father. I mean, sure, it’s something I’ve always wanted, but I’m in my thirties. I live a playboy

lifestyle. I guess I thought if it was going to happen, it'd have happened by now.

The temptation to call social services and hand this child over to someone better qualified than me is overwhelming. But I stamp down that instinct, at least for a moment. The kid's probably terrified, and the last thing he needs is for the person he was dumped on to throw his hands up and say "nope, not it," and leave him too.

As someone whose father abandoned him as a child... well, suffice it to say, that shit causes some deep trauma I'm not prepared to put this kid through. I may not have a fucking clue how to parent, but I'll at least give it a shot.

I'm not sure I can do it alone, though. I imagine there are some social programs out there to help people in my situation, right? They can't just expect you to single parent all by yourself... *right?*

One problem at a time.

Is this really happening? Am I a dad?

Matthew's staring at his still-empty plate like he's never seen food before. "You need help, kiddo?"

Buddy, kiddo, dude, jeez. I need to just pick something and stick with it. I sound desperate, frazzled, and basically everything I'm feeling inside is leaking out through the tone I'm using. He probably senses that, right? Kids sense these things?

"No, thank you."

Despite his "no," I feel compelled to help. I give him two pancakes, some bacon, and pour syrup over the pancakes before I cut them up. Do parents cut food for eleven year olds? I can't remember how old I was when I learned to cut my own food.

Then I give him a small side plate with fruit on it, in case he's a weirdo like Mom and doesn't like syrup touching his fruit.

“I’ll be right back, okay? I just need to go lock a door. But I’ll be right out there.” I point out the door so he knows he’s not being abandoned again. He doesn’t acknowledge me, but remains staring at his plate. Something’s off with the situation but I can’t think about anything other than the fact I have a young boy in a house with a currently open sex-dungeon. And I know for sure that’s a big red flag with social services.

I ask Alexa to put on some music, the quiet is deafening, constrictive, and I offer Matthew what I hope is a reassuring smile.

Darting out of the room, I make my way to the door to the dungeon. I never lock this door. I’m going to have to start locking this door. I grab the keys from the table next to the front door, lock the dungeon, and carry all of Matthew’s things upstairs to my guest room. I guess it’s his room now.

I feel sick. My day job is a work from home position. I might be a bar manager by night but that’s essentially just for the fun of it. I don’t need my pay check from Protocol. Working there fuels my need to be around people without getting *too* close to people. And it gives me a space to safely express my sexuality, which is a huge part of my life.

By day, I’m a scientific literature reviewer with a biomedical science degree. I’m a contractor. Generally working around three hours a day and bringing in pretty damn good money because of the field I’m in. That’s my bread and butter. But my bar job, that’s my *me* job. That lets me be myself, and gives me the strength and bandwidth to work from home, alone, to keep a roof over my head and food on the table.

I can’t leave my job at the bar, not even for my kid. It would destroy us both. I’d sink into a miserable space and resent him for it. I’d—wow. Talk about getting ahead of myself. I’m already writing us off.

I suppose it’s easy to do, all things considered.

The temptation to flop onto the guest bed and scream into the pillow is overwhelming. My role as a parent is barely ten minutes old, and I already have one foot out the door. I haven’t

even had a real conversation with the child yet, either. Anxiety claws at my chest like an animal in a cage.

This is such a bad idea. I can't adult for another human being. But something inside me knows with one hundred percent certainty I'm a dad now. This is really happening.

Back in the kitchen, Matty isn't sitting where I left him. Instead, he's under the table making a low noise, hugging his pillow to his chest. Don't know what was wrong with my pancakes, but I've never had complaints before. Matty's plates remain untouched.

When I try to coax him out from under the table, he doesn't move, and in fact, it just makes his shrieking noises get louder. He's not using words, but the message is clear from his contorted features, something's wrong, very wrong.

Maybe he really hates pancakes? I have no idea.

Going back to the note he gave me, it's like a slap to the head. The note says he's autistic. I've had very little experience with autism. One of my colleagues in the bar is autistic. She told me it's a developmental condition that falls within the autistic spectrum. But beyond that, I've never taken any time to truly understand what any of that means. Because it's never really impacted me before.

Shame coats my entire body like sand clinging to sunscreen at the beach. Not only have I never taken the time to get to know what being autistic means for my colleague at work, I'm not ready to help this child in the now, never mind parent him for the rest of his fucking life. Chewing on my thumbnail I try to process what's going on.

What the hell am I supposed to do? How do I get him out from under the table? Do I just leave him there? Do I pick him up and move him? Starting off my parenting journey as an epic failure isn't really what I'd expected. And I'm suddenly mad at myself for being wholly unprepared for something I couldn't possibly have seen coming.

He now seems as though he's completely out of control, in excruciating pain. He's gone from being curled up in a tight

ball, to star-fishing on the floor, the pillow discarded next to him. He's wailing so loudly there's no way the neighbors can't hear, and his arms and legs are thrashing against the tiles. I've never seen a child in such extreme distress as Matthew is right now.

"Matty? Matty buddy. It's okay." I crouch down, trying not to crowd him. Fighting the urge to bundle him into my arms and rock him back and forth until he knows he's safe here with the giant stranger.

He doesn't reply, instead, he screams louder.

"Matty, I know you're scared, but it's all going to be okay."

No change. Just screaming.

I can't say I blame him. His whole world just up and left in the blink of an eye. I'm not sure there's much I could say in this moment to help encourage him that things will get better. Mostly because kids can smell a liar from a mile away, and I'm honestly not sure things will get better.

At least here, under the table, he can't hurt himself, right? He's not smacking his head against the wall, or the tiles, he's just thrashing. And I'm here, so there's nothing he could do in the moment to hurt himself.

Do I ride it out? Do I pull him to me and force a hug? How do I deescalate this situation for this poor child whose suffering is ripping through the muscles in my body?

Fuck.

Sweat prickles along my hairline. This is so bad.

The only thing I can think of to do, is to talk to him. I'm sure this isn't the first time he's had a meltdown like this, so maybe I can get through to him on some level, and he can figure out a way to help me, help him.

That's a shit-load of responsibility to put on someone so small. I need a better plan.

"Matthew, buddy. I really don't know how to help you right now. And I'm so sorry about that. But I'm here, okay?"

I'm here, and you're safe, and you can do whatever it is you need to do to get through this. I promise you, everything is going to be okay."

Well, shit. I went and promised something I had no business promising. But I'm resolved. No matter how long it takes, no matter how hard things might get, I'm going to make sure this kid comes through okay.

It takes about twenty minutes for Matthew to find some calm and stop screaming. I didn't leave his side. I just sat here feeling frustrated and ashamed of myself that I couldn't *do* anything to help this kid.

I didn't want to look things up on my phone while I was right there in front of him, but as soon as he goes to bed I'm going to try to find ways to help him moving forward. This isn't fair on him, and I hate feeling so helpless, so out of control, so unable to help soothe someone.

As a dominant, I take great pride in helping my submissive, in taking care of them, in anticipating their needs, knowing what will help them in any given situation. But this? I feel like I'm free-falling without a parachute. I'm heading toward breaking every bone in my body on impact. And there's not a single thing I can do to stop it.

It's time to call my mom.

Maybe she can help, or at least tell me what to do.

She answers on the second ring, out of breath. She's probably power-walking around her neighborhood in Seattle. She moved out there for husband number two—or was it three? —and she never came back even after they divorced.

Her love of the Pacific Northwest is the only thing that trumps her love of her only son. That and Beecher's mac and cheese. Okay, so now I come to think of it, I fall pretty far down her list of priorities. Maybe I'm top five. I think. Either way, she's never let me feel anything other than her number one. Ever.

As a single mom, she fought to give me all the best things in life, and now that I'm faced with the scariest situation of my

entire life. I just want my mom.

“Thor? Honey I can’t hear you.” Her panicked voice snaps me out of my own brain.

It’s scary as shit in there sometimes, and I need a smack. “Mom?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just—”

“Thoren Bartholomew Snyder, don’t bullshit me. I wiped your ass for years and know exactly what your shit smells like. Start talking.” She stops, takes a few gulps of a drink, and the jingle of her dog’s leash rattles through the speakers.

“I have a son.” Who is currently still under the kitchen table, but he’s quiet at least. Though I’m not sure that’s a good thing.

Something falls, possibly the phone. Mom cusses, scrambles to pick it up, and her dog—Everest—a tiny handbag dog with big dick energy, goes ballistic.

“Everest! Everest, shut the fuck up a second.”

Everest does *not* in fact shut the fuck up. He just gets louder.

“Fucking squirrels.”

A door squeaks open. Everest yips, growls, and barks like the mailperson’s walking toward him, then suddenly goes quiet. Mom’s dining room chair squeals against the kitchen floor tiles, and she plops on it. I can imagine her clear as day. In an eighties shiny tracksuit, neon headband holding her hair back, and fanny pack around her waist as she walks her little terror of a dog around the neighborhood.

“Honey? I’m pretty sure you said you had a son. We spoke a few days ago. Didn’t we skip a few steps? Who’s the lucky girl?”

“It’s not like that.” Rubbing at the ache in my chest doesn’t help. “He’s eleven.”

“Thor, I’m very confused right now. You’re telling me you’ve kept an eleven year old son from me for years? How is that even possible?”

“Mama, no. Can you just...?” I drag my hand through my hair. “A kid landed on my doorstep today with a note that claims he’s mine. I never knew about him before today.”

“You’re sure he’s yours? You’re just accepting it? Or are you going to get a DNA test?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Strong family genes are hard to deny. I get it. And the mother?”

How she manages to be so practical and logical while also still being smushy and loving is anyone’s guess. Do they learn that at mom school? “Gone.” My voice breaks on that one word. I should leave the room. I shouldn’t have this conversation in front of Matthew, but the last time I left, he had a meltdown. I don’t want him feeling abandoned, again. I still can’t place a Caz from twelve years ago, though.

“Gone or dead gone?”

“Gone.”

“Ooof.” She exhales a blast of air in my ear. “Can’t imagine how hard that decision must have been for her to leave. Poor woman.”

Poor... woman? Doesn’t she mean poor me? I’m the one left holding the baby. Okay, so he’s not a baby, and I imagine if I tried to hold him he’d lose his shit—rightfully so—but still. Aren’t I a victim in all this too?

“I’m sure you’re great with children, Thor. You just need to believe in yourself and listen to what—oh my God, what’s my grandson’s name?”

“Matthew. Though the note said he doesn’t mind Matty either.” Can we get to the helping part please, Mom?

Chewing on my thumbnail isn’t helping, in fact, I’ve bitten my cuticle so much it’s bleeding, and I can’t leave Matty to go get a Band-Aid.

“Okay, so you take a few days to get to know Matthew, build some trust with him, and take it a day at a time. I can come down in ten days, for a couple weeks, but then I have to come back. I’m booking flights right now.”

Ten days. I just have to make it ten days and Mom will come and help me out of whatever shit storm I’ve managed to bury myself in.

“What else did the note say?”

“He has autism.”

Mom grunts. “Thor, honey, you don’t *have* autism, you *are* autistic.” She clucks her tongue. “It’s not something he has, it’s something he is. Turn off the music I hear in the background.”

“What?” I glance over to the speaker on the counter. It’s not all that loud, and it’s certainly not offensive music.

“Turn off the music, honey. It’s probably contributing to his overwhelm.”

“But—”

“Now, Thor.” Her stern voice has me moving across the kitchen.

“I thought it might help to keep us both calm.”

“I know, sweetie. But that’s not how autism works. We’re going to need to educate you quickly on the ways of ASD.”

I pour myself a glass of orange juice and sit at the table. “How do you know so much about it?”

“Betty McClay’s granddaughter is autistic. She’s younger than Matty, but it’s been a baptism by fire for Betty. She has thirteen grandkids, and Darlene is the first who is neurodivergent. Betty calls her neurospicy.”

“What the fuck is neurospicy?”

“Watch your language around my grandson, Thoren.”

Ouch. She’s breaking out my full name again. I suppose at least this time there was no middle name drop. “Yes, ma’am.”

I guess parents don't get a cussing pass when they're consumed by the terror of being entirely responsible for another human being for the first time in their lives.

"You scared?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She hisses out a breath. "I'm sure you're terrified. But it's all going to be okay."

"That's what I said. He didn't look too convinced to be honest."

Her doorbell rings in the background, and a seed of panic sprouts in my chest. "Sweetie I need to go. That's the first Stitch and Bitch member to arrive. She can hold the fort while I have a quick shower. I'll talk to Betty about some resources for you, and we'll get it figured out, okay? Don't panic. Just keep breathing. And if you get stuck, Google is your friend. I'll see you in ten days."

The call ends abruptly, and I'm left staring at my cellphone wanting her to come back and give me all the answers.

"How about we get you settled into your new room?" Forcing myself into action, I crouch down to his level. I'm hoping that giving him some control over his situation, his surroundings, will help calm him a little. When shit feels out of my control, anxiety takes root, so maybe it's similar for him, too.

"Okay." He doesn't look as sure as he sounds, but at least the screaming has stopped.

Sure, my guest room is bland as vanilla ice cream, but with time and some input from him, well, it could be anything he wants it to be.

After a while, we're unpacking his bags into the closet and drawers, and making up his bed. And by 'we' I mean 'me.' Most attempts at trying to start conversation fail, but that's okay, as long as he knows I'm here if he needs me, he doesn't need to talk to me.

There are two binders among his belongings. I open the blue one to find pages and pages of plastic sleeves, filled with hockey cards.

He holds his hand out to me. “I like hockey.”

Fuck. I scrub my jaw. Maybe this is my saving grace. I speak hockey. Living in Minnesota for most of my life, well, it’s one of our state’s sports. It’s hard to escape being a hockey fan. “The Wild?”

He nods. “I really like the Snow Pirates too. My mom took me to see them once, but... it was too loud.” He winces as though even the memory physically hurts him.

“I like hockey, too.”

That lights him up. The first sign of excitement or positive emotion since I stepped out my front door and found him on the porch step.

“I mean, I probably don’t know as much as you do. But I’d love to learn if you want to teach me.”

He launches into Hockey 101. Except it’s more like hockey 801 by the time he gets done. He eats a granola bar from his backpack for dinner, and eventually tells me what I’ve done wrong with his bed and we figure out how to make it right so he can lie down.

When I close his door behind me, I slither down the door and land my ass on the floor. Green binder in my lap. I have no clue what autism is, or how to help Matthew navigate the world while being autistic. But I sure as shit am going to try.

CHAPTER 7

Addison

I DON'T RUN. LIKE, NEVER.

Cardio and I aren't exactly on first name terms.

But when I say I fled Thor's house as though someone was chasing me and asking to share my food, it's an understatement. My ankle hurts, I probably twisted it... from all the running.

When I jumped in the car and slammed the door behind me, I half expected the damn thing not to start. It would have been the perfect time for the universe to get in my way. Thankfully, the engine started on the first try, and I was able to escape.

I would not want to be Thor right now. I can't imagine how scared, confused, and dare I say angry he is. But that's his problem right now, not mine. I have problems of my own.

As soon as I get into my old apartment, I cringe at the boxes lying all around the place. So many problems of my own.

It's a reminder of all the things I need to do: find a roommate, find a job, finish packing up all my shit and move it from this apartment to my new one. And those are just the biggies. I also have to scrub this place to within an inch of its life if I have any hope of getting my security deposit back. And I really need that fucking deposit.

Nervous energy consumes me as I pace around my living room. When I try to sit down, my ass hurts, so I bounce back onto my feet with a whimper and resume walking in circles.

Paige interrupts my pacing with a text asking if I'm still at Thor's. She sent it to the group chat. It's tempting to ignore it, pretend like I didn't see it, what with all the sexing. But maybe I need to talk it out.

Something terrible happened.

Okay, so it wasn't terrible, it was just greatly unexpected, and I have no idea what to do with it.

KENZIE

Are you gonna make us guess? Or do we get more than that?

PAIGE

^^ What she said. We can't help if we don't know where to bring the shovels.

That makes me snort out loud. My friends are always ready to help hide the bodies. It's one of the things I love most about them.

Not in the bedroom. I'm safe, I'm fine, I wasn't violated. Thor is a fucking sex god. The rumors are true.

KENZIE

Does this require an in person intervention?

PAIGE

I'm not going to Thor's house if he's still pounding her lady town. Voyeurism isn't my kink.

I'm not at Thor's anymore. I'm back at home. But I think I need an emergency Sub Club meeting.

KENZIE

On our way.

Fifteen minutes later, my besties arrive on my doorstep. They've brought filled bagels, sausage, egg, and cheese, bacon, egg, and cheese, and some monstrosity with avocado. And they brought wine. Apparently the fact that it's early afternoon doesn't matter in a crisis. Wine time is any time.

Paige pops the wine and grabs glasses, while Kenzie assesses my apartment with a hand on her hip and a concerned look on her face.

"You could move in with me and Austin." She gestures at all the half-packed boxes scattered around my living space.

Holding up a hand, I shake my head. "No. Thank you, but no. You *just* moved in with him, Kenz. There's no way on earth I'm going to bunk with you guys. I'd rather live in my car than gatecrash your honeymoon period."

"I wish I hadn't sold my house, now. I'd have let you stay there in a heartbeat."

Shrugging, my body heats. "It's not your job to bail me out of hot water, Kenz. This is my mess, I need to clean it up myself. I signed a lease. Unless I want to go to jail, I need to find a way to pay for the apartment. Maybe I'll start an Only Fans."

Paige snorts. "You wouldn't go to jail, drama llama. And there's no shame in sex work."

"That's fine for you to say." I take a wine glass from her and toss my head back as I take a long swig. "You're not the one about to go to jail."

Is it possible I'm overstating things? Sure. But right now I feel like I'm losing on all sides. Suddenly, this apartment I've lived in, and complained about for years, doesn't feel so bad. Packing my life up and moving a few miles away feels like an impossible task.

Not being able to keep a roof over my own head feels so irresponsible. When all I was trying to do was split costs until I could save up a down-payment on a forever home. Paying half the rent meant my bank account would get nice and fat. I was trying to be responsible.

This is why I don't adult. It never works out for me. I need constant adult supervision.

Paige shoves my shoulder. "Stop it. I can see you mentally berating yourself for whatever it is you think you should have done but didn't." She flicks my forehead. "This isn't your fault. It could have happened to any of us."

"But it didn't. It never happens to you two. You're all adult and shit. I'm the fuck up. Always the fuck up." Tears burn my eyes as a lump appears in the back of my throat. I refuse to cry. Not because I'm not alone, but because I hate feelings and refuse to let them have power over me.

Kenzie's our resident crier. She's welling up watching me well up. She feels everything. Like, literally everything. I'm pretty sure each feeling has a physical presence and reaction in her body. It must be exhausting. I can't imagine letting so many feelings take control of my person, my life. How does she even move with the weight of all those emotions clinging to her?

Not me. I'm in full control of my small array of feelings, and that's how it's going to stay. Forever.

Okay, except for right now. Right now I'm drowning.

We sit and drink. I tell them all about my amazing night with Thor, in graphic detail. By the time I'm done recounting, they're both fanning themselves.

"Holy shit. Thor's a pleasure dom for sure. He just kept rolling your orgasms until you couldn't come anymore?"

Nodding at Paige, I refill our glasses. "Yeah. I think my soul left my body. But I'm pretty sure he kept telling me to be a good girl and come for him. But by that point I was just hearing colors and seeing sounds so I might have just imagined he said that."

They laugh and drink from their newly filled glasses.

"I am so jealous." Kenzie shakes her head.

"But you have Austin." I drag my finger down the condensation on the glass.

“Denial.” Paige rolls her eyes as they both answer my silent question.

“I thought she accepted she’s all loved up with him? They’re living together for fuck’s sake. It’s a bit late now to deny her feelings.”

“Orgasm denial.” Paige grins at her own words.

“How long has it been?”

Kenzie’s stare hardens. “A day.”

Paige cracks up laughing. Like, full belly laugh, tears in her eyes, clutching her stomach laughing. Kenz smacks her arm. “Stop it. It’s not funny. It’s *awful*.”

Kenzie looks like she might cry again. “He says he’s trying to teach me *patience*. I feel like not orgasming for a whole day is patient enough. But apparently he doesn’t agree. He’s driving me insane.”

Paige laughs again. “He’s making her edge like six times a day.”

“When do you have the time?”

“I don’t,” she snaps before downing so much of her wine she’s probably going to need to take a ride-share home.

“He’s making her do it anywhere and everywhere.”

“Everywhere?” My eyebrows jump. “Like where?”

“Restaurants, bathrooms, my car, the parking lot, work...” She hangs her head in her hands. “I was almost busted by one of the players on the team last night at work. Hand in my pants in my office, edging for the millionth time. They stopped by ‘cause they saw I was working late and wanted to walk me to my car.”

I can’t help laughing. Working as a trainer for the college hockey team is usually her happy place, but she seems so distressed. I guess it’s easy for me to laugh since I spent the past twenty-four hours coming hard and often for the master of orgasms.

Oh, the master of orgasms. He'd totally love that ego stroke. Something smarts in my chest at the idea I might not get to see him again. And discomfort roots in my stomach at the fact I can't avoid him forever unless I never go to the club again.

This was a poorly thought out plan. Should probably have given this further consideration before jumping him.

Maybe now he's a dad he'll stop working at the club. I can't imagine it'd go down too well with the PTA moms that he works in a sex bar.

Except, wouldn't that be damn near every housewife's dream? Single dad who looks like Thor, who works in a BDSM club?

Fuck. Now I'm all the way jealous.

Kenzie's phone vibrates on the table and she groans. Paige howls with laughter, picking up Kenzie's cell. "Better get to it. Chop, chop. And we'll tell him if you don't, so make the noises believable."

Paige is enjoying herself way too much.

"Paige, your Domme is showing." I tip my glass to her, and she clinks hers against it.

"It's been too long since she's come out to play."

"I hate you both," Kenzie mutters as she pushes back from the table.

"You're really going to just go get off in my bathroom?"

"It's that or I go out to the car."

"Can't you just lie to him?"

Paige grunts.

"No. I can't just lie to him because he'll know. He always knows." She walks toward my bathroom, grumbling about how much she wants to come.

"Kenz?"

She pauses.

“Just go use the bed. Clean toys in the top drawer to the right. Make it easier on yourself.”

She growls. An animalistic rattle in her chest. “Fingers only.” Her tone suggests she’s mocking Austin, and if he were here, he’d probably throw her over his lap and spank her ass raw right in front of us for that comment.

I’m suddenly elated that Austin isn’t my dom. He might be delicious to look at, albeit a little young for me. But clearly the man is a sadist. Poor Mackenzie.

“Don’t look at her with those sad, sympathetic eyes. She loves it. And the reward when Austin is satisfied that she’s learned patience...” Paige sips her wine. “He’s going to kill her with orgasms.”

“I’d be so horny that he could just look at my clit, and I’d come.”

“That’s the whole idea.” Paige’s wicked grin reminds me of Thor last night.

When Kenzie comes back to the table, her cheeks are flushed. Her ass is barely on the chair when her phone vibrates again. “Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.”

Paige snorts. “Off you go.”

Without another word, Kenzie trudges back to my bedroom grumbling about how much she hates Austin.

“I’m really going to tattle to him if you keep complaining.” Paige grins as she calls out to Kenzie’s back.

My eyes widen. “You wouldn’t.”

She jerks her chin at the door Kenzie just closed. “Part of her probably even wants me to.”

Kenzie pulls the door open, pointing a finger at us. “I feel like there’s more to the Thor thing than just boundless orgasms. So wait for me to get done before you tell.”

Nodding, I can’t help but laugh. She’s probably so twisted up and blinded by lust right now, and yet she still wants all my dirty Thor gossip.

It doesn't take long for her to come back to the table. I guess the more you edge, the closer to orgasm you are all the freakin' time. Kinda sounds like fun.

“Spill.”

I avoid looking at either of them while cradling my empty wine glass. I could absolutely get used to this day-drinking-with-the-girls thing. Especially if we all go our separate ways and get off periodically. That's some R&R time I could totally get behind.

Paige nudges my hand. “We can't help if we don't know what's going on.”

“I don't know that it's my place to gossip.”

At that, my friends turn toward each other, stunned. We always gossip, it's what we do. Before I changed the group chat to Sub Club, it was Gossip Girls. But this is different.

I don't know whether Thor plans to keep Matthew a secret for a while until he finds his feet. That's not fair, I don't mean a secret, I just mean to himself. I don't know if he's a private person or if the world knows his business. And even if the world knows his business, does he want them to know this part of his business?

I don't know. But this is burning a hole in my stomach keeping it all to myself. “He has a child.”

Paige literally sprays her drink at me. “What the hell? You can't be serious.”

I tell them the story of how Matthew arrived at the door, with all his things scattered around his feet. “So he's just had this huge, terrifying thing dropped on him, and I can't be a part of any of that.” I gesture my hand toward the front door like Thor drama is lingering right outside it. “Even if I want to see him again. And believe me, I most definitely want to see his tongue again... and his dick... but... I can't.”

Paige stacks some boxes on top of each other, clearing space so she can pace. But it's Mackenzie who asks the first question. “Why can't you see him again?”

It's Paige who answers for me. "She doesn't do kids."

I've never said it out loud to my friends before. But it tracks that Paige has noticed a pattern, she's observant as fuck.

"Every time she comes up against a single dad, she flees like he loves Star Wars instead of Star Trek."

Kenzie laughs. "I don't think Austin knows what either of those are."

"You want to tell us your deal with the crotch goblins?"

I don't. But I'm not sure I'm going to have the chance to escape. Staring at Kenzie's phone, I will Austin to send her another message ordering her to my bedroom.

"You can tell us anything."

"You say that..." I reach for the wine bottle, but it's empty. Kenzie is already on her feet and stepping into the kitchen. When she comes back, she cracks the seal on the second bottle and pours us all another round.

"Don't either of you have to work today?" I take a sip of the crisp, citrus white that explodes on my tongue.

They both shake their heads.

"Stop stalling." Paige kicks me under the table.

After a long and heavy silence, I swallow another gulp of my wine. If my friends truly are ride-or-die, we're about to find out. "I almost killed a child when I was younger."

They look at me like they don't believe me. Like they're used to me exaggerating and being dramatic. Except this time, I'm not stretching the truth at all.

"I babysat for the neighbor's kid when I was a teenager." Staring into my glass, I shift in my seat, ass smarting from the bruises but I can't bear to look either of my friends in the eye when shame swirls with the wine in my stomach.

"I took her for a walk." Another gulp of wine. There's no amount of liquid courage that will help make this story easier to tell. "I met up with my boyfriend and we got... frisky." Still

not able to meet either of their eyes, and my cheeks are on fire, heat radiating from my neck.

“While we were sucking face, the little girl almost drowned in the stream.” My voice cracks, the unsettled alcohol and food in my stomach threatening to make a reappearance.

Silence.

Neither of them speaks. Paige takes a slow sip from her glass.

I want the floor to swallow me whole while I’m talking. I hate myself for almost having taken a life through my carelessness.

After what feels like an age, the girls try to tell me I was just a child myself, but it doesn’t matter. I was responsible for another human being, and it almost ended in that human being’s death. That’s not a risk I intend to ever take again.

Brushing them off, I finish another glass of wine. I promised myself I’d never put myself or any other child in the position where I’m accountable for them. It’s too much pressure.

My own sister won’t even trust me to watch her kids while she takes a shower, for fuck’s sake. My niece is autistic, too. So I know how challenging having a special needs child can be.

Not to mention the fact I barely have time for all the shit of my own I have to do right now, never mind taking Thor’s crap on my plate.

I can’t. I always said no kids. And I need to stick to it. For everyone’s sake.

No kids.

Not even if the kid is older, not even if my best friends think I can do it, and not even for the beautiful Norse God with brilliant blue eyes and a smile that melts my panties.

CHAPTER 8

Thor

WHAT THE FUCKING FUCK WAS I FUCKING THINKING?

I don't know how I thought we could do something normal on our second day.

Ouch.

Normal.

Suddenly the words I've used my whole life have taken on new meaning. If anyone so much as *suggested* my kid—who I've barely known for five minutes—wasn't normal, I'd rearrange their face.

My inner monologue and verbiage is definitely something I need to work on. I guess what I was trying to say is that I had no idea that special needs parents had such a hard time while trying to do something as simple as going out for lunch.

After reading through all Matty's files, I had a chat with his pediatrician, his school to talk through his IEP—individualized education plan—and his behavioral intervention plan, BIP, then touched base with his occupational therapist.

I've never heard so many acronyms: OT, PT, IEP, BIP... I'm sure there are more. But after two hours on the phone this morning, my brain is lava. It's a lot.

Turns out Caz had been planning this for a while and put me down on Matty's paperwork with the school and care providers. Suppose I should be thankful for small mercies.

Matty and I went for a walk through the park before stopping into Brew'd Awakening to grab lunch. It's a quaint

cafe, a little hipster, plenty of space and light, with great food. I stupidly thought it would be easy. Thought I could order everything off the breakfast menu and sit with Matty until he tried everything and picked whatever his favorites were.

I was wrong.

Very, very, very fucking wrong.

He's under the table having a meltdown, and the eyes of every person in this place are on me right now as he loses his shit. Again. Sweat's trickling down my neck, soaking into the collar of my t-shirt.

Movement in my periphery draws attention to a redhead sitting at the window, thankfully it's not Addison. I couldn't stand for her to watch me fail. Yet again. I feel like every second of every day right now is failure on top of failure. And it's only day fucking two. How can I do this for years on end?

I've spent so long priding myself on being able to provide comfort to people, to taking care of them, and this small child who needs comfort... I just... I've got nothing.

Mounting pressure behind my eyeballs draws a groan from me as the server approaches. I order a coffee as big as my head and tell her I hope to order food soon. But considering I have no clue how to calm my son down, we might just take the drink to-go and get the hell out of here.

Oh, shit. No. Addison *is* here. She's sitting about six feet away, staring at me with an unreadable expression painted across her porcelain features. She's got an employment-focused website on the screen of her laptop that she spins away from me before offering a small smile and wave my direction when she sees that I've clocked her presence. I try to return the smile, but I'm pretty sure it comes out as a grimace.

Grabbing my hair, I tug a hair tie over it. Putting it up into a ponytail won't stop me from sweating like a sinner in church, but it might help. Somehow. Maybe.

I'm going to ask for my coffee to go as soon as the server passes by me again. That was an error on my part. Matty is escalating under the table, and I have no clue if it's a tantrum

or a meltdown. What does he want from this situation? Is it comfort and attention? Is he overwhelmed?

His mom just left him, his whole life is fucking overwhelm. Isn't that just the poor kid's new status quo?

Should I just stay home with him forever and never take him outside? Am I being cruel to my son by even trying to bring him out into the world?

The ache in my chest deepens, and the pain behind my eyes increases. Dropping my head into my hands, I sigh. I can't subject the rest of the coffee shop to my son's screaming for much longer. I thought I could handle this... him... us... A new father-son relationship with the added difficulties of navigating special needs. But I very clearly can't.

Addison drops on the seat across from me with a wince. Hopefully it's the reminder of our night together making her cheeks heat. I don't even have time to grin, or make a smart ass comment about how her ass is smarting. "Can I try something?" She jerks her head at Matty under the table.

"Of course."

She ducks under the table with her backpack. I don't know what she does under there, but she just stays with Matty. Her voice is low, calming, reassuring, and after a few minutes, she climbs out from under the table and sits back on the chair.

It's not long before Matty settles a bit. Addison keeps one hand under the table. I don't know if she's holding his hand, or stroking his hair, or what she's doing, but it seems to be working. I'm not too proud to admit I'm feeling guilty as hell right now. I should be able to settle my own fucking child.

The server places my coffee in front of me, and I point at Addison. "What are you drinking?"

"Oh." She waves a hand. "It's fine. I'm fine." The urge to stroke her cheek, or tip her chin so she looks me in the eye is consuming.

Arching a brow, I find it hard to believe she doesn't want coffee. "You came to a cafe to just sit and not drink coffee?"

Her pale skin turns almost as red as her hair. “I’ll take a caramel latte please.” She pauses. “Do you have somewhere quiet that they could eat?” She points under the table.

The server crouches at the foot of the table, spots Matty and gives him a wide smile. “I’ll see what I can do. Do you want another menu?”

Addison looks at me as though she’s asking for permission to stay to eat with us. I’m not sure what she sees on my face, whether it’s hope, silent pleading, or relief that she hasn’t already high-tailed it out the door, but she nods.

When the server leaves, she leans toward me. “I can leave you guys alone if you’d rather. They just make exceptional soup, and I love their club sandwiches.”

I’d rather barbecue my balls than have her leave right now. I don’t know how she’s soothing Matty but if she goes, I’m afraid she’s going to take his calm with her.

“Please stay.”

She nods, but doesn’t meet my eyes. She looks like she wants to bolt. She gives me a small smile. “Noise canceling headphones. I have an autistic niece, and that’s what my sister asked me to get for her for Christmas last year.”

Glancing around the cafe, it eludes me how she can think this place is loud. There’s a din, but it’s by no means noisy. Suddenly, I feel like a complete idiot. It should have been one of the first things I thought about when I walked in. And yet, since it doesn’t seem all that loud to me, so I assumed it wasn’t an issue.

“You couldn’t have known.” Her voice is soft, quiet, pacifying. But it does little to soothe the ire bubbling under my skin. Matty is my kid, and I don’t know the first thing about soothing him or making him feel better. And this woman, this *stranger*, knows him better than I do already.

“He’s holding my hand.” She tips her head as though she’s pointing to where her hand is under the table. “I tried to retract it, but he isn’t ready to let it go.”

Something sharp slinks into my chest at her words. Matty hasn't let me touch him since he arrived at my door yesterday.

I'm trying not to be bitter about it. I'm trying to put Matty first, this is about him, not me. No matter how difficult it might be for me to accept that other people might be able to help my son when I can't. I need to let it go and focus on the fact that she's helping.

Then learn how I can help, too.

The server comes back with Adi's coffee, and takes our order.

She crouches at the end of the table again and addresses Matty directly. Reaching toward him, probably to catch his attention. A quick glance under the table confirms he's slipped his headphones off one ear to talk to the server.

"Would you like something to eat... eh...?" She looks up at us.

"Matthew," Addison supplies.

"Matthew. I love that name. Would you like some soup or some grilled cheese Matthew?"

After a short silence, Matthew's little voice answers her. "I like grilled cheese."

She grins. "Grilled cheese it is." She tells us that her manager said it's okay for us to eat in the room next to her office. Addison and I coax Matty out from under the table and follow the server into the quieter part of the cafe. It's also darker back here, and Matty seems to visibly relax at the change in environment.

I don't know how they did it so quickly, or if they have other ASD families who come back here, but there's a table and chairs, silverware, coloring books and pencils, crayons, and markers.

The server tells us that the owner's son is autistic. He's working on adding an ASD friendly space, protected time to their opening hours for ASD families to stop by and have somewhere to go without "strange looks," her words, and ASD

friendly items to the menu. She says if our family ever wants to come back with Matty and bring our own food for him, that's okay too.

My hand trembles as I fight the urge to cry. I didn't realize how much stress I was carrying over finding somewhere for us to be social and eat together until this woman told me that this was a safe space.

We're hiding out in a back room to have lunch, it's not quite eating out front with all the other patrons. But it's a start. Matty isn't hiding under the table, he's not screaming, and he's pulled a book out of his backpack about the history of hockey and he's quietly reading it.

This gives me hope. "Are there other ASD friendly businesses around?"

She nods. "We don't have fliers yet, but I have a list of places the owner takes his son sometimes." She pats me on the shoulder, sympathy etched in her smile. "I know it can be overwhelming. But there are plenty of businesses in Minneapolis that offer ASD friendly times, or activities. More and more places are catering to our neurodiverse community."

I've got so much homework to do, my head might actually explode. But this gives me hope, and a renewed sense of determination to try all of the places on the list and to go out of my way to find even more.

I've spent my whole adult life swearing I'd never turn into my father, and yet I was apparently just like him this whole time without knowing. What must this child think of me? Does he think I left him and his mother? Fuck, does he think I left because of him? He was pretty astute at recognizing that Addison left because he arrived. The urge to tell him I didn't know he even existed is overwhelming, but I don't want him to think ill of his mother for not telling me, either.

Addison pats my hand. Everyone keeps patting me. I hate it.

"I could ask my sister for some resources for you as well."

I hate how much sympathy is in Addison's eyes. I'm not used to being the one needing to be taken care of, and I don't like it. Control. That's my thing.

We spend our quick lunch making small talk. Safe territory. Where we grew up, where we went to school, what we like to do, and eat, and watch. And when we're done eating, we argue over who's going to pay the bill. She eventually caves, but she's very clearly not happy about it. Her face and neck is flushed, and the way she holds herself suggests something else is going on with her, but that isn't my circus, and she isn't my monkey.

Right now my monkey is gripping her hand like grim death. "Any chance you want to walk us home?"

She nods, and we step outside into the sunshine. It's a glorious fall day with just enough of a nip in the air to remind you that the weather could change at any moment. I'm glad I didn't need to explain to her why I wanted her to walk us home. She seems to just *get it*.

But I can't have her around forever, I need to figure out how to understand my son without having the random hookup from the bar interpreting everything for us.

Ouch. That was a dick thought to have about her. She's only trying to help.

We don't say a word the entire ten minute walk back to my place. I don't know that there's much to say. My gratitude to this woman is overpowering. I want to take her inside and ravage her until she comes a million times just to show my appreciation for her help today. But that was old Thor.

New Thor is a father, a man responsible for someone's well-being other than his own. He's not a Casanova, a player, someone who could hook up with two women on the same day, sometimes even at the same time.

Standing in silence at my front door, just staring at her face, her auburn curls catch the sunshine making her hair look like flames.

“It was lovely to see you again, Matthew.” Her smile to my son is warm and genuine. “Thanks for letting me have lunch with you.”

“You’re welcome.” His voice is small, but hearing him engage with her and speak a little more than... well... not at all, is nice. He doesn’t meet her gaze, staring at his feet, but he hesitates for a second.

“Did you know the Minnesota Wild was granted an NHL expansion franchise on June 25, 1997, and began playing in the 2000-2001 season?”

She giggles. “I did not, in fact, know that. I don’t know much about hockey, perhaps you can teach me?”

Matty looks at me, smiling when I nod before he heads inside. Following him, I assume Addison is right behind me. I pause as he pulls out a chair at the dining table, grabs his book from his bag, sits and starts to read. Addison didn’t come in behind me, she must be standing at the door. Fuck. Awkward.

I have so many things to thank her for from just today alone, but I can’t find the words as I walk back outside to say goodbye. Why didn’t she follow me inside?

Every time I try to form a coherent sentence, the words get stuck in the back of my throat. “Thank you.” It comes out a growl, and for once I don’t intend it to.

Her head snaps up, her gray-green eyes meeting mine before flickering to my lips. I feel it too. The powerful draw to kiss her, to hold her, the desire to repeat our night together. Everything’s changed except the sizzling chemistry hanging in the air between us.

My fingers skate over her high cheekbone of their own volition. Her eyes flutter closed, breath hitching. The thudding in my chest drums hard, pushing me closer to her. I want to kiss her, and she tips her head as though she wants to kiss me too.

For a moment, the need to kiss her is everything. It’s my past, my present, my future. The one thing I need to breathe

oxygen into my body. It's safety, security, it's confidence in my ability to take care of her. It's trust.

Everything.

Her eyes threaten to open, clearly I'm taking too long to make the decision as to whether it's smart or not to kiss her. But just as I'm about to pull away, instinct kicks in. I spin her so her back hits the shingles as I back her up, cup her jaw with my palm, and capture her mouth with such need, such demand that kissing her leaves me dizzy.

Her whimpers against my mouth have me hard in seconds. If I thought she was open to it, I'd fuck her where she stands. God knows I could do with a release.

But I'm not going to fuck her just because I have a deep and painful need to be in control of someone, something... *anything* right now. It's not fair. Not to her, not to either of us. I don't like using women to get what I need from them. That's not what my brand of dominance is about.

When our kiss ends, we just stare at each other for a long moment, braced against the side of my house, standing right there on the street.

That kiss felt like the start of something, and yet it also felt like goodbye. The sadness reflected in her eyes tells me she felt it too.

"I'll see you around." She throws me a wave before turning and walking down the path. Her ass was made for jeans. Her hips sway as she sashays down the street and away from where I live.

As I watch her leave, a crazy idea comes to me. "Adi?"

She stops, but doesn't look back at me.

"Addison?"

She turns. I close the distance so I'm not shouting across the yard at her. "I have an idea."

Her brows twitch, and I know she's jumped straight to dirty thoughts. Old Thor would have been right there with her. New Thor can't give up his job at the bar and can't leave his

son alone at night while he works. New Thor is responsible, and a problem solver.

“You were on LinkedIn at the cafe. Were you looking for a job?”

Her face turns scarlet in seconds. “I’m keeping my options open.” She pauses, her shoulders slumping. “Between jobs right now.”

I don’t want to pry, but I do need help. “Come and work for me.”

She crosses her arms, eyes narrowing. “Doing what? I have no bartending experience.”

“I don’t mean at the bar.” I shift my weight from one foot to the other. Why am I suddenly so uncomfortable? “I need help with Matty so I can work at the bar. Mom is coming in from Seattle in ten days. But until then, well, I might need help picking him up from school, and getting him ready for bed, and on the nights I’m at the club I’ll uh...” Starting to think this wasn’t my smartest idea ever. “I’ll need you to stay over to make sure he’s okay.”

She arches a brow. “You want to pay me to... babysit?”

Before I can answer, she doubles over laughing. Cackling, even.

“He likes you, Addison. Anyone can see that. You’re good with him.”

When she stands upright, tears trickle down her cheeks. She’s still laughing like it’s the funniest joke she’s ever heard. “I used my one pony trick at the restaurant. Beyond the headphones, I got nothing. I don’t do kids.” She holds her hands up, her face sobering. “You don’t want me to watch your kid, Thor. Trust me.”

With that, she’s gone. I’m standing on my front lawn with a painful hard on and a headache. And wondering what the fuck I’m going to do now that my one bright idea was shot down by the fiery-haired vixen I want to fuck all over again.

CHAPTER 9

Addison

“I KNOW, MOM.”

“How could you have just... lost your job?” She sighs heavily. The perpetual sign of parental disappointment. “Why can’t you be more like your sisters?”

There it is. She jumped straight there this time. It usually takes her a few more admonishments to get to the sibling comparisons. It’s not even muttered under her breath anymore, it’s just out there for anyone to hear.

Always such a screw up, Addison.

What did you do this time, Addison?

Why can’t you be more like your sisters, Addison?

Because we aren’t all suck-up, high achieving doctors, with fancy husbands, two-point-four kids and white picket fences.

I have another three rejection emails in my inbox. I’d held out hope that if I’d gone further afield than the top fashion designers, I’d have better luck. But it turns out my old boss’s pervy tentacles reach every corner of the industry. I probably couldn’t even get a job as a janitor in any fashion house in the whole wide world. Not even exaggerating.

A tiny voice at the back of my mind says it’s a sign for me to branch out and start my own clothing line. I’ve toyed with it for years. When my niece Kitty was a toddler, my sister used to have the most epic meltdowns about how there were so few clothing lines for kids with special needs. After doing some

digging, I found out that it wasn't limited to just ASD kids either. Kids with trachs, and g-tubes, and various other pieces of medical equipment need their clothes to be adaptable, and while it's a growing niche in the market, they're still not well provided for.

At the time, I did extensive research, I scribbled down some ideas on a notebook, and I came dangerously close to asking my parents to bankroll the idea. But I landed my previous job instead. And now I've been dismissed from that role, I'm too much of a screw up for them to ever trust me with their beloved hard earned cash.

As Mom berates me in one ear, another new rejection pings in my emails, and suddenly Thor's offer to pay me to sit with Matthew overnight while he sleeps, sounds pretty enticing. I should have applied for the barista job that was advertised in the window of Brew'd Awakening two days ago when we had lunch. That would have at least been some kind of income.

I'm so glad he offered to pay for the food. I argued, sure. And I could have made it work, but the more rejections that pop up into my inbox, the more aware I am that I'm staring down the barrel of homelessness. I can't afford the lease on the new apartment.

What a fucking mess.

"We won't bail you out this time, Addison. You're a grown woman. You need to face your mistakes yourself and figure something out."

"But Mom, I didn't—"

"I don't want to hear your excuses, Addison Juniper. Your father and I are tired of helping you out of holes you get yourself into. It's time to be an adult and stand on your own two feet."

That's exactly what I was trying to do! "But—"

"I have to go, your sister's here."

If she'd just let me get out the fact that my boss was inappropriate with me, she'd understand the why. Then she'd

help. Right? She'd see it wasn't my fault, and she'd offer to help me.

She turns her attention to somewhere else in the house. "I'm in here darling. Where are my beautiful grandbabies?" she coos. She doesn't even say goodbye before hanging up the phone.

I'm on my own this time.

I say that like they bail me out of hot water often. I bail myself out. Damn near every time I face adversity I am my own fucking hero. But sometimes I need my parents—is that such a crime?

Apparently so. I guess because my two older, adultier, more stable sisters never need the help of their parents that makes me the worst, the weakest, the problem child.

Staring at my phone, I pull up Thor's contact information. Despite the consuming fear crawling over my body, I need the job, I need Thor's money.

Plus, Matthew is an older kid.

I learned my lesson.

I've grown up.

I won't hurt Thor's son.

I can be more responsible. I can.

Rationalizing takes the edge off the fear crushing against my chest. It's not my only option, and despite the anxiety over taking care of a child, it's a right-now solution to a right-now problem.

Even if I did go to Brew'd Awakening and ask for a job, there's no guarantee I'd get an immediate start date. And I'd have to wait to get paid. I couldn't pull together the kind of cash I need to take care of the apartment lease.

I need an up-front cash payment to help get me back on my feet. And while I'll feel guilty for taking advantage of Thor like that, if he really wants me to sit with Matty for ten

days until his Mom comes in from the Pacific Northwest, then it's going to cost him.

Hands shaking, stomach like lead, I type out a message to him. As I'm typing, the dots move on the screen, indicating that he's typing to me too. What the heck?

After a beat, a message appears.

THOR

Can I buy you dinner and talk about my offer again?

And if your answer is still no, can I buy you dinner to thank you for helping me with Matty?

And if that answer is STILL no, can I buy you dinner to return the headphones you left here?

Actually, I bought you new ones. Matty has claimed yours as his own.

A giggle bubbles in my chest. He's adorable when he's flustered. I was going to talk to him about the job anyway, so face to face sounds like a better plan. Plus, I do love food.

Sounds good. What do you have in mind?

THOR

My place? I'll order in. You like meat?

I spray water out my nose at his question. The temptation to poke fun at him and tell him I loved *his* meat is overwhelming. But I bite it back.

THOR

Please tell me you're not a vegan.

What's wrong with vegans?

THOR

Nothing. I'm sure they taste delicious.

Does that mean if I'm not a vegan I'm safe, and you won't eat me?

I gasp at the message that flew out of my fingers, wanting to un-send it, but it's already marked as read.

THOR

Actually, I know you're not a vegan. You put bacon on your plate when you stayed over.

Also? We both know how much I enjoyed eating you, Addison.

Fuck. This conversation has taken a turn, and I have no idea how to get it back on track considering how inappropriate it is. He's my potential employer, and now all I'm thinking about is riding his tongue with reckless abandon. Again.

THOR

See you at 5:30?

Sure thing, see you then.

I resist the urge to call him boss, or boss man, or Sir, and place my phone on the table just out of my reach. I don't need to flirt with him, I need his money, that's all. And he needs my expert babysitting skills.

I laugh so hard I almost piss myself. This is the single worst idea anyone has ever had. Pulling out the laptop from my bag, I open it on the table. Maybe if I go back over the job sites again I'll find the perfect job waiting for me. It'll pay enough money to dig me out of this property hole I've managed to get myself into, and it'll keep me away from delicious Thor, and his kid.

My phone vibrates with a message. It's a potential roommate who wants to meet. Maybe things are finally

looking up for Addison the screw up.



WALKING UP THE FAMILIAR PATH TO THOR'S DOOR STIRS something in my stomach. A week or so. That's all he needs me for. Once the week is up, his Mom will take care of Matthew, and I'll have enough money to keep me afloat until I figure out the next thing.

It's extortion. I know this. But if he's likely desperate enough, he'll pay it. And I'm definitely desperate enough to ask.

He opens the door with a smile, stepping back so I can enter the house. "Fancy seeing you here." His hand meets my lower back as he leads me into the dining space. "I ordered Manny's, it'll be here any minute."

"Manny's?" I can't have heard him right. Manny's is the best steakhouse in Minneapolis. Huh. Maybe it's not extortion after all.

He pulls out a chair and gestures for me to sit. He's moved the dining table so it's placed such that you can see the living room while you eat. Matthew's sitting on the sofa, he's got a game on the TV, and headphones over his ears. Smart. I love strategy, and the fact Thor has moved his dining table and can still see his son and make sure he's okay tickles something inside me.

"Wine?"

"Just one. I'm driving."

If I didn't know better, I'd say he's trying to woo me. He's wearing a plain white v-neck t-shirt, stretched beautifully across his wide chest. His dark-wash jeans contrast my light-wash jeans, but he totally wears them better. How does he make casual look so goddamn sexy?

“I’m just going to say a quick hi to Matthew.”

He nods before pouring me a glass.

Matthew barely breaks eye contact with the TV screen until I sit next to him and point to his headphones. He pulls one side off, but continues playing.

“Hi, Matthew.”

“Hi, Addison.”

I love that he remembers my name without me having to remind him. My parents have known me my whole life and some days it still takes them three tries to get the right daughter’s name when they’re talking to me.

“How are you?”

“Good.”

Colors flash in blurs of motion on the screen as hockey players crash each other into the edge of the arena. Right as I stand to go back into the kitchen, Matthew clears his throat. “You wanna hear another Wild fact?”

I can’t help but grin. His enthusiasm for hockey at such a young age is adorable and makes me wish I knew more about the sport. Maybe I can find a hockey encyclopedia somewhere to see if I can’t keep this kid on his toes with hockey facts.

“Of course I do, buddy.”

“The team’s official fight song is “Let’s Go Crazy” by Prince.”

“Great song.”

He pops the headphones back in place over both ears so I slip back out into the kitchen. A few minutes of silence and sipping wine pass by before the doorbell chimes. While Thor deals with the delivery guy, I sneak a glance around. The lighting has been changed, it’s not as bright and harsh, and there’s a giant lava lamp next to a salt lamp beside Matthew as he plays in the living room.

Thor’s definitely done some homework, and shopping, in the past few days. How many toys and trinkets has he bought

for Matthew's room? I can just see him in my mind, running around the store with a cart, dumping everything he can think of into it.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like. I realize I could have asked, but I figured anything you don't like can do for my meals tomorrow. I ordered some lobster cakes, a Caesar, and a wedge salad. I got a fillet, and a strip, loaded mashed potatoes, mac and cheese, French fried onions, mushrooms, and creamed garlic spinach."

My mouth is watering as he unpacks all the boxes.

"Manny's makes the single best bread pudding I've ever eaten, so I got some of that, a slice of cheesecake, and some key lime pie." His face is bright red. This is easily a three hundred dollar spread. I get it, I've panic-ordered more food than I need from my local Chinese restaurant on more than one occasion, but this... this is an expensive moment of panic. How much does Protocol pay their staff?

"Day job, remember?" He taps a finger to the side of his temple like he can hear my thoughts. "Contrary to how it may seem, I'm actually quite a smart guy." He flashes *that* smile, and my panties combust. I wore boy shorts today, a step above my period pants, and an absolute deterrent to taking my clothes off for that man. He cannot see my Wonder Woman boy shorts. He will not.

He hands out plates and serving utensils before ducking into the living room. It takes great self-restraint not to ogle his ass, and as he crouches down next to Matthew, my ovaries explode. His entire demeanor changes, softens, and he's just so adorable.

I don't hear what he asks Matthew, but the boy shakes his head. Then Thor picks up a water bottle on the coffee table and hands it to Matthew. He shakes his head again, but Thor insists and the boy relents. When Thor rises to his feet, he ruffles Matthew's hair, and I wait for the reaction.

When there is none, I exhale. I wonder if that's the first time Matthew has let Thor touch him. Thor steps back into the dining area. "Serve, eat, it's getting cold."

I bet that even cold, Manny's tastes exceptional, but I don't say that as I open the containers and plate up the feast.

"It's new."

I snap my head up at Thor's voice as I scoop spinach onto my plate.

"The hair ruffling. He let me touch him this morning for the first time. It feels like such progress. I'm trying not to push his limits, but I really just want to grab him into a giant hug." The pride is as clear as the cheek dimples on his face, and I can't help the wave of satisfaction and excitement that crashes into me.

"I'm so happy for you, Thor. That's fantastic."

And it is. It's a definite step forward for the two of them.

"This is quite an extravagant business dinner." I shovel a forkful of the mac and cheese into my mouth and almost come on the spot. Jesus Christ on a cookie, this is delicious. I don't think I've ever had such creamy, cheesy, exquisite mac and cheese in my life.

"I felt like I needed to sweeten the deal."

I'd smile at him, but I'm too busy inhaling this meal. If I don't slow down I'm going to get heartburn, or puke. Maybe both. It's just so good.

"My Mom fell and broke her hip."

As much as I should feel empathy, or sympathy, the first emotion to course through my veins at his words is dread.

A broken hip doesn't heal quickly.

A broken hip means my position would be more than a week while we wait for her to arrive.

A broken hip is a big fucking problem.

The steak I just swallowed sticks halfway down my chest. No amount of gulping will shift the wad of meat wedged in my esophagus. "I can't."

"I didn't even ask you anything... yet."

Thumping at my chest, I try to clear my throat before chugging down half my glass of wine. “You’re going to ask me to watch your kid until your mom recovers.”

He points a finger at me. “Yes, I was most definitely going to do that.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?” He pops a mushroom in his mouth and chews slowly.

“I don’t *do* kids.”

“But you *do* need a job.”

I nod. “I can’t stay here though.” Shame consumes my entire body like a wildfire. “I-I-I...”

He takes my hand in his, giving it a squeeze. “What’s going on? Let me in, maybe I can help.” He pauses. “Maybe we can help each other.”

Finishing the rest of my wine, he pours me another. “You can Uber home. I feel like this discussion calls for more wine.” He tops up his glass.

I take another healthy slug of wine, shovel another mouthful of mac and cheese in my mouth, and when I’ve swallowed, I feel more ready to share my clusterfuck of a situation with this almost-stranger. Maybe by the time I’m finished telling him how much of a screw up I am, he won’t want me to watch Matthew after all. That’ll fix everything.

Okay, it won’t fix anything, but it’ll make my Wonder Woman undies a moot point.

Not meeting his gaze, I launch into my story. My savings being used for my fucked up car. My potential roommate bailing on me at the eleventh hour after I’d signed a lease for the two of us. And my handsy boss who has block-listed me in the industry I’ve wanted to work in since I was a little girl.

“Wow.” He’s sipping on his third glass of wine by the time I’m finished talking.

“Yeah.”

“Wow.” His beautiful face crinkles with a frown as he stares at somewhere past my shoulder.

“Yeah. I told you. You don’t want me watching your kid.”

“So you need a job that pays good money, or you need a way out of your lease.”

My stomach free falls. “There’s no way out of the contract. I paid first and last month’s rent when I signed the lease. The rest of my savings went to fix the car. I’ve got one month of the apartment paid for, but my problem now is the other eleven months I signed for.”

“But you won’t need the apartment at all if you’re going to live here for six weeks. I could try to help you break the lease. I doubt I’d get your first and last months’ rent back for you, but you at least won’t be on the hook for the entire year. You could spend the next six weeks here, finding something smaller, more reasonable, that you don’t have to meet strangers from the internet to help you pay for.”

I mean, he’s kind of making sense. But my pride doesn’t want me to back down. I wanted that fancy apartment, I saved for the fancy apartment. I was responsible enough for the fancy apartment. I don’t want to lose it just because my car is a drama queen, and my old boss is a vindictive asshole.

“Take the six weeks. Work for me. Regroup. I’ll pay for your food while you’re here, and since you’re staying here you won’t need to pay for rent. You can take all the money you earn and put it into savings, and you can spend those six weeks trying to find something for you to do that doesn’t involve sitting for my kid.” He shrugs. “Sounds like a win-win to me.”

I can’t find the downside. Other than being in a confined space with Thor and not being able to strip him naked and ride him like a bucking bronco.

“You don’t work at the club every night. Why would I stay here when you’re going to be here anyway?”

“I work during the day too. Some days it’s just two hours, some days it’s four or five. But I think the more hands we have

around here the better. Like I said, I'll need help getting him to and from school, putting him to bed, meal times."

He studies my face for a long moment. "It's just six weeks, Adi. I don't expect you to be my live-in maid. I'm pretty good about keeping my shit clean and tidy. If it doesn't work, then you can find somewhere cheaper to live that won't make you look like you're going to puke every time the conversation comes up."

He's not wrong. I do feel nauseous every time I think about the fact I have to get so much money together.

"How would you break the contract?"

He taps the side of his nose in a move that draws my attention to his kissable lips. "I know people."

If he could get me out of the contract, and in a position to put my dream home on the backburner again until I can figure my shit out without me having to serve time in prison, I'm here for it.

The person who texted me earlier to meet up about moving in together has gotten a little weird.

And by weird I mean he sent me a dick pic, and I had to block him.

I'm backed into a corner. Maybe six weeks will be enough time for me to find something, and if not, it'll be a six week cushion where I'm not freaking the hell out about how I'm going to pay for an apartment I had no business signing.

I still can't think of a downside. I'll be able to tell my parents I got a job, I got out of my lease agreement, and I don't need anything from them. That in itself is almost a bigger win than not being on the hook for thousands of dollars.

And I'll have a roof over my head, a few bucks in my pocket, and food in my tummy.

His lopsided smile tells me he knows he has me. "Strictly professional."

I try to mask my disappointment, but I'm not sure I'm all that successful. I'd love to play with him again, but I get it. He

has a child now, someone who depends on him, and his entire home life has been turned on its head. He needs things to remain purely business, and maybe he wants that as well.

Either way, I need the job, the money, and the place to crash, so I extend my hand to him and nod. “Strictly professional.”

CHAPTER 10

Thor

ADDISON FINALLY SAID YES. I'M NOT ONE HUNDRED PERCENT sure what swung it for me, but I don't think offering her an extortionate amount of money was *the* thing that sealed the deal. And it sure as shit wasn't my Colgate smile.

It happened when she was applying for the part time position advertised in the window at Brew'd Awakening. I told her she didn't need an additional job, that I'd pay her more than what was fair for a short term position but she seemed determined. I guess when you're on the clock for a six-week position you want to start lining interviews up to pick up the torch.

That said, I also neglected to tell her that Mom won't be able to *walk* for four to six weeks. Depending on how her recovery goes, it could take *months* for her to be fully healed. Six weeks is not only a conservative estimate, it's hopeful. At best. Uncertainty, anxiety, fear, you name an emotion, it's mixing together in my body like some melting pot of feels.

It's hugely inconvenient that Mom got seriously injured right after Matty was dropped on my doorstep. Selfish, I know, but I was counting on her coming to save me like she always has. And now, well, I'm kinda winging it.

Despite seeming like she's okay, I'm still worried. She's not the spring chicken she thinks she still is.

Under normal circumstances I'd hop a flight to her, enforce her resting and getting her all bent out of shape by serving her dinner on the wrong plates, or making her tea

wrong. When I talked to her this morning she sounded tired, but surprisingly chipper for someone who just broke a major part of her body.

She sent a selfie at the hospital. Half a dozen of her Stich ‘n’ Bitch friends landed in on her with snacks and alcohol free wine to cheer her up post-op. Best case it’ll be six weeks, she’ll hop a plane and spend the whole flight asking the pilot “are we there yet?” as she impatiently taps her foot to get to see her new grandson.

Worst case, six weeks becomes longer, potentially much longer depending on Mom’s recovery. By the time the six week mark comes along, Addison will have settled into her new role and perhaps be more open to the idea of staying on with Matty.

Is it deceitful and underhanded? A little. Sure. Am I desperate? Absolutely.

Am I fit to be a father? Do I know how to love this kid who can’t really express love for me back? Am I mature enough for this?

No. No. No. No. No.

All I’m hearing is no, all I’m feeling is the band around my chest pressing harder, crushing my lungs and stealing the air from my body.

The idea of interviewing a list of strangers and trying to find someone who gels well with my new-to-me kid is overwhelming. I can’t imagine finding someone suitable within six weeks. Addison is here, she needs work, and I’ve got money to burn. It makes sense. At least it makes sense to me. Hopefully it’ll make sense to her too. In a few weeks.

I wipe down the bar with a wet dishrag. My boss, the owner of the club, and my best friend, Slade Taylor sits on a stool to my far left, tapping a pen on a pad watching me with interest.

“Wanna talk about it?” Slade and I grew up together. Despite graduating at the top of his class from law school, it’s always been his lifelong dream to own a chain of BDSM clubs

throughout the Midwest. Protocol has been open for a while now, long enough for him to think about opening a second location. He's been scouting locations in Cedar Rapids lately, in the hopes he's going to find somewhere appropriate that works for expansion.

“Talk about what?”

Two guys walk up to the bar and ask for alcohol free beer. There are plenty of kink clubs that serve alcohol across the country, some don't even have a one or two drink maximum, but Slade has always maintained an alcohol free environment. He wants nothing readily available that could hinder consent in any way.

As much as I'm a huge proponent of safe, sane, and consensual kink, Slade is even more so. He's aggressive in his pursuit of risk aware play. His dedication to making his club a safe space for open sexual expression is impressive.

And something many of his competitors—near and far—strive to emulate.

“The fact you've had someone else work your shift for the past two nights? The fact people 'round here are saying you've got a kid. The fact you haven't called me and talked to me about it. Anything, really. What's going on with you, Thoren?”

It's almost as effective when he uses it as when Mom uses it. This isn't the space for me to talk about my personal life, though. Protocol is my safe haven, my happy place, my home away from home. The idea of bringing personal drama into these walls makes my stomach hurt. And unfortunately, Matty is personal drama right now. Ugh. That's a shit way to put it.

“Not here.”

“You're not talking to me anywhere. So it's gotta be here where I can pin you to a conversation.” He tips his bottle at me. “You've been avoiding my calls.”

And his texts, and his voice mails. His next step is to turn up on my doorstep and demand answers. I should probably let him in, metaphorically, before he shows up at the house and scares the shit out of Matty.

“I don’t like to bring my personal stuff inside this building. You know that.”

He drops his pen, and I know I’m in trouble. “Don’t make me haul you out into the street and make you talk.” He checks his watch. “Actually, it’s still early. There are a few rooms downstairs that are open right now. I could tie you up and make you tell me.”

Chuckling, I give him a wink. “Stop threatening me with a good time.”

He rolls his eyes. But my dick stirs in my pants at the memory of a time when he did exactly that. As a dominant, I rarely trust partnering with another dom in a scene who has not at least had some experience in the role of being submissive.

Even if only in the form of allowing someone to top them from the bottom. Many experienced dominants have that in their pocket as a soft rule for partnerships. I wouldn’t trust a flogger who had not been flogged themselves. And while it doesn’t work for every role, it works for many. Especially when instruments are involved.

Like a couple other doms in the Minneapolis area, I trained under Slade. The idea that a dom needs to train under another dom before they are a dom is one that’s kind of become outdated, but in so far as Protocol is concerned, Slade tends to mentor damn near everyone who comes into the club. He never set himself up that way, it just kind of happened. He’s a good teacher, he has endless patience, and a way about him that makes people talk to him.

He even set up classes, and offers Protocol to host munches, sponsors and attends conferences, to learn and encourages patrons to attend. He’s also an advocate of paying skilled people to teach more complex things like rope and dangerous play. It’s why we have a class schedule in the club, so people can learn kink in a safe environment, and not end up submitting to a narcissist who thinks he’s the dog’s balls.

For a time, I even submitted to Slade. Or tried to. It often resulted in my attempts at topping from the bottom. It’s

becoming increasingly less popular to say that a dom needs to submit before they can truly dom but I wanted to.

I don't need to submit to know that I'm a Dominant. I don't need to try being a vegan before I can eat meat. I don't need to get hit with a flogger to know it hurts, and there are safe ways to learn how to do these things without trying them yourself. But I still didn't want to do things to someone when I hadn't had them done to me first.

But over time we learned each other well, and you'd be hard pressed to find another dom I trust in a scene more than Slade Taylor.

His club is open every night of the week. The weekends are always so busy I barely have time to think, but during the week, especially Mondays and Tuesdays, we're pretty quiet.

"You know it's not just an idle threat. I could make sure Phoenix forgot her watch. We could go for as long as it takes for you to spill your guts."

Phoenix is our resident timekeeper and badass. She makes sure people don't overstay their welcome in the play rooms. It's easy enough to get carried away when you're consumed by a scene. Phoenix's job is to make sure that those who want a turn, get a turn. She's like the club's mom.

Though she hates when we call her that.

I make my way over to him, so clients can't hear when I say the words out loud. "It's tempting. I could definitely do with a little mind clearing."

His brown eyes bore into me with intensity.

"A one night stand from twelve years ago turned up at my door and dropped a child on me that I never knew I had."

His face pales. "The rumors are true?"

Nodding, I suck in a deep breath. "I have a son. His name is Matthew, or Matty, and he's autistic. So we're going through a steep learning curve."

"And what the hell are you doing here? Go be with your kid."

Shaking my head, guilt snakes up my spine. I know I should. But Mom has told me for the past three days in a row that just because I'm filling my own cup as a person, doesn't make me a shit parent. I'm not sure I believe her. There's a knife in my chest that dug in pretty deeply when I left Matty with Addison tonight before coming to work.

Is this something I'm going to have to live with forever? Or does it ever go away? Rubbing at my chest, I try to swallow down the bitterness in the back of my throat.

"I didn't leave him by himself." I wave him off. "But it's a lot, all at once. And you know this place keeps me sane."

He nods, slowly taking a long pull of his beer. "You're the only person who loves this place more than I do. But I'm serious, man. If you need time away, your job will be here when you get back. You know you never need to worry about that."

"I don't need time away. I need to stay level, and keep my bucket filled, so I can be the best version of myself when I step out of this place and head home to my son."

Nodding again, I'm not sure he believes me, but that's his problem. There are plenty of working parents out there in the world. Sure, not all of them had an almost full-grown, autistic son dropped on their head out of the blue, but they work and parent at the same time just fine.

"Who's sitting for him? Mom?"

Wincing, I go back to cleaning the bar top. I haven't gotten around to telling him Mom broke her hip, and he's going to be even more pissed at that than me not telling him. He's like a second son to the woman.

"Thor...?"

I still don't answer him.

"What's wrong with Mom?" He smells blood. If I don't explain myself soon, it'll probably be mine.

I should have called in and canceled my shift again today. Never mind Matty not being ready to be left without me, I

wasn't ready to face the inquisition that waited for me behind Protocol's doors.

"She fell and broke her hip."

His eyes widen. He's probably contemplating hopping the bar and kicking my ass right now, but a steady stream of patrons have come into our space, and my attention is in demand.

"Does she need anything? Is she okay?"

"She's... Mom. Impatient to get back on her feet despite being heavily medicated. She's probably running wheelchair races through the hospital halls as we speak."

"I'll call her tomorrow. And have Jaz send her flowers."

Jasmine is Slade's assistant. She's basically the reason this place doesn't fall down around our ears. She's the grease that keeps the cogs turning, and the glue that holds everything together. She keeps the bar stocked, the rooms fully booked, and our schedule full of demonstrations and things to keep people interested in Protocol.

A redhead approaches the bar, her hips swaying and her lips curving into a smile.

"You're not off the hook, Thor. And I'm telling Mom you didn't share with me that she fell." He points at me with his pen before turning his attention back to his notebook.

He's always called Mom, Mom. Since we were little. Even though he has his own family, his own parents. It's never been weird. In fact, it's kind of nice feeling like I'm not an only child sometimes. Even if he grinds my gears on the regular.

Turning my attention back to the redhead, I tune out Slade as he pulls out his phone. "What can I get you?"

"A pitcher of mango margaritas please." She flashes me a winning smile. "And three glasses." She points over her shoulder to a table where two other women sit facing each other in deep conversation.

I don't recall seeing any of them here before. "You know it's alcohol free, right?"

She nods, glancing back over her shoulder again. “Is it that obvious that it’s our first time?”

Now she mentions it, nervous energy courses off her in waves, and she keeps spinning the ring on her thumb. “Our friends have been here before, they gave us the four-one-one before we came.”

She pulls out a stool, taking a seat while I set about making her virgin margaritas. “It’s so weird. I feel naked without my phone.”

That’s the most common feeling when newbies come in here. People seem to have the most epic of brain farts when they don’t have their phones. Having to actually interact and socialize causes them to glitch.

She leans forward. “To be honest, I’m not sure this is my kind of thing.” She looks from side to side like she’s expecting someone to jump out and handcuff her to something. “But I have to admit, I’m definitely curious.”

After *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and the rise of books and movies involving kink in pop culture, there has been a stark increase in the number of kink-curious people out there. At least that’s what Slade says. I think people have always been kink-curious, it’s just that now they’re *allowed* to be publically so. *Fifty Shades* gave people the balls to stand up and say, hey, I like that too.

“Are you... kinky?” Her face turns the color of beets before she flaps her hand in front of her face. “I take it back. I don’t want to know.” She shakes her head. “I swear I haven’t been drinking. I don’t know why I’d ask something so... personal.”

She’s adorable. And if I wasn’t stuck behind this bar, I’d consider taking her down to the dungeon and giving her vanilla self a quick, hot as fuck intro to kink. But I can’t.

Also, I’m not sure I want to. The more I stare at her pretty face framed by bone-straight red hair, the more I wonder how Addison is doing. She showed up at my house earlier wearing an oversized cable knit sweater that fell almost all the way to

her knees. Her hair was in a messy pile on top of her head, her face was stripped of all makeup, and she had an overnight bag slung over her shoulder.

Pretty sure she's never looked more beautiful.

She had oversized glasses balanced on her head, too. And I've spent the night thinking about her curled up in my loveseat, feet tucked up under her, reading a book, sipping on some hot tea, and being generally adorable.

But the more the woman in front of me leans over the bar, the more of her cleavage she's showing me. I've never been a one-woman guy, so I should be drawn to this beautiful blank canvas in front of me. Maybe part of me even wants to be drawn to her.

There's few things I love more than helping a strong, empowered, and consenting woman find their kinks. I enjoy being the one to help them explore their sexuality. Like a moth to a flame.

Thankfully there's a bar between us. I don't have the time, or the personal space right now for a hookup even if I no longer have the time or personal space at home for hookups either. And while Slade is a pretty laid back guy, he has rules about going downstairs to play while we're on shift.

I didn't think it would be an issue, generally speaking, but so far we've had two members of staff who indulged in extracurricular activities while they were supposed to be working, and not even on their breaks.

The redhead says thanks for the drinks and takes them back to the table. When there's a lull in traffic at the bar, Slade agrees to stand watch while I use the restroom.

As I exit the bathroom, she's there waiting for me. The redhead with the wrong shade of red hair and huge tits. Leaning against the wall, spine curved, chest raised, breasts on full display.

"You followed me to the bathroom?"

She shrugs, giving me a lazy smile. She's confident, which wasn't evident by her bumbling about kink at the bar, but she's

clearly a woman who knows what she wants. And right now, she wants me. Stepping toward her, I brace my forearm above her on the wall, caging her in. She looks up at me with wide eyes. If the light wasn't so dim I'd probably see her pulse fluttering in the base of her neck. I might even try to bite it.

“My friends dared me. It's my birthday, and they dared me to come and get a kiss from you.”

Skimming my knuckles across her cheek sends a shiver through her. “Happy birthday.” Her breathy sigh would normally send signals straight to my cock, but tonight... nothing.

Biting back a groan I try to send telepathic messages to my junk. I am not a one-woman man. Addison and I are not together. And there's a gorgeous woman in front of me wanting to stick her tongue in my mouth.

Still nothing.

Addison's halfway across town, completely ignorant of what's happening here at the bar, yet she's still managing to cock-block me.

“Are you going to kiss me?” The redhead drags her tongue over her full bottom lip, and fuck if I'm not just a little tempted to kiss her. “For... my birthday...”

Glancing down the corridor leading to the bar, I make sure Slade isn't watching. I mean, there are cameras in the hallways, so he could find out if he really wanted to.

What harm would a kiss do? Especially if it's for the woman's birthday. Maybe she's an even better kisser than Adi is, and my dick will remember that it's supposed to be playing the field.

This chick clearly wants it. And who am I to turn down a beautiful woman when she wants to press her half-naked body against mine?

Leaning over her, my breath skates across her skin, and she sighs again. So responsive. I can just imagine her being under my fingertips in one of the rooms downstairs and all the noises I could drag from her eager body if given half the chance.

“Thor.” Paige’s voice echoes around the hall, and at the same time, my mysterious lady friend’s head snaps up, colliding with my face.

“Fuck.” I cover my face with my palm. If I’m not bleeding, it’s definitely going to leave a mark.

The woman with the hardest skull in the whole world squeaks and flees. Like literally runs away. So much for her birthday kiss.

Did I even want to kiss her? My still-flaccid dick insists I didn’t. I cannot be yearning after the woman I just hired to take care of my son.

“You’re not usually here during the week.” Is that the best I can come up with?

“And you’re not usually hiding in the shadows outside the bathrooms with patrons. Want to talk about it?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Paige has been coming to the club for a long time. I’m pretty sure in a previous lifetime, she was Slade’s girl, but I’ll be damned if he’ll tell me what the hell he did to make her so fucking mad at him all the time.

But she’s also Addison’s friend. And while she’s not staring me down with judgment, part of me wonders if she’s going to text Addison from the restroom and tell her she caught me in the corridor with someone else.

What does it even matter?

There’s nothing between us. We’re employer, employee. We had one delicious night together. Okay, fine. And the next morning. And sure, I’d have loved to repeat it if things hadn’t shaken out the way they did. But they did. They shook out, and now we’re nothing but... friends? Colleagues? People who fucked and got cock-blocked by an eleven year old?

I’m a free agent. A grown-ass man. I can do whatever, to whomever I want.

So why is heat crawling up my neck making my shirt tight against my skin? Why is my stomach heavy? And why have I

been thinking that the stranger at the bar has entirely the wrong shade of red hair, and the wrong shaped lips all night?

Ugh. I don't remember the last time I had a crush. But I'm pretty sure I have one on Addison... I don't even know her last name. She's just Addison. And right now she's in my home, putting my kid to bed, and making herself comfy with the pint of ice cream I made sure was in the freezer before she arrived earlier.

I don't have time for crushes.

Not least of all on my new nanny. Even if she is temporary.

Maybe when Mom gets better from her fall and makes the trip to Minnesota, I can talk to Addison about having another night of spanking. She responded so beautifully under my hands that I'm itching to do it all over again.

But for now, she's out of my reach. She has to be. I can't risk dragging her down to my dungeon, stripping her naked, and having Matty waking up and freaking out.

It would be irresponsible at best, neglectful at worst. And I'm not going to risk anything with Matty, not now, not ever. Unlike my own father, my kid comes first. Matty comes first. Always.

And my dick will just have to accept that.

"Thor?" Paige's frowning face reminds me I'm still in the hall outside the bathrooms stuck in my own head.

"I'm fine." I wave her off and make my way back to the bar, ignoring the probing stare from my boss as I take an order from two guys who just walked in. The redhead and her friends are gone. I'd never thought Paige was all that intimidating, but either she scared the shit out of the woman, the stranger reevaluated her decision to kiss the random bartender in the bathroom corridor, or they went downstairs.

Either way, something unknots inside my chest at the fact I wasn't a stupid man-child who kissed the randomer at work.

The bar phone rings behind Slade, and when I reach to answer it, he slaps away my hand. "Protocol, Slade speaking."

He pauses for a moment, then another, his face creases with frown lines. “Take a breath. I can’t understand you.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind I know this call is for me. Any attempt at brushing it off due to misplaced paranoia is crushed when Slade hands me the phone.

“Addison?”

“Thor.” She’s crying, and her voice is shaking. “You need to come home. He’s bleeding. I—”

I don’t let her finish. I’m already grabbing my keys and hopping the bar.

CHAPTER 11

Addison

I'VE DAMN NEAR PULLED MY HAIR OUT AT THE ROOT WHILE pacing back and forth waiting for Thor to get home. Matthew is curled up in the closet of the main bedroom, he's screaming so loudly you might think I was harming him. If the neighbors don't call the cops it'll be a miracle.

Thor bursts into the house, the door slamming off the wall as he swings it open. Is it still on its hinges?

“We're up here.”

He's already sprinting up the stairs, steps thundering even over the cries of Matthew. “Where is he? What happened?”

Not letting me answer either question, he pushes past me, following the wails of his son.

“It's okay, buddy. Dad's here. I've got you.” Thor looks up at me, tension tight around his eyes. “What went wrong?” His voice is laced with the same kind of disappointment my parents have when they address me.

His questions are relatively harmless, expected even, but all I hear when he opens his mouth is, “Addison you're a failing failure who fails.”

Matthew screams louder, and Thor waves his hand at me. “You should probably leave so he can calm down.” He crawls into the closet and lies beside Matthew, dismissing me. He's talking to him in soothing hushed tones, wrapping his arms around him, and stroking his hair.

I don't know what to do. I want to help, but I don't want to make Thor any madder at me. Of course he's mad at me, he left his child in my care, and he's fucking bleeding.

Coming here, moving in like this, even just for six weeks was a mistake. A giant fucking mistake.

Thor's lawyer friend, Slade—the same guy who owns the Protocol club—was able to get me out of my rental agreement without it costing me a penny. Okay, no more than my first and last month's rent that I already paid. I have no idea how he did it, but I don't need to find a roommate off the internet who sends me pictures of his purple, veiny cock. I don't need to sell organs on the black market to afford the monthly rent. And I don't need to leave the country and change my name because I stupidly signed a contract without confirming the person I was moving in with was still moving in with me.

I should be happy. Things went better than I thought they would. I'm living rent free in Thor's beautiful house for six weeks, eating all his ice cream, using all his hot water, and hanging out with a pretty cool kid who knows more about hockey than I'll ever know about anything. Ever.

But right now, standing listening to Matthew crying, knowing how angry with me Thor is... I should have taken my chances with collections. This heavy feeling in my gut is awful.

As I head downstairs, my mind goes into overdrive. Should I leave? Like should I grab my overnight bag and haul ass and turn up on one of my friends doorsteps leave? Or should I go hide in my room? Or should I wait here in the living room for Thor to come downstairs and yell at me?

"You should leave," could mean anything. He wasn't particularly specific. Is he done, done? Is this first strike of three done?

Ugh. I feel sick. Matthew looked so scared when he saw the blood. The more I keep trying to tell myself it could have happened to anyone, neurotypical kids too, the less I believe it.

This is all on me.

I'm so out of my depth right now. I'm regretting ever agreeing to the twinkly eyes and easy smile of the beautiful man who asked me to take care of his terrified kid. I knew better. I'm not cut out for childcare. It was a dumbass decision that I now regret immensely.

I was so blinded by his wallet, and his fucking tongue that I let my sense of reason take a vacation.

I should have sold a kidney, or started an Only Fans, sold lemonade on the street at a stop sign... Something. *Anything* that wasn't move in with a near stranger and his brand spanking new eleven year old neurodivergent child.

What the hell was I thinking?

Better question, what can I do?

I pick the skin around my thumbnail as I pace, struggling to find an answer that I want to entertain. Sarah will know what to do. But I'd rather shave off my eyebrows and draw them back on with a hot pink sharpie than call my sister.

She'll have some magic solution for getting kids to let you put a Band-Aid on. She's bound to have faced this situation with my niece and nephew at some point. But then I'd have to tell her what I've done. She's going to lecture me. We both know I have no business being responsible for anyone, not even myself. And especially not a child.

With shaking hands I pull up her number on my screen, swallow down the bile threatening the back of my throat, and hit the call button, then the speakerphone button.

I start filling the sink with water listening to the ringing. The phone rings three times before she answers. "What did you do?"

I wish people would stop asking me that. I wish they'd stop assuming the worst in me, and for once just say, "Hey, Adi, how are you?" Except in this instance, she's not wrong to ask what I've done.

"Hey, Sarah. How's things?"

“Fine. We’re all fine. It’s late, and I’m about to go to bed, so can we cut to the “what you need” part of the call, please?”

In some moments I hate my family. And I often wondered throughout the years whether I was adopted or not. I’m so unlike the rest of my family that it feels as though I was dropped in with them, maybe even by aliens.

Sighing, I bite my tongue. Literally. It’s the only thing that stops the retorts from spilling out of my lips when it comes to my older sisters. “I need some advice.”

She snorts, as though she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. “Okay. I’ll bite. Advice on what?”

Sometimes she can be a real bitch. This was a bad idea. I don’t want to ask her for advice. My sisters never make it easy for me. They’re far too busy being perfect in their perfect lives with their perfect jobs and husbands and kids that they don’t have time for the dysfunctional reject little sister.

“I have a friend who just got placed with an eleven year old autistic child. He’s struggling.” It’s much easier to ask for help when it’s for someone who isn’t me. Maybe she’ll even buy it.

She sighs. “What have you gotten yourself involved in this time, Adi?”

“Nothing. I’m just trying to help a friend.” It’s half true. I am trying to help a friend, and a child, and myself.

“So you randomly have a male friend who got landed with an eleven year old neurodivergent child, and you’re just randomly asking me for advice?”

I stay quiet, scrubbing a stubborn ketchup stain off a plate in the sudsy water.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing, I—”

“Addison.” Her clipped tone tells me she’s had enough, and I’m on her last nerve. Never takes much. “Either give me the whole story, or I’m hanging up. I have no interest in helping your *boyfriend*. Whoever he is.”

“What? No. That’s not what this is, Sarah. Not at all. He’s...” I groan. “He’s my employer.”

“Your... employer? He works in the fashion industry?”

“No. He...”

He said he had a day job but I have no clue what Thor does. And if I tell her he’s a bartender... she’s going to look down her nose at him, I just know it. Fuck it. I steel my spine. There’s nothing to be ashamed about when it comes to where Thor works. No matter how my prissy sister may react. “He works in a BDSM bar.”

There’s a long pause on the line. “He works in a sex club? He’s single?”

“Yeah.” I see where this is going, but there’s nothing I can do to derail the train. At least she didn’t say something shitty about kink, or the fact he’s “just” a barman. My sisters are both doctors, they both married doctors, and I’m sure all their kids will grow up to be doctors.

As well as being a Grade-A bitch sometimes, Sarah is also an elitist. I’d make excuses for her, or say she doesn’t mean to be. But the truth is, she probably does. She’s just a shitty person. And once again I wonder why the hell I even called her.

As a woman in my thirties, I sometimes wonder why I still keep in touch with them at all. But it’s not completely terrible all the time. Holidays are my favorite. And at the end of the day, they’re family, it’s what you do... right?

I think my sisters get so mad because everyone knows I’m Daddy’s favorite. He’s soft on me. Not that he’d ever stand up to Mom, but it’s why Mom always “deals with me” and my mess ups. Daddy would just fix everything and pretend like nothing ever happened. But my sister both have Mom on their side, and it’s never felt like I’ve had her on my side at all.

Right now, however, I’m enduring this painful conversation with my sister for Matthew. That’s all that matters.

It’s for Matthew. It’s for Matthew. It’s for Matthew.

“So who watches the kid while he’s at work at night?”

Here it comes.

It’s for Matthew.

My silence seems to be all the answer she needs for a hot minute. And I’m almost sure she’s not going to make me say it out loud.

“Addison?” That sharp edge to her voice is back, and suddenly I’m the child being scolded by a grown-up for something I never even did. “Who is watching the recently displaced autistic child while the barman is at work?”

“Me.” My voice is barely a whisper, but she’s most definitely heard me, because her laughter echoes through the speakers.

It’s for Matthew.

“Someone left you with their child? Like... by choice? Did you tell them you almost drowned the neighbor kid when he was a toddler?” The vitriol in her voice slides under my skin like a thousand needles as tears fill my eyes.

“It was an accident.”

“An accident that wouldn’t have happened if anyone but you had been watching him, Adi.”

No amount of channeling my therapist telling me that her words are untrue is helping to drown out their noise. Gripping the edge of the countertop, I sag under the weight of her accusation.

People make mistakes all the time.

People make mistakes all the fucking time.

And yes, I made another one upstairs when I went into the other room to get Matthew’s pjs out of the drawer, but it really *was* an accident. He seemed okay. Until he wasn’t.

My brain is spiraling into a dark space. Calling Sarah for help was a bad idea. I should know by now that she’s only ever made me feel worse about myself. This time was destined to be no different. I need to talk to my therapist about drawing

some boundaries with my family, especially my mean-girl sister. It shouldn't be this painful to talk to family.

Tears stream down my cheeks, probably dragging my mascara along with them. I couldn't find the good mascara in the boxes marked "personal care" before I left Kenzie and Austin's garage to make my way across town to Thor's house. I left almost everything I own at their house, furniture included. You'd think there wouldn't be much by way of bathroom stuff, but apparently the majority of my crap is labeled bathroom. Turns out I have a lot of hair shit.

"Sarah, this isn't about me. It's about Matthew. He hit his head and—"

"Oh, Adi, no. How long have you worked with this child?"

"Today is my first day." Shame crawls over my entire body, eating away at my skin like poison.

"And he hit his head? Where were you?"

"Getting his pjs from his bedroom."

"What did he hit his head on?"

"The bathroom cabinet over the sink."

"Is it bad?"

I don't know, he wouldn't let me see it. He covered his face as blood trickled through his fingers and screamed murder. So yeah, I'm going to guess it's bad, but I'm not telling her that. Plus, Google said that head wounds bleed a lot and are often far more dramatic than they seem at first.

"Adi, why the hell would you get yourself into this situation? I'm guessing you were fired, but come on. You know you're not cut out to be around kids. It never ends well."

She's not wrong. My stomach is tangled in so many knots it feels like I might puke over the freshly washed dishes drying on the drying rack.

"I just wanted some advice Sarah. On how best to help Matthew. This isn't about me, it's about him."

"Oh, it's most definitely about you, Addis—"

Her voice cuts off mid-sentence. Thor's hand is on my phone, hanging up the call. "Fuck that noise."

Spinning to face him, I almost lose my breath. He's shirtless.

"Sorry." He walks around me to the laundry room, where he emerges with a fresh shirt in his hands. "Got blood on the other one."

He pulls the shirt over his head. "But again, I say: fuck that noise."

He reaches around me, snagging a Kleenex from the windowsill right over the sink. Dabbing the tissue on my cheeks, he wipes my tears. "It's very tempting to leave you like this. You're so beautiful with tear streaked cheeks. But it's giving me inappropriate thoughts right now."

I can't tell if he's joking, and truly, I'm not feeling in any way funny, but I offer him a small smile.

"Your sister's a dick."

Did he just say that?

"I know I don't know her or anything. But I heard enough of that conversation to know that your sister is a dick. You shouldn't let her in your space, Adi. She doesn't deserve to be part of your world."

"Thor—"

He covers my lips with his finger. "Are you about to make excuses for her? Or apologize for her? Or say something that belittles yourself and emphasizes her point?"

I was absolutely going to do all of those things.

"I don't want to hear it. Accidents happen. Mom says kids are the most unpredictable and fearless creatures in the whole world. There's no telling what they're going to get into next."

Wow. He's taking this "I broke your son," thing way better than I expected him to given the ferocity with which he stormed up the stairs.

This is wholly unexpected. Where's all the yelling and screaming? Where's the "you should have known better," speech?

"It's just a bump, Addison. Hell, we even have accidents as grown-ups. I have a bruise on my calf... no idea where it came from." He's trying to make light of the situation. But a bruise is very different from actual blood on his child's actual face.

"I don't think this is going to work, Thor." Even though he's being patient, and understanding, and all the other nice things I can't think of right now because I'm staring into his captivating eyes, Sarah is right. "My sister is right. The neighbor's child almost drowned under my care when he was little. I know I was younger too, but I can't be trusted to take care of someone. Least of all, another child."

He shakes his head, and little strands of hair fall from his messy bun. "I'm sorry I reacted the way I did. I'm sorry I freaked out. I was running on fear and adrenaline. I heard "blood," and I lost it. But it's just a bump. I was able to put a Band-Aid on it, and he's already sitting upstairs in his room. You want to come up and say goodnight?"

No. "Sure."

I poke my head into Matthew's open door. Thor's hand rubs circles on my lower back as he stays out of sight. Matthew is reading a book I can't see the cover of. "Hi, Addison." He doesn't look up. "Did you know the Wild's official mascot is named Nordy?"

I love that he's constantly educating me. His little off-the-cuff hockey facts are so sweet. "I didn't. I'll have to Google him. How are you doing, Matthew? How's your head?"

"It's okay. Dad put a BandAid on it."

My heart warms at his use of "Dad." Matthew points to his head. "It'll be okay. It doesn't hurt anymore unless I poke it."

It's like he added the last part to make me feel better. Even if he didn't, the reassurance settles something deep in my chest. I turn off the light in Matthew's room, and close the

door, following Thor back down to the kitchen in silence after wishing Matthew sweet dreams.

It seems too easy, it *feels* too easy, but there's something to be said for looking a gift horse in the mouth. I'll take whatever wins I can get, easy or not. I let myself relax just a little.

Matthew doesn't need stitches. Thor isn't firing me. And he reinforced my thoughts that my sister is a toxic influence in my life, and I need to deal with that... at some point. It's not a now thing, however, because right now I'm face to face with Thor in the kitchen, fighting the urge to throw myself into his arms.

"See? I told you he's already over it." The way he strokes my cheek with such tenderness sets off alarm bells in... well, everywhere. My clit, my nipples, my brain, my heart. Sirens ring out throughout my body. He's too close.

This is such a bad idea.

He needs to not touch me.

He needs to step back, create space so I can breathe again, and reinforce the boss and employee boundaries, because right now? In this moment? My smarting feelings about the whole goddamn evening and my butt-hurt brain after being yelled at by my sister could most definitely do with a good spanking, and we both know that's a bad idea.

A very, very bad idea.

CHAPTER 12

Thor

THIS IS A TERRIBLE PLAN.

Addison is caged against the kitchen counter. Her eyes are still red-rimmed and puffy from crying, cheeks blotchy, curls falling loosely around her face, and all I want to do is kiss her. Actually, that's not all I want to do. I want her on her knees, my rock-hard dick between her pretty pink lips, thrusting against the back of her throat and making that mascara run down her face for better reasons than her sister is a raging bitch.

Why does she put up with that bullshit?

"Thor..." I don't know if my name is a plea to kiss her, or to leave her alone, but the flush creeping up her neck and settling into her cheeks makes my decision so much easier. Especially when her gaze flickers to my lips. I want to make her feel good. I want to kiss her until she's not sad anymore, until she feels like the strong, adept woman she is.

Her breathing picks up as I lean into her, aching, desperate to take care of her. That asshole of a sister got in her head. She's doubting herself, her capabilities... I haven't known her for long, and I don't know her all that well, but I know she is capable of doing anything she puts her mind to.

Hell, from the looks of the uncertainty written all over her face, she's questioning everything, ever.

I want to kiss her until my strong, empowered, fearless seductress comes back to me. Was I pissed that Matty hurt himself on her watch? Sure I was. But I called Mom from the

floor of the closet, and she talked me down from a really high ledge. She told me that kids hurt themselves, all the goddamn time. She said she spent most of my freakin' childhood in a blind panic about what injuries I'd come home with.

She said I made her old before her time. And that if we crucified every parent whose kids had a booboo, there'd be a lot more orphaned kids out there.

She said maybe it was Addison's fault, maybe it wasn't, but either way, regardless of what happened, she'd put money on Addison feeling terrible. In my heart of hearts, I know Addison would never do anything to hurt Matty. It might only be day one, but I've seen how good she is with him, how patient she is when he's explaining all of the positions on a hockey team, and every single Snow Pirate that's ever laced up and skated for the University of Minnesota hockey team.

In all my years on earth, Mom has never been wrong. Okay, fine, she's been wrong plenty of times but she's the best parent I know. And hearing her talk about all the shit I got up to when I was eleven years old made me feel much better about the fact that Matty hit his head on the corner of the cabinet.

Plus, if I had a dollar for every time I cracked my head on that damn cupboard... I'd be rich as fuck.

Gliding my fingers over her cheek and down her neck, temptation has my senses on overdrive.

"I work for you, Thor."

It doesn't matter. It has never mattered. You're not supposed to mix business with pleasure, they say it's a recipe for a disaster. And "they" whomever they are, may not be in this room right now, yelling at me that it's a bad idea. But it wouldn't matter even if they were.

Our trajectories were predetermined. From the moment I met Addison, we were on a crash course. And now our orbits have collided, we just have to ride it out and see where it goes.

It's all new and weird as fuck. Relationships aren't my jam. And maybe I just need to play with her a few more times

and have her see out her role with Matty and that'll get her out of my system. But something tugging inside my chest suggests that might not be all this is.

She's special. And she has no idea just how special she is. It doesn't help that her asshole family puts her down and talks to her like she's a child. Is her other sister like that?

The more I stare into her puffy green eyes the more my blood boils until something snaps. Wrapping her hair around my fist, I give into the primal urge inside my chest to kiss her. Yanking her head back, I capture her pouty bottom lip between mine, and suck it between my teeth.

Her mewls and moans, the curve of her body as she opens herself up to me, the way her breathing changes at just a bitten lip is inebriating. When I seize her mouth, I devour it, kissing her like it might convince her that she's not the useless screw up her sister claims she is.

It's hot, it's consuming, and it's unstoppable. Rational thought has left the building, taking with it all notions that this is a bad idea, that this might complicate things with my childcare provider. In this moment, all I want is for this woman to feel good, and I'll set myself on fire to make it happen if that's what it takes.

"Are you on birth control?" My question comes out broken between kisses.

She pulls back, a stitch pinching her forehead between her eyebrows. "Yes, but..." She doesn't need to finish her sentence. My reputation of being a man-whore is fairly earned. But as such, I get tested regularly and always suit up Little Thor when he rides into battle.

I can't bring myself to leave Addison right now. I can't take the risk that by the time I go upstairs to get a condom she'll have changed her mind and gone back into herself. Or even worse, she'll have left the house entirely.

"I'm clean. I got tested a couple of weeks ago. I use protection."

She points at me. "Except this time."

I drop kisses up her neck, squeeze her nipple through her shirt. “I can go upstairs and get a condom if you want.”

She shakes her head, panting as she claws at my shirt. “No, just... Thor just fuck me.”

I love it when women use their dirty words and tell me exactly what they want me to do to them, almost as much as I love doing it to them. “Yes, ma’am.”

Spinning her to face the kitchen window, I kick her ankles apart. “Hold the counter.”

“Th-Thor... your neighbors.”

“What about them?”

“Their kitchen faces this one. Wh-what if someone sees?”

Sinking my teeth into the malleable skin where her neck meets her shoulder, she groans as she flings her head backward. “Do you really care?”

She doesn’t answer, as though weighing the options. “Do you?”

I chuckle. “Do I care that my neighbors might see me fucking a stunning woman?” I shake my head, adding another bite to the line of her shoulder as I shuck her yoga pants down over her hips. “I hope they do. I hope they see me fucking you and are jealous as fuck. I hope Harold—the husband—sees me balls deep inside you, can’t contain himself, and goes and dicks his wife Julie.”

She moans as she pulls one leg out of her pants. My dick is painfully hard, shamefully hard. It’s definitely standing at attention for Addison, and I push any rational thought of what that might mean for us right out of my brain.

“In fact, I hope he sees me fucking you mindless and then goes and gets her so she can watch us too.” Ripping her sweater over her head, I palm her tits through her pretty pink lace bra.

I graze my other hand along the inside of Addison’s thigh, enjoying the little pants of breath that make her chest bob up and down while moving my fingers up toward her pussy. She’s

soaking, hot, and ready for me. “Do you like that idea, Addison? Do you like that Harold and Julie might see me fucking you?” I pull down one of the cups of her bra, freeing her perfectly plump breast so I can tug on her hard nipple. “That they may fuck while they’re watching us?”

She doesn’t answer, nor does she look away from Harold and Julie’s window.

“Do you want me to stop?”

She shakes her head, rolling her hips as my fingers skim her clit.

“Do you want to come for me, Addison?”

She nods.

It’s tricky to maneuver my hard dick out of my pants and inside her without losing rhythm on her clit, but with a concerted effort, I’m quickly buried in her as she grips the countertop.

“You’ve got to stay quiet kitten, okay?”

She mewls, it’s almost a purr that vibrates all the way to my cock as it pistons inside her, harder and harder. As soon as she bursts apart on my dick, I know I’m on borrowed time. Her muscles have me clenched in a vise so tight I’d be surprised her pussy doesn’t keep it when I try to pull out.

Grabbing both her hips, I jut into her, harder and harder with each thrust, clinging to sanity for just a minute longer. Her little gasps and whimpers, pleas for me not to stop make it hard not to shoot my load. At the last minute, a moment of panic strikes. Even though she says she’s on birth control, I’ve just had one kid I didn’t know dropped into my life. I can’t afford another.

Pulling out, I spray her perfect ass with jets of warm, creamy cum, murmuring to her about how perfect and beautiful her ass looks with my release splattered all over it. After a heavy moment of silence, Addison’s head snaps up the same moment mine does. There’s movement in the upstairs window of Harold and Julie’s house, the blinds fall back into place as a figure disappears.

Someone in the neighbor's house got quite the show. I hope Harold and Julie are about to have the best sex of their fucking lives.

CHAPTER 13

Addison

IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS SINCE THOR FUCKED ME IN THE kitchen. Two weeks of subtle touches, lingering gazes, and bubbling sexual frustration.

We haven't had a repeat of the kitchen-fucking incident, or fucking anywhere for that matter, but we both want it. It feels like it's simply a matter of time before my clothes fall off, and his dick makes its way inside me again. I wouldn't complain. In fact, it would be like stepping outside after a thunderstorm.

I think we're both trying to stay on the "right" side of the employer-employee line but the more we try, the harder it actually gets. And I don't just mean his man-wand.

Having him bareback inside me that night felt different, like it may have meant something more than just two emotional people getting naked together and finding comfort in each other's bodies. I'm so damn curious to see if we were to get naked again, if that feeling is still there, or if it was fleeting.

And until this morning, other than the drama from that first night where Matthew bumped his head in the bathroom, things have been... well, I'd love to say calm, or interesting, or even educational. But the thing I'm quickly learning about autism, is that no two days are the same. And any progress you make one day, might quickly leave the next.

Every outing is meticulously prepared for. I spend hours covering all my bases only for something to still blindside me.

At the last minute, something well-planned could, and probably will, go horribly wrong.

Even the simplest things are no longer simple.

Food is a constant battle. The same dish made the same way by both Thor and I can result in differing outcomes. And it's not even consistent. Sometimes Thor can make it 'right' and sometimes I can. Sometimes neither of us can, and we are back to square one trying to get nutrition into Matthew as he's hyper-tuned into details: taste, smell, color, even environment.

We invite him to try everything we make and eat ourselves. He always says no.

Every day Matthew gets the same plate, the same silverware, we'll do everything "by the book," and Matthew will still say it tastes, smells, or looks wrong.

I'm learning the art of compassionate patience and routine pattern familiarity, but damn, I can't say it isn't a struggle some days.

The more time I spend with him, the more comfortable he seems to get. I guess. But maybe that's just hopeful thinking. I spend seventy three to eighty two percent of my time trying to convince the child to put clothes on. He hates how they feel against his skin, and unless I can convince him of the logical reason as to why he needs to wear them, he opts to not. Always.

Adam and Eve never wore clothes, so why should he?

Which wouldn't be so tricky if he wasn't coming into puberty and developing into a man. I've become a pro at averting my eyes.

My day to day life has become about taking the logic and reason aside and analyzing what Matthew needs. It's not about what I, or even Thor *thinks* he needs. It's about what Matthew *actually* needs.

It's hard as an empathetic human being not to try to *fix* a child you know is struggling sometimes. It's even harder to have learned that I've been wrong this whole time. Matthew doesn't need to be fixed. He doesn't need to be wrangled into

my, or societies ideals of what normal is. He's perfect just how he is. And the more time I spend with him the more I utterly adore him.

When we're out and about, other parents of autistic kids see similar behaviors and relate. I do it too. They are far more likely to approach me and start a conversation than neurotypical parents. I'm making fast friends with a couple of the neurodivergent parents at the park, and the staff at our favorite autism friendly eateries know us both by name.

I haven't earned full acceptance by these parents yet. But it's been super nice for some of them to take the time to talk to me. I guess most of them are cautious of disrupting their own routines, too.

Speaking to the people I've met sets my mind at ease about some of the things I've been feeling, internalizing so I don't let the word vomit get the best of me and spew my thoughts at Thor.

While I haven't had anyone say anything to me about Matthew—God help it if they ever do—Some of the parents at the park have had issues. They've had people say their kids are spoiled little shits, that it looks like their kid has asked for something and never gets told no.

Many relate to my struggle with the unpredictability, trying the same thing every day and getting different results.

These children are defined by their diagnosis, instead of who they are as people. And I'm ashamed to admit that until my niece was born, and to some extent even until I met Matthew and started to get to know him, in many ways, I was one of the people who defined them.

Some days, Matthew is completely non-verbal. Even at eleven years old he'll sit in silence for the full day, and no amount of coaxing or subject shifting will draw him out of himself. Other days, he has no filter, and the world requires him to have a filter.

The more time I spend with him the more I'm learning he can't cope with emotions. It's most definitely not that he

doesn't have them. It's like his body and mind can't decipher what they are or what to do with them.

Nothing is hypothetical in Matthew's world.

Nothing is easy.

Everything needs to be the same. The exact same.

I'm exhausted. I'm mentally and physically worn out, and my nerves feel like they're constantly raw and fraying.

This morning was the worst morning since I came to work for Thor. Matthew became upset and lay on the tiled floor banging his head off of it. When I tried to intervene, he hit me instead.

I'm pretty sure I have a shiner, and I have some scrapes and bruises from him clawing at my arms while I tried to keep him safe, but mostly I have a heavy and disappointed heart. In moments like this, I feel like I'm failing him.

After snuggles and apologies, we had some down time. He's been in bed for about an hour, and as much as I have a laundry list of things I need to accomplish—including my never ending pile of laundry because I've taken to just wearing everything I own instead of doing laundry periodically—I'm just sitting on the floor outside his room, head tipped back against the door, and taking a few deep breaths.

Tears race down my face. My muscles are heavy, tight, and my heart hasn't slowed to a regular rhythm.

I need to wash his bedding, both from his bedroom, and from the car. When I pick him up from school, he has a cocoon of bedding in the back seat to help him decompress from his day. Sleeping bags and quilts. My whole life has become sleeping bags and quilts.

I need to make something with the strawberries and raspberries in the fridge. Maybe I'll just dump them into liquor or something. I've come to learn over the past couple of weeks that fruit does not work for Thor's autistic little champion.

While one strawberry might smell like another strawberry, they don't look the same, and they certainly don't taste the

same. I've never been more aware of the variety of taste and textures between pieces of fruit in a bunch or tub before.

I need to pick up more shower gel and hand soap and find somewhere to donate all of Matthew's cast-offs. It has taken fourteen different bottles of both to find one that he is okay using. Again, I had never before paid attention to the texture of toiletries. Some are oilier, slipper, verses gloopier and thicker.

I need to gas up my car from driving around in the middle of the night three of the last five nights that I've been working. Sometimes he just won't sleep. He'll be wide awake and restless, others he'll ask if we can go out in the car. If it keeps him calm, I don't mind.

I also need to read every book in the world ever written. Matthew has an incessant need for knowledge. It's like he needs to know how to navigate out of every possible situation he could face so he can cope with it. And while I'm a pretty smart woman, my knowledge is limited in many areas.

"Hey," Thor's soft voice rumbles around the space. The lighting is low, but his head peeks around the top of the staircase, his intense eyes homing in on me in the dimness.

"Hey." Sniffing, I wipe my face. There's no use trying to hide it. I don't know how long he's been there, listening to me breakdown while I run over my to-do list in my mind, but I at least know he's heard my snotty hot mess self sobbing. What started as a couple stray tears trickling down my face, turned into gut-wrenching, body shaking sobs, on the floor outside his son's bedroom.

"Need a hug?" He doesn't stand up, in fact, he just sits on the top step of the stairs, and beckons to me.

I don't stand up either. I crawl toward him, nodding as I approach. I'm bone-tired, my soul aches for the little boy who was abandoned by his mother, and the mother who reached the end of her rope enough to leave her little boy. It's so sad and heart-aching that I almost can't breathe around the tightening in my chest.

He scowls at my face before tipping my head back, examining me under the soft light. “What happened?”

“It was an accident.”

“I know.” He knows as well as I do that Matthew’s outbursts don’t hold malice. “But I’d like to know what happened.” He dots a kiss on the still-throbbing bruise on my face, and I crumple against his chest.

Between cries and sniffles I tell him about my day. I haven’t seen much of him this week. When he’s working during the day, I’m doing things like groceries and the occasional household chore—by choice, not because Thor makes me. But because I like to be useful and stay busy—and seeing my friends. And when he’s working in the evenings, I’m driving Matthew around the neighborhood, or trying to fold him into bed, just so.

“What can I do for you, Adi? What do you need?”

I know before I ask that he’s going to say no, but I want him to acquiesce so badly it aches in my core. “Make me feel good.”

Shaking his head, his features soften. “That’s a hard request, you know.”

Sighing, I nod. “I know.”

“I can’t make the pain go away. I could distract you for a minute. Maybe an hour or two, or more. But your mind isn’t going to let that last. It’s going to come back.” It’s his turn to sigh. “My instinct is to give you what you’ve asked for, but my training tells me that it might not be the best idea. Can I trust you to be honest with me about whether or not you’re up to what you’re asking me for?”

My stomach lets out a ferocious grumble, and I don’t even have the energy to be embarrassed in front of this man. I don’t think I’ve eaten today. His face flinches as his gaze flickers to my stomach. And for a split second, I’m almost sure he’s going to haul my ass downstairs and feed me spoonfuls of Nutella and peanut butter—which I’m not averse to.

But I really want something else from him, something deeper, something physical, something *good*.

Spreading my legs as far apart as the closed space on the top stair allows, he doesn't wait for me to move his hand where I ache for it to be. His fingers skim the inside skin of my thigh, quickly reaching the hem of my denim shorts.

When they slide under the fabric and sweep back and forward, I tip my head back on a sigh. "Please, Thor. I'm okay. I just want to feel good."

He drags his tongue along the length of my exposed neck, from the hollow of my throat all the way up to my jaw before nipping at the line of my chin with his teeth. This man is a maestro, and my body reacts to him from the moment he's in my space.

My nipples pebble under my tank top, I'm not wearing a bra because we had an incident with orange juice that resulted in a pool of sticky syrupy liquid in my bra and it's in the laundry pile. I also haven't been able to find the energy to pull another one out of my cases.

I don't know why I haven't unpacked, but living out of two suitcases for the past two weeks has been less than ideal. It's not like Thor's guestrooms don't have furniture. He has everything I need, drawers, a closet, hangers, but I can't bring myself to settle all the way into his space. This is temporary, and the more I remind myself of that, the less chance I have of getting hurt. Because despite the fact that today was hard for Matthew and I, we've all fallen into an almost comfortable routine that neither Thor or me have spoken about, but we've both felt.

Thor pops open the button and zipper on my jean shorts. As his hand splays out over my stomach, traveling toward my panties, I bite down on my lip. We're right outside Matthew's room, and while my head knows I should encourage him to move elsewhere in the house, my pussy is hot and demanding.

When he doesn't settle his fingers between my lips and instead tugs my shorts down my legs leaving me bare from the middle down, I lean back. Thor said himself that he wants me

to lie back and enjoy it, to take what he's giving and he really enjoys feedback, particularly if it's not working or I don't like it.

Spoiler alert: I most definitely like it.

He hasn't yet done something to me where I've said, "Nope. Stop please, that's not nice." If anything, it's always left me a pile of warm boneless goo that barely knows my own name.

He slides down the stairs in front of me, hooking his fingers behind my knees and pulling my ass to the very edge of the step. He glances at Matthew's door, shakes his head, and slides me down the first flight onto the small landing space at the turn of the staircase.

He grins at me before jerking his head. I lie back on the soft carpeted floor with a dreamy sigh. I know what's coming, I trust what's coming, I can't wait for what's coming.

The first slurp of his tongue through my folds should probably make me cringe. I'm so wet and ready for him. Part of me wishes he had to work harder, but the other part is just so damn relieved at his touch.

The tip of his tongue scalds a trail around my clit, burning, blistering, scorching my slick heat, only serving to make me wetter. When he hums, I arch my back, pressing myself against him, shamelessly, silently pleading with him to give me what I need.

His index finger presses against my back entrance, and I tense up. I know it's just a finger, but the tightness that courses through my body as he puts the slightest amount of pressure on my ass is tangible.

"Shhhhhh, easy." At least I think that's what he's saying against my pussy. I can't quite hear him. His noises are contented, but I'm so wet and squelchy that I'm pretty sure he's going to drown.

Using the flat of his tongue, he sweeps against my clit, sending shudders through my limbs, and sparks of pleasure skittering over my skin. I'm a lightning rod, poised to intercept

the flashes from his tongue, but instead of protecting me from damage, the building orgasm rumbling deep within me, threatens to break me apart.

The more he laps, the more I pant, quietly whispering his name, pleading with him not to stop. When I reach to brace his head where I need him, he snaps his head up, eyes shining, and tells me to put them above my head.

Temptation tickles my fingertips. I want to arch my hips, dig my fingers into his hair and hold his face against me until I come enough times that my muscles turn to jelly, or he drowns from my cum.

Whatever comes first.

But I want him to be proud of me, to praise me for following his instructions without question. Most of all, I don't want him to stop. I want him to make me come apart at the seams.

Reaching my hands out on the carpet above my head, the soft fluffy fabric tickles the skin on my arms. My body curves like an archer's bow as I interlock my fingers, anchoring them onto the floor, fighting the constant temptation to defy him.

Wiggling my hips against his face doesn't do much to convince him to change his speed. Impatience claws at my body, that faint tingle of orgasm bubbling just a little too far for me to reach.

Every few moments he pushes me hard, driving me toward my O such that I know he's controlling me, my body, my reactions, even controlling my breath. It's not that he's clueless and doesn't know how to get me there, he's enjoying the journey, taking time to sink into the process, and play with my clit like it belongs to him.

If I had questioned the fact he was a pleasure dom, I don't anymore. But it's hard to find patience when my whole body is stretched out, taut, ready to crack like a neon snap bracelet from the nineties.

I've never been one to endure orgasm control, or denial, I'm an instant gratification kind of girl. When I rub one out it's

to feel good, a means to an end. Input creates output. I know if I touch myself one way, it draws out a consequence I desire.

Right now, it's like a storm is brewing deep within my body. He pushes me forward, then eases off, like he's revving the engine of a car, or taking part in an intimate kind of dance I don't know the steps to.

My frustration quickly turns to greed, desperation, and sheer delight as the level of pleasure thrumming through my veins rises with each swell. He's eating me out like he has nowhere else to be, like it's his favorite thing to do, like all he's planned for and looked forward to all day is splaying me out right here on the landing, and tongue fucking me as though he's been training for it his whole life.

His finger presses into my tight hole again, and I roll my hips. I'm so wet there's going to be a puddle on the stairs under my ass. The additional pressure of his finger drives me wild, and I moan so loudly I need to smash my clasped hands against my face, biting at the fleshy part of my thumbs so I don't scream.

The tip of his thumb replaces his tongue as he comes up for air. "Don't come, kitten."

"B-b-but..." Clenching my muscles, I pray the tsunami heading straight for me somehow stays away until he's ready for me to come.

Sliding the tip of his finger into my ass, he wiggles it just enough to make me whimper. "Not yet. I need you to be a good girl for me and hold off."

Good girl.

I'd always thought women who responded to that were somehow weak. That a simple two words could drive someone over an invisible line and make them blow their load just because their Dominant said something nice to them was beyond me.

Until I met Thor. And until I heard those words fall from his mouth dripping in my arousal, and his lust, until he growled them at me with such reverent demand that I will do

everything in my power to give him what he wants, and to drive him to say it again.

Good girl.

I focus any energy I have into my breathing, slowing my sharp, panting fast breaths and working on a deeper flow of oxygen through my body. I don't know if it's going to help, but if I don't try something, I'm going to fall apart on Thor and the idea of making him in any way disappointed renews my determination to at least try.

Any trace of my brat has been replaced by a needy, fraught woman who just wants the beautiful man between her legs to tell her she's amazing, and he's so proud of her.

Can brats have praise kinks?

When his tongue meets my clit again, I'm swollen, tingling from activity, and the coolness against my burning pussy makes me hum.

The prickles vibrating all over my skin and all the way down to my bones grow in urgency. It's as though he's testing me. Pushing me, almost daring me to come without his say so. The finger in my ass sinks in a little deeper, swirling and twisting like a slow stretch.

The way he lazily works my asshole relaxes the coiled anxiety in my shoulders about butt stuff. He doesn't seem in any rush to add more fingers, or even to add the rest of the one he's got sitting in there. He seems happy enough to take it slowly, just giving me a little to see how it's landing.

This whole experience feels like a science experiment. He's watching me, feeling me, examining my responses to the combination of things he's doing to me. Swishing his tongue versus flicking, lapping versus sucking. He's taking painstaking effort to learn just how my body reacts to every change in his tactics.

"Not yet." He grumbles against me.

Wiggling my hips, I can't help whining. "Thor, please." The hollowness inside me is consuming. The finger in my ass not enough to sate me.

“Not yet.”

My orgasm smacks against the flimsy dam holding it back, demanding I let it draw me into the undertow, as he drags it out, drags me out, sending me higher and higher with each lick and flick against my now super-charged clit.

The fingers on his free hand tease at my labia, gliding along my soaked slit, spreading them with a torturously delicate touch. The second his fingers sink into my body, my muscles tense. When they arch toward my g-spot, my body buckles, twisting, rocking, convulsing with a frantic need to come.

He hums, then blows air against me like he’s giving my clit a raspberry, and lifts his head. “What’s the matter, kitten?”

I’m going to draw blood from my lip from how hard I’m biting down on it so as not to wake the sleeping child across the hall. “Please.”

“Please what, pretty girl?”

“Please...”

“You’re going to need to use your words, Addison.”

I don’t think I can. I don’t have any words left, they’ve all trickled out my pussy. There is only demanding need.

His thumb slowly circles my clit, keeping me right at the edge. “You’ve been such a good girl, Addison. Tell me what you need.”

“Come. I need...” The breathless words tumble from my lips before he sweeps his tongue through my lips. “To come.”

“Then come for me kitten. Come so hard you soak my face like the good little girl you are.” As soon as the words are out of his mouth, three things happen at the same time. His mouth closes over my clit with a ferociousness he hasn’t used since he spread my legs for him. His fingers grab my g-spot with such pressure my limbs turn to jelly and white spots prick the edges of my vision. And when he rams his finger deeper into my ass, I’m a goner.

I've never orgasmed in such a violent way. I've never come so hard I literally feel my release spray out of my body. Until today. Thor doesn't relent, dragging every last drop of cum from me as my body twists and writhes underneath his silent commands.

When I sag, and a silent scream rips from my hollow shell, he still doesn't stop. He captures my clit with his lips, his tongue, his teeth, and keeps pushing my sensitive nerves to the limit.

I've been with men who couldn't ever get me off before. I've been with men who took a while to get me off, or who got me off pretty quickly, but I've never before been with a man who could make my body perform like a marionette doll the way The Viking between my thighs can.

My knees tremble, toes curl, and back bends even more as he doesn't give up, determined to tear my soul from my body through my clit and not willing to settle for anything less.

The man is possessed.

Maybe it's my responses to his touch, how I bounce and flail as he plays me like an instrument he's intimately familiar with. Maybe it's how I taste, or smell, the fact I'm so squelchy I'm pretty sure his nosy neighbors next door can hear my slickness every time he moves his hand. Or perhaps it's the fact I was patient and waited for his say so before I came, but either way, this feels like worship.

It feels like I'm an altar to worship at, or a precious deity he can't pray enough to. When my first orgasm rolls into a second, I can't stop the cry that escapes me before I jam my hand into my face to smother it.

Thor doesn't stop like I expect him to. He pushes and pushes and pushes until I don't know where one orgasm stops and the next starts.

I'm levitating over my body, my limbs are matter, but they're so far gone from taking commands from my brain I'm not sure they're still attached. I shake, my chest heaves, sweat

streams down my face, and there's no question as to just how wet I am when he slurps my juices.

Fuck. I'm going to explode again. I didn't think I could. He grunts, then shouts something into my pussy that sounds like "Again," then "don't stop."

I've never had such an unrelenting wave of orgasms crash into me back to back to back. But Thor doesn't stop. Has it been thirty minutes? Three hours? Am I dreaming? I have no idea. All I know is that if I don't come again, he won't stop until I do.

If I don't give him what he needs from me, he's going to keep sucking and teasing me until I let up.

His patience is boundless, his hunger is unparalleled, and he's eating me out like both of us might die if he doesn't.

When the next orgasm hits, I bolt upright, my legs tensing, clenching his head against my body. I expect him to pull back, but he slips his fingers out of my holes and grips my hips, jerking me toward his face.

He's going to die, he's going to suffocate himself and the medical examiner is going to find his entire face blocked up with cum. The man's unhinged.

I don't know if one more orgasm rolls through me before I collapse, or if it's the tail end of the last one, but I when I fall back onto the soft, damp carpet on the landing. Thor finally stops his onslaught on my clit and everything ceases to exist.

CHAPTER 14

Thor

I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO HELP MY CHILD FROM ONE DAY TO THE next, but as I carry a giggling Addison to the guest room, something inside my chest warms. She clings to me like she never wants to let go, and a tiny voice in the back of my mind says I might like it if she doesn't.

She's past the point of being safe to bathe by herself, but I clean her up with a warm washcloth as she giggles. She's not sleepy, at least she doesn't seem it, but she's playful and fun, and if I was a betting man I'd say she's slipped into sub or even little space.

With a lot of effort, I guide her into her nightwear that is stacked neatly on her pillow, before tucking her into bed. Before pulling off my jeans, I take out my phone and message both my bosses asking for tomorrow off. Addison was so upset when I got home, and I pushed her pretty hard, I don't want her to hit sub drop tomorrow. Not just for herself, but for Matty too. The last thing I need is for her to drop, and something to happen to either of them, or worse, both.

It's reckless for me to climb into bed with her in so far as Matty is concerned. I don't want him getting confused about my relationship with Addison, but at the same time, I'm feeling pretty confused about things myself.

I never thought I'd be a one woman man, and as I slide between the blankets I admit to myself in the darkness that my intention of having my fill of her, my hopes of making her come so often and so hard that I get her out of my system didn't work.

Barely conscious, she wastes no time rolling toward me, draping her arm across my chest, her leg over both of mine. The warmth in my chest flickers a little brighter. It's as though she's claiming me somehow in her sleep. And while I wait for the fear of being claimed to smack me upside the head, I start to drift asleep with the uncomfortable knowledge that it's not coming.

Maybe it's not that I don't want to be claimed by anyone at all, maybe I've been waiting to be claimed by the red headed kitten in my arms.



ADDISON IS STILL SLEEPING BY THE TIME I DROP A KISS ON HER temple and make my way to my own bedroom to grab some sweats the next morning.

Downstairs, Matty is already on the couch playing something on his tablet, with last night's hockey highlights on the TV.

“Good morning, buddy. You sleep okay?”

“Morning, Dad. I've been up for a while.”

In the kitchen, I pull out ingredients from the pantry and get working on making muffins. Mom rarely had a lot of time for baking while I was growing up, but every now and then she'd pull out a bunch of stuff from the cupboards and make muffins.

Making them together was something I loved, a power-baking mother-son team. We'd talk about things, she'd show me techniques, correct my form, and gush with pride when I finally made my first solo batch and nailed it.

“How'd your teams do last night, Matty?”

“Snow Pirate's lost. I'd imagine Coach is gonna shake things up over there. Wild won 2-1.”

I already know the scores, I checked them this morning from the shitter, but having some common ground to bond with Matty on is important to me. I hope we get to the place where we can hit up games together.

“Can I have Cheerios please, Dad?”

“Sure thing, kiddo. I’m making some muffins too if you’d like to try one.” I pull out the cereal and milk, while he grabs a bowl and spoon.

“Maybe.” His voice is distant, like he’s already tuned me out and zoned back in to his screens. He pours himself cereal and gets stuck right in.

“We’ll have to do some reading today, okay?”

He nods, but doesn’t answer. The kid can consume books faster than anyone I know. He lives for information, thrives on learning, and absorbs it too.

I’ve barely pulled the first tray of treats from the oven when Addison steps into the room. Her hair is wrapped in some kind of twisted t-shirt, and she’s in a sundress that instantly makes my mouth water.

“Good morning.” Her pink cheeks belie an embarrassment I’m not used to from her. “Did you sleep?”

Nodding, I tip the carton of orange juice her direction, offering her a glass. “I did, thank you. You make for a good weighted blanket.” Winking at her, I give her the juice.

She takes a sip, smacking her lips before giggling. “Guess I like to cuddle. I crashed out hard.”

“You did.”

“You want me to finish those up so you can work?” She takes a step toward me.

“I’ve got it. I took a personal day.”

Her eyes spring wider, surprise clear in her bright, well-rested gaze. “You did?”

Stepping around the counter, I approach her. If her hair was down her back, I’d curl it around my fist and yank her

head back so I can kiss her. I don't want to fuck with her t-shirt hat, so I grab the back of her neck and lay one on her.

It wasn't planned, but the way she licked her plump lips after she drank her orange juice called me to her. She tastes sweet, the citrus tang exploding as my tongue caresses hers. She sinks into me, her cold hand against the hot skin of my bare chest making me moan.

If Matty wasn't in the other room I'd pick her up onto the counter and fuck her senseless, but the best I can do is a kiss, a promise, and hope it reassures her if she's feeling unsettled this morning.

"Why are you not working today?" Her wide eyes implore me for an answer, searching my face like she might be able to read it.

"I wanted to be here for you in case you dropped, or in case you needed more aftercare than I could give you between jobs today." Clearing my throat, I decide to show my hand. "I wanted to be here with you, kitten." When my fingers caress her cheek, she breathes out such a contented sigh my soul resonates on the same frequency. "I need to take care of you."

When she opens her eyes again, they're glassy, like she's fighting back tears. Thus far our entire relationship has been somewhat physical, and her looking after my kid, but what makes Addison tick? What motivates her? What's she afraid of? What makes her heart soar?

I don't have the answers to any of those questions, and I want them. I want answers to every question I haven't yet thought of about this woman.

After my third muffin, I brave the question I don't really want an answer to but I feel compelled to ask. "Have you thought about what you want to do after you leave us?"

My stomach twists. It's the last thing I want to think about, having to function around here without her presence. I want her to say she'll never leave, and not entirely for Matty's sake.

She shrugs, her shoulders curl forward like she's retreating into herself.

“What did you do before? Before you met me?”

She launches into telling me that she was a fashion designer for a household name fashion house. The way her smile brightens and her eyes light up as she talks faster and faster about how much she loves fashion design shows me glimpses of joy I haven't seen in her before.

I don't know what happened, and I'm afraid to ask in case the light slips from her eyes again.

“I'd love to design and make my own ASD friendly line of clothing.” She casts her eyes down as though she's embarrassed, or wary of my reaction to her announcement. “It's stupid.”

I slam my mug down on the table to draw her attention back to me, her eyes snap to mine. “Enough. There are a great many things I tolerate, kitten. But talking shit about yourself isn't one of them.” What I don't say out loud is that her family treats her enough like shit without her adding to it. Not under my roof, that much is for certain.

She shrugs. “My sister has such a hard time with my niece. Getting clothes that fit right, or feel right is impossible. I've done some research and there are so many kids out there with medical conditions, trachs and gtubes, growing difficulties, special needs when it comes to shoes, needing larger onesies than the stores sell beyond a certain age. It's a real problem, and I think I could fix it.”

I shrug back at her. “Then fix it.”

She snorts. “That's fine for you to say.”

“And finer for you to do. What's the problem?”

She doesn't answer. Is it a confidence thing? Money? Or maybe she sucks at drawing and at best she'd put stick figures in skirts, but something is stopping this kitten from roaring like the lioness she is. I'm determined to figure out what that is.

“Addison? What's stopping you from doing this? It's clearly something you're passionate about. If you worked with a brand name, it's also something you're more than qualified

to do. So what's holding you back?" Take that logic, little lioness.

She nibbles on her bottom lip, indecision clear on her face. "I'm afraid I'll screw it up."

Something must show on my face to make her continue. On a loud exhale, she ages in front of my eyes. "I'm the screw up of my family. I'm the runt of the litter, and the one they all expect to fall on her face."

Balling my hands into fists, I swallow down the bitterness in the back of my throat.

"I've given them cause to. I *am* the screw up. I mean, just look at this situation. I had everything planned out, all my dominoes lined up and ready to tip over the first one. Then my car broke down, and they tipped over in the wrong direction."

I nudge her foot under the table, "Working for me hasn't been all that bad now, has it?"

Her face softens as she smiles. "No, it hasn't. I just can't stand another failure on my scorecard."

"So your bar for success is what your family considers successful? You're holding yourself to a target someone else has placed for you? An arbitrary goal that you can probably never reach?"

She scrunches up her face, thinking about my words. "Maybe." She tongues her teeth like she's tasting the word. Or perhaps she's tasting the idea that she's been chasing a moving target for her whole life, and she needs to figure out her own shit.

"You have to establish your own goals, kitten. You need to pursue your own markers of success. Do you know what that might look like?"

She shakes her head, staring off into the distance over my shoulder.

"Then perhaps start there." As she cleans up the kitchen, I sneak a peek in on Matty. He hasn't moved, but he's eaten the breakfast he got himself while the last batch of muffins cooled.

“Matty bud? What do you think about joining us in the kitchen and coloring with us?”

He doesn't seem to respond. But I go to what is now my crafts cabinet and pull out the sketch pads and pencils, markers, and crayons and place them onto the dining table where all the breakfast dishes had been.

Addison cants her head at me. “This feels manipulative.”

Picking out an adult coloring book that has more F-bombs in it than I've probably said in my entire life, I plop back down onto my still-warm chair and reach for the markers. “Or maybe I just like to color.”

Skimming through the book, I settle on an uncolored page. Sometimes I pick up an old picture and do a little more work on it, but this time I'm feeling a fresh start.

Matty comes in from the living room and grabs colors and a coloring pad. “I like that one.” He points to my book.

“You want it?” I offer it to him but he shakes his head.

“Addison, you should color with us.” He's right, she totally should. I smile at him, throwing him a wink.

After a few minutes of watching us from the counter Addison takes her seat and rifles through the stack of books opting for a blank sketchpad and a packet of charcoal pencils Mom got me one year for Christmas that I haven't used yet.

She angles herself such that I can't see what she's going to be drawing, but I don't care. Hopefully sitting her in front of a blank page with tools of her craft will spark something imaginative in her brain and encourage her to create.

Matty's still searching for the perfect book to color. He finally pulls out a Disney coloring book, and chooses a picture of Flounder from *The Little Mermaid* to work on. The three of us sit in silence coloring for over an hour, maybe closer to two, I'm not sure. All I know is that we're calm, we're still, we're content, and we're sharing an experience together even though it's landing a little differently for each of us.

When Mom's recovery is finished I can imagine her taking up the fourth seat at the table, coloring another obscene word from the book I'm working in right now. This time is peaceful, it's warming, it's a contentedness that I haven't felt since before Matty arrived, and I want to grab it with both hands and hold onto it forever.

At the end of our coloring session, Addison leans over the table. "How'd you do?"

Beaming with pride, I rotate my coloring book and show her the giant "Fuck" colored in bright colors.

"I'm not allowed to say that word." Matty shakes his head with a smile. "It's a naughty word."

"He's right." Addison nods solemnly before she bursts into laughter that glides over me like stepping out into sunshine on a warm day.

"Can I ask how yours went?"

She flips her notebook to me. The title across the top is "adaptive clothing range," it's underlined three times in red ink and a series of brightly colored kid's clothes surrounded by notes are spread out across the large page. The notes include things like "no tags or seams" "breathable and soft fabrics" "looser fit" and as I study her work, she studies my face.

"What do you think?" Her voice is slightly higher than a whisper.

"I think you're going to help a shit ton of families, Addison."

The way her face splits into a brilliant, glowing smile warms my insides and any remaining traces of denial that I'm gone for this woman dissipate in an instant.

Matty cranes his neck to look before a shudder passes through him. "I hate tags on my shirts."

He hates wearing shirts full stop.

"We know you do. Addison is going to design a line of clothing for people who hate tags on their clothes. Wouldn't that be good?"

His face lights up. “No tags?”

She shakes her head, pink darkening her face.

“Mom cut the tags off my clothes, but I can still feel them.” He shakes his shoulders again. “This is a really good idea, Addison.” He stares at the images for a while. “I know people like tags for information. But there could be a way to print the information inside the shirt so they don’t lose it altogether. Like how to wash it, or what size it is.”

Addison knocks me down with a mega-watt smile as she ruffles Matty’s hair. “That’s such a great idea. Thank you.” She writes down ‘printed information’ next to ‘no tags.’ “You really think it’s something I could do?” She still sounds unsure.

I think deep down she probably knows that it’s well within her remit to do, but she’s clinging to fear, to a belief about herself that isn’t hers to hold. It’s as clear as the smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

“I know it is.” And I’m going to help her make her dreams become reality.

CHAPTER 15

Addison

ANOTHER TWO WEEKS HAVE PASSED IN THOR'S WORLD. AND mine too, I guess. Our world? Sounds kind of presumptuous. And yet...

I feel somewhat insulated from the outside. We've been living in this little domestic bubble like it's something that's going to span beyond the next two weeks. In so far as this job is concerned, I have more time with Thor and Matthew behind me, than I do remaining in front of me. But I don't feel as though I'm done with either of them. And we haven't talked about what comes next.

Things are progressing. I think we've crossed from one-night-stand, to friends with benefits, to something more. Something intimate despite us not having had sex again since... well, since he broke me into tiny little pieces with his tongue on the stairs.

Actually, that's not quite true. I sucked him off in the laundry room last week when he'd had a particularly stressful day at work. There was something empowering about being on my knees, about looking up at him with my tear-streaked face and my smudged lipstick and knowing he was hurtling toward his release.

I've never really been a fan of giving head, but when it came with a side of Thor-Praise and head pats... well, as soon as the opportunity to repeat it presents itself, let's just say I'll happily get on my knees.

Something's definitely shifted between us, though I daren't breathe out loud in case he hears and gets spooked. But it's definitely *more*. And there's a not-too-small part of me that wants to follow that thread and see where it goes.

Thor texted me from the club last night to tell me he invited Mackenzie and Austin over for dinner tonight. About thirty seconds later, Mackenzie blew up our direct chat with excited emojis and "WTF" gifs.

KENZIE

What can I bring?

Matthew has food aversions, right?

Should I bring him a toy instead?

I don't have a lot of time tomorrow, but I can go to the store and grab something for him if you think that's okay.

And before you say it, I know. I won't invade his space or be too loud or overwhelm him. I'm just excited to see you guys and hang out.

Never mind. Austin is making lemon and raspberry trifle for dessert. Apparently he's already discussing it with Thor. Can't wait to see you, feels like forever.

It hasn't been forever. It's only been a few days. But I know what she means. I've been kept pretty busy, and enjoying spending my time with the boys. I've missed my girls, but I'm bonding with Matthew, and even if I'm not reaching him the way it feels like I am in my chest, I'm definitely bonding with Thor.

I wasn't sure how playing house with the handsome giant would unfold, and I thought I could remain on the outside with my feelings, but I'm totally in over my head. I definitely don't want to leave.

With only a few hours until Kenzie and Austin arrive, I set about getting the house clean like it's my own. I'm generally a

house proud woman, and hanging out with people in my space... well, just call me Martha. It's been a while since I've felt enough like myself to play hostess. This whole getting fired from my job for opening my mouth and pointing out a predator thing has thrown me off my game a little.

I'm not a baker, though, so I ask Kenz if she can bring a box of delicious Quinn-cakes from The Cupcake Cartel. I feel like cupcakes. The former captain on the hockey team Mackenzie is a trainer for, the Minnesota Snow Pirates, is engaged to a woman who owns the best bakery in town. Her cupcakes—Quinn-cakes because her name is Quinn—are the single greatest sugary creation I've ever had the pleasure of wrapping my tongue around.

And it's been a while. They're not what I'd call expensive, but they're also not as reasonably priced as a box of Hostess's Ho Hos, you know?

I'm salivating at the thought. If I know Kenzie as well as I think I do, asking her for five cupcakes will result in half a dozen, meaning I'll get a leftover one tomorrow, and future Addison is already grateful I thought to ask.

She replies that she already has cupcakes, and a pitcher (probably two because it's Kenzie) of margaritas, but she was trying to see if there was anything else I needed. She's such a peach—a sweet, southern firecracker with a steel backbone and a heart the size of her home state, Texas. She's been through so much and yet she shows up every day with a smile that could melt butter, or slice a man in two depending on what the day calls for.

And Paige and I will help her bury whatever bodies need to be buried. Sister code and all that. No friend carries that weight alone. They'd put their back out if nothing else.

Paige.

A pang of guilt ripples through my chest. I shouldn't leave her out just because she's single, so I send off a quick text to my bestie and invite her to dinner.

A gasp escapes me as I fold a pair of Thor's chinos. What if Matthew wants a cupcake? The thrum of excitement that courses through my blood makes me beam. Wouldn't that be something? I'd totally give my tomorrow Quinn-cake to him. Without hesitation.

I wonder if Kenzie got the same flavor throughout or if there'll be a couple different tastes we could offer him. Chances are he'll say no, but I'll offer him a bite of every meal I ever eat just in case one day he says yes.

We're ordering in from Maya tonight, a delicious Mexican restaurant that sends a gurgle through my stomach just thinking about their elote. Thor has already placed an order of burritos, quesadillas, tacos, elote, chips and dips. It's going to be a party in my mouth, and I can't wait.

He always over-orders. Partly so he doesn't have to think about what to cook the next day, and partly because he eats so much he's probably afraid to under-order in case he's still hungry when he gets through a tray of a dozen tacos. I'd love to say that's an exaggeration, but I've seen it happen. Then he starts circling my plate like a vulture over carrion.

The afternoon blurs by in a whirlwind of household chores. For Thor, not me. He works on an endless pile of laundry folding, scrubs the toilets, and makes sure the table looks nice for when people arrive while I hang out with Matthew.

We color every evening after dinner, it's become part of the daily routine, so there are coloring books and colors scattered around the dining room space. I admit, it's something I want to do forever.

Sometimes I sketch designs on the notepad Thor has now declared is mine. And others, I just color in a page from one of the countless coloring books Thor has on hand. It's relaxing, especially on the tougher days.

I manage a shower while Thor takes over and plays NHL on the Xbox with Matthew. Thankfully, it's not a wash day, so I refresh my curls with a spritz or ten from my trusty spray bottle, add a little curl cream to one side, and some light-hold

gel all over. I'm always amazed how a quick refresh can make my curls look almost as good as wash day.

And by 'quick refresh' I mean, not at all quick.

When the doorbell rings, Thor's upstairs getting dressed. Pulling the door open with a grin, I smooth down my shirt with my free hand.

Oh fuck.

"You know, I have seen a great many reactions from women when they see me." Slade steps into the house past me, a bottle of wine in each hand. "But until now there's only been one woman to react with such disappointment at my presence. You clearly learned from the best. Is she here yet?" The mischief dancing in his sparkling eyes suggests he is not only thrilled that Paige is here, but he has zero intention of leaving.

"She's not here, no."

"But she's definitely coming, or your face wouldn't have done that swoopy thing from smiling to utter distress."

Closing the door behind him, I rub my stomach. This is a disaster. What the hell is he even doing here? Why didn't Thor tell me he invited him? Another pang in my stomach. I didn't tell him I invited Paige either, so I guess we're both to blame.

Sighing, I nod. "She's coming." I level him with what I hope is a mean-muggin' stare. "Don't start anything tonight, Slade. I don't care that you're Thor's boss, if you upset my best friend, they'll never find your body."

He jerks his chin over my shoulder. "Your girlfriend has claws, Thor, I'm here for it."

A scalding flush spreads across every inch of my skin. My jaw drops open, brain scrambling to find the words to deny I'm Thor's girlfriend, but I come up empty. We haven't talked labels, but it's definitely something I've been feeling for a while. Will Thor deny it?

"You have no idea." A hand slides across my lower back, and lips meet my temple. "You look fanfuckingtastic, kitten."

His murmured words skim over my skin, sinking into my body and making me warm from the inside. Why isn't he denying that I'm his girlfriend?

Holy fucking shit on a stick we really are in a relationship. Fuck.

I manage to meet his gaze. It's playful, and heated, but there's no mocking there. He clearly knows what he said, or didn't say, and he's okay with it.

I knew something had shifted between us, but wow. Girlfriend. I'll have to play with that word a little. I don't dislike it, but it's been a while. And we aren't teenagers, so maybe we could come up with something a little less... young?

The ding of the doorbell draws me out of my "I'm Thor's girlfriend" realization loop. We'll have to talk about it later for sure, but for right now, our friends are arriving, and in my haste to get ready for visitors I forgot to get the body armor out for our guests. Paige is *not* going to be happy that Slade is here. Not at all.

Kenzie and Austin arrive next, and I was wrong. Kenzie has brought a dozen Quinn-cakes with her, I'm going to be happy as a pig in the proverbial shit tomorrow with leftovers.

Ushering them into the house, Thor steps in and grabs the margaritas from Kenzie before leading her and Austin into the dining room.

As though sensing Paige's presence, Slade steps over behind the door. I don't blame him, I'd hide from her if I was him, too. He watches through the glass panel to the left, not letting her ring the bell before he yanks it open, and she walks in.

"I didn't know what to bring since you *just* invited me, but I figured dessert wasn't a bad guess." She hands me what I'm hoping is her apple pie. Yes, I have a thing for sweet treats. And I think we're up to four at this point, but I don't care. I'll enjoy every single one of them.

My girl Paige hates sweating her tits off in the kitchen, but she makes the best apple pie on the face of the earth. I'm tempted to shove it in the freezer before anyone notices that she's brought it. Might not be pie, since she just got invited. Unless she was already mid-bake. Wouldn't that be serendipitous?

Slade sends the door closed as soon as Paige gets far enough into the foyer. Paige freezes, eyes widening as her Spidey sense visibly kicks in. She groans. "Oh, no." She shakes her head. "You didn't. You wouldn't do this to me."

Slade's wicked grin widens as he blocks the door. Smart fucker's not letting her escape. The only thing worse than a pissed off Paige, is a caged-in pissed off Paige. This guy has a death wish. He literally wants to die right here, right now.

"I didn't." My voice is a whisper, and I hope she hears the anguish laced into my words. "I didn't know Thor invited him."

She doesn't glance back at him, but she has that look on her face that she gets before safe-wording her way out of a social situation. It's something the three of us have done for as long as we've been friends. If we're in an uncomfortable space and want to leave, we have a safe-word.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've used it over the years, but each time was an absolute emergency, and my girls came through for me. "Kenz brought margaritas."

The flickering rage on her face suggests that even if she drinks every drop of tequila Kenzie brought with her, it wouldn't be enough. One of these days Paige will have to tell us what actually went down with this guy, because aside from the confidence oozing from his pores, he's hot, he's rich, he's kinky as hell... I fail to see where the problem is.

Without saying a word or so much as a backward glance, she walks right past me and further into the house. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath, waiting for her reaction, prepared for war, until I huff out a long stream of air.

I'm already exhausted, and the night has barely started. Slade claps his hands together then rubs them with glee. "This is going to be fun."

I have regrets. And most of them are regrets that I thought we could have a normal, pleasant meal with friends without drama.

As I follow Slade into the dining room, part of me expects Paige to be standing, knife in hand, ready to carve him like a pumpkin in the fall. I'd like to think Austin would step in to stop the murderous woman before she did any real damage, but one, she's wily, and two he's nowhere to be seen in the dining room.

"He's in the living room with Matty." Thor jerks his head as though he read my mind. A quick glance confirms that Matthew is sitting squished up against Austin, their shoulders touching. The game is paused on the TV, and the lights are up a little brighter than usual.

"What's going on?"

They seem engrossed in conversation, it warms my heart. Matthew looks so comfortable sitting there with Austin.

"After I tried to introduce Mackenzie and Austin, Matty realized Austin was *the* Austin who played hockey for the Snow Pirates."

Matthew has a poster of Austin and his former teammates on his bedroom wall. He has a bunch of posters, in fact, and hockey memorabilia all around his room. Thor spoils the kid rotten. Especially considering the fact it's only been a couple weeks since Matty arrived.

I guess he's just an eager new father trying to make his son feel more comfortable in his new home. I don't blame him, if I had Thor's money, I would too.

Thor and Slade walk into the living room. I guess it's been a while since Slade has been around because Thor's showing him something on the wall. Despite the feeling of my friends' eyes on my face, I can't look away from him. Thor's just delicious. He's wearing a black button-down shirt with the top

buttons open and if Matthew wasn't here, I'd open the rest of them.

Swallowing, I spin to face the accusing, amused smiles of my girlfriends. "Out with it."

"Adi and Thor sittin' in a tree..."

"Being super kiiiiinky..."

They burst into giggles, clearly very happy with themselves. But I groan.

"This is why we haven't seen you much for weeks. You're with him. Like... *with* him."

"Of course I'm with him, he's my boss, and I live and work in his house." You sit on a throne of lies Addison. You also sat on him, and used his peen like your personal joy-stick.

Mackenzie snorts, handing me a glass of freshly made Kenz-a-ritas. They're the best I've ever had, too. Huh. I have super talented friends. And I think I just learned that food is my love language.

We clink our glasses together before taking a sip.

"I'm pleased for you, Adi. You seem happy, lighter somehow. And he looks at you like you hung the moon."

Shaking my head, I pour drinks for the guys. I'll tell Thor he can drink, and I'll stop at one, just in case something happens with Matthew and we need to go out.

Paige has barely uttered a word, her glare is fixed on the back of Slade's head, and I'm pretty sure he's actually hot for her rage.

"You like him, don't you?" Mackenzie asks with a small smile.

Rolling my lips between my teeth, I nod. Daring to let my friends in just a little. "I tried not to. He's not a one-woman man, and he's got Matthew, and things are... complicated." Other than our initial conversation, the fact he's a player hasn't come up at all. When we met, I wasn't looking for a

relationship either. His thoughts on that seem to have changed, otherwise he'd have denied the girlfriend thing, right?

We're approaching the end of the six weeks together, and things have most definitely changed for me. I want to be his girlfriend. I don't want to just leave and go back to whatever friends with benefits thing we could come up with. I want to be Thor's girlfriend.

"But you like him," Kenzie repeats before taking a sip from her glass.

Sighing, I sit with it for a second before answering. "I do. And..." I glance between Paige and Slade, making sure the boys are still out of range of eavesdropping. "Slade called me Thor's girlfriend earlier."

Neither of my friends react with surprise, which only further enforces the fact that yes, I'm in a relationship with Thor. And I seem to be the last person to know it.

"Did he deny it?" Paige's voice is laced with venom. I'm trying not to take it personally, but I should have thought to check with Thor before asking her to come. She glances toward the front door, like she's contemplating her escape.

"He didn't. He leaned over and kissed my face instead."

Kenzie's lips curve into a wide smile. "I knew it." Her whisper is excited, but my insides are still churning.

When the doorbell rings again, Paige makes a break for it, but Slade abandons Thor in the living room and strides toward the door with quick paces. He tosses her an easy grin. "Nice try, firecracker. But you're here for the duration."

She scowls, and for a split second I think she might stamp her feet. "You can't hold me here against my will."

The delivery driver pauses, bags in the air outstretched toward Slade, and cocks his head. "Ma'am are you okay?"

Paige growls at him, the delivery guy blanches. "I'm serious."

Slade turns to Paige. "Go on, firecracker. Tell the nice man you're being held captive by the big bad man." His voice is so

charged with taunting and challenge, that if she doesn't launch herself at him and gouge his eyeballs from his head with her teeth, I'll be amazed.

"He's fine, I just hate him. We're here for a mutual friend's dinner party. I'll stab him with the steak knife."

The delivery driver doesn't look convinced that everything will be okay, but he's got that "I need to get the hell out of here," look on his face. Slade passes the food back to Thor before taking the billfold out of his pocket and passing two notes to the driver.

"It's paid for."

Slade nods, tucking the wallet back in his pants. "That's your tip."

The driver looks at the two fifty dollar bills, eyes wide.

Paige groans.

Thor chuckles.

Aside from Matthew and Austin, we're now all standing around watching the situation unfold. The thick tension filling the air around us.

The driver looks at the money, looks at Slade, looks at the money, looks at Paige. "If her body turns up dead somewhere and the cops come knocking, I'm hanging you out to dry."

Slade's face turns fake-serious. "It'll likely be my body, not hers, but you do what you need to."

When the door closes, Kenzie bursts into fits of giggles. "We're going to end up on the evening news."

Instead of the dining room, Thor carries the food into the living room. "Can you grab some paper plates, Addison please?"

He meets my questioning stare. "Matty's having so much fun with Austin that I don't want to interrupt them and pull him away. Austin says he's cool with it, so I figured we'd eat in here so we're all together.

When I return with plastic silverware, disposable plates, and napkins, Thor has already started to open all the food and lay it all out on his oversized coffee table and the nest of end tables.

With two couches, and two armchairs, Thor's living space has enough room for all of us. Kenzie sits on the floor at Austin's feet, Thor and I take up the second couch, leaving the two chairs for Paige and Slade.

Slade plates up a pile of food, but instead of sitting with it and digging in, he turns to Paige and gives it to her.

This is not how I expected this evening to go. At all. I thought it would be a relaxing evening with friends instead of watching whatever... foreplay? Or whatever this seems to be between our friends.

Paige doesn't say thanks, but accepts the plate of food with a glare before pulling her feet up underneath her on the seat and diving into her food in silence.

Chattering and eating is the most comfortable part of the evening. We keep it to safe topics. Since the girls and I have been friends for a long time, we can carry a conversation. The boys join in where they can, and the discomfort that settled into my stomach at the start of the evening when Paige arrived and wanted to stab Slade, has dissipated. A little.

By the time it's time for everyone to leave, however, my shoulders sag with exhaustion. I've definitely reached my limit. I'm three margaritas in, Thor opted to have a beer instead of the margarita I poured for him, and then he stopped. He seems to have stepped into the caretaker role when I met him, and no amount of offering him the best margaritas in the land is making him tuck it away. Not even for a night.

Kenzie pauses at the door before she leaves. "If you guys ever want us to sit with Matthew for a night so you could get a real date night..." She pauses and glances between us, a familiar sizzle settling into my cheeks. "Austin and I could watch him for a few hours. He really took to him in there. And I mean, like, not right now. I know it's too soon. But we could

come over a little more often and get him used to the idea. Even just a meal out, just the two of you.”

She pulls me into a giant hug, planting a kiss on my cheek. “Think about it?”

Thor tugs her into a hug, air kissing her cheek. “We will. Thank you so much, Mackenzie. It was a pleasure.”

When it’s just us left, Thor closes the door behind Slade, and grabs me by the waist, angling me so I’m between him and the pane of wood at my back. He kisses me, deep, and slow, and with such tenderness my whole body springs to life.

“Thank you.”

“What for?” I’m breathless, but the words manage to break out of my mouth.

“Tonight. Making everything so easy. Being so adaptable when I moved into the living room and we didn’t get to eat at your prepared table. Lots of things.” He kisses me again, and again, and the more he kisses me the more I’m convinced this man is mine forever. A thought that should terrify me, but oddly... doesn’t.

It’s only been a few weeks. I’m trying not to get caught up in the romanticism of it all. But this man, the way he holds me, the way he kisses me and talks to me, the way he pushes me... there’s something here. And I’d be a fucking fool to ignore it.

CHAPTER 16

Thor

MOM'S HEALING NICELY. FIVE WEEKS INTO THE ORIGINAL SIX weeks I negotiated with Addison. and it's looking like she may be able to leave if things keep improving with Mom's hip. Except I don't want her to. And I'm not sure how to bring that to her in a way that doesn't sound desperate and needy.

We definitely need to talk about what's going to happen when she moves out in a week or so. *If* she moves out in a week or so.

We're heading out to eat soon. Together. Alone.

A week ago, the idea of leaving Matty with anyone but Addison would have given me anxiety so bad I couldn't leave. But Austin and Mackenzie have visited every evening for the past seven.

I never asked, but they just keep showing up. They hang out with Matty, Austin talks hockey, Kenzie tries to play whatever game with him he's into and fails with a smile on her face, and they're actively trying to get to know my son.

The act itself is touching, but the fact that they just kicked us out of the house to spend an hour or two with him alone... it feels pretty good instead of terror-inducing.

We're going to the Lotus in downtown Minneapolis for Vietnamese food. I have such a strong craving for summer rolls I might have cried if Adi had said she doesn't like Vietnamese food.

But she does. And we're headed there as soon as I can pick my jaw up off the ground and get this beautiful woman in

front of me out into the car. She's wearing a skin-tight white dress with black cuffs on her bicep-length sleeves, and a black trim around the bottom of the mid-thigh-length skirt. Her long, curly hair falls loose over her shoulders, and her black strappy shoes make me ache for those heels to carve into my back as I take her all night long.

For the past few weeks, she's lived in sweats, yoga pants, and jeans, and while she's the most stunning woman I've ever seen when she's just awake and slobbering around on the couch... This... right now, she looks like a fucking goddess.

We're going somewhere casual, low-key for dinner, but this woman is anything but low-key. Even in sweats. My mouth is dry, my dick is hard, and the teasing, sultry smile tugging at her lips tells me she knows. She absolutely knows.

"Alright Matty, we're going to head out, okay?" I thought he'd be anxious, ask us to stay, and I think part of me kind of wanted him to as well. But when he waves us off from the couch with a smile and a loud "Bye, Dad. Bye, Addison, have fun and enjoy dinner!" My heart swells with pride in my ribcage. I feel like my body keeps growing to accommodate the expanding love I have for this kid.

Outside the house, I hold the door open for my girl, closing it with a soft click. Once I'm inside the car, I leave the radio off and broach the conversation that has been hanging over us like an anvil in a cartoon. "If you wanted to stay beyond next week... we'd like that."

There. I've said it. It's out in the open. Okay, so I can't look at her, pretending to focus all my attention on the very important task of driving, and there's a solitary bead of sweat creeping down my neck. But I still said it. It's not quite a romantic delving into my feelings and laying my soul bare for her, but I think it gets the point across. I don't want her to leave.

Her stare rests on the side of my face. If I wasn't sweating before, the tension, the apprehension of her response would make me clammy. "You're sure? I don't want to overstay. I heard you on the phone to your mom this morning. She's only

going to be out of commission a few more weeks. She's expecting to be cleared for flying before long..."

The way she trails off twinges in my chest. "I don't mean we'd like you to stay on for work, Addison. I'd like you to consider staying... for me, for us." Sliding my fingers into hers, I'm regretting choosing this moment to have this conversation. I should be across the dinner table from her, reading her facial expressions.

She needs to know she's wanted for her, not for what she can do for me and my kid.

"I'd like to explore this girlfriend thing, Adi." Trying to keep it light doesn't help. The words may be upbeat, but the emotion behind them is a big deal and we both know it.

"Really? Mr. One-Night-Stand is thinking about settling down?"

The light changes to red, and I look at her, cupping her face. "He's been settled for a while now, kitten. I think it's time we both admitted it. Don't leave next week."

Her chin trembles under my hand as she nods. "Okay. I won't."

I think we eat dinner at the restaurant, I'm so distracted by the boner in my pants that I'm honestly not sure what happened while we were there. They may have put food in front of me, but I was so taken by the siren across the table, I just sat and stared.

There's no food on my shirt, and I don't feel hungry, so it's safe to say I ate. But I have no recollection of anything other than her eyes, her smile, the way her hair shone in the overhead light, and the way the other men gazed at her with longing.

Fuck. Definitely falling hard for my kitten.

"Kenzie says Matthew is doing great." She shows me her phone, there's a Kenzie-selfie with Matty and Austin in the background, curled up on the couch reading. "She said..." She clears her throat. "If there's somewhere else we'd like to go..."

Is that why she's dressed like the foxy vixen she is? She wants me to take her to the club? My brain short-circuits as she rises from the table. Maybe she just feels good in that dress, and she hasn't even given the club a second thought. But now the thoughts in my head, it's all I can think of.

I want this woman bent over a bench in Protocol. The check has been paid, and we're ready to go, but the lure of that short hem is making me want to see whether she has underwear on or not. With how tight that fabric hugs her ass... it could go either way.

Hand in the small of her back, I lead her out to the car in the open parking lot, opening the door instead of bending her over the hood. She casts a playful glance back over her shoulder, and my resolve frays like shiny ribbon on freshly sharpened scissors.

Before she can breathe my name, she's bent over the trunk, her skirt shifted up over her hips, perfectly plush peach-shaped ass on display. It's sensory overload. What do I do first? Do I spank her, lick her, or fuck her?

"What are you waiting for?" She wiggles her hips with a giggle. "Or would you like for me to get on my knees for you Thor?"

By the time she finishes my name, I'm balls deep inside her, thrusting hard and fast while she just takes it like the good girl she is. She didn't caution me against strangers this time, or the fact it's illegal to fuck her like this... maybe my girl has a little of the exhibitionist in her after all. And I'll stoke that fire until it's a blue flame she can't contain, desperate to take me everywhere and anywhere the mood strikes.

I need to get my shit together. I need to fuck her senseless, drive her to the club, and worship her until her soul leaves her body when I'm not so frantic and aching to fill her. My brain swims with options, ideas, things I've wanted to do to her that I couldn't because we didn't want to wake Matthew, or because I didn't want her to be incapacitated in case he needed her.

My mouth waters at the sight of her ass. By the time I'm done with her in Protocol, my dirty girl isn't going to be able to sit down tomorrow, and I can't wait.



NERVOUS ENERGY RADIATES FROM MY KITTEN AS WE ENTER the club. While this place is my second home, somewhere I'm comfortable within my own skin, this is the first time—I think—that she's been here with someone other than her girlfriends.

Essentially, it's her first time. I'm going to let her set the bar, decide how fast or slowly she wants us to take things. If she just wants to go to the viewing rooms to watch someone else do their thing, I'm down. If she wants us to be the ones being watched, I'm here for that, too.

Slade jerks his chin at me over the bar, a teasing glint in his eyes. I grabbed red wristbands on the way in from the new kid at the coat check. I don't care how comfortable Addison may feel within these walls, she's mine.

Mine.

It's not a discussion we've had yet, at least not explicitly, we touched on it a little in the car. It's just been knowing glances, and Slade calling her my girl. But I feel it, *she* feels it. I think I'm afraid to put a label on it in case she doesn't meet me there, or in case labeling it is going to be the thing that ruins it.

This, what we have right now, it's easy. I have no idea how, all things considered. We're in a comfortable routine. The three of us together, working as a little—dare I say it—family unit, and there has been minimal drama.

Matthew seems to be settling in. His school says that the disruption at home hasn't derailed his schooling much, though

some days it's tough to get him out of the car and through the door to the building.

Addison is such great company, I can't imagine her leaving next week. I just can't. Not only because I don't think I can function as the single parent of an additional needs child. But because she's made me think that maybe this one-woman-man thing wouldn't be so bad if she was the one woman. On the way here, asking her to stay, that was me staking my claim. She staked hers right back.

"Where do you want to go?" My voice is low, and she shivers as my breath skims the sensitive skin underneath her ear. "Do you want a drink?"

The bartender working tonight isn't quite as good as me, but I'll give him his dues, he's not bad. She shakes her head, her curls swinging around her jaw. "Please." She leans into me. "I'm nervous."

"What are you nervous about, Addison?" I could take a guess but I don't want to presume.

"It's just... intimidating."

"I know, kitten. I know. But you have no reason to be afraid. We have red bands, Slade is here, we have people here to keep our patrons safe, and even if we didn't, you're here with me. I've got you. We can do as much or as little as you want. If you want to leave, we can do that, too. There are no rules right now for what we need to do or not do. This can be whatever we want it to be."

Slade hands me a non-alcoholic beer and a fruit juice for Addison before I even ask, cracking the top off the plastic bottle for her. "Thanks, Slade." Her smile is fragile, timid, and while I know my lioness is in there somewhere, I'm not thrilled that she's shaky right now.

"We don't need to go downstairs if you don't want to, Addison." I try to inject extra conviction into my voice. She needs assurance, and that's what she's getting. If my girl is truly uncomfortable I will throw her over my shoulder and haul her ass out of here if I have to.

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe not having her friends at hand for comfort has her a little anxious.

It feels like she needs a dose of that female empowerment women seem to be so good at. I wish I could figure out how to tap into that. For all my experience with women, I don't have that. I don't have the "light her up like a goddess from the inside" kinda vibes.

She squeezes my hand before she nods at me. "I'm okay, Thor. Really. Just nervous, but not a bad nervous."

I've felt those nerves before, those fluttering sensations through my body as energy churns through my muscles. Being on the edge of something new brings all kinds of new feels, and it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between fear and fun.

We finish our drinks in silence, Addison's eyes roaming the crowd, scanning over the patrons who are filtering in for the night. While she people watches, I duck out of the club and text Austin, just to check in. Mackenzie said everything was fine, and I trust our friends. But there's a voice in the back of my head that tells me I'm a parent now, and my primary focus should be Matthew.

How do parents do it? How do they go out and enjoy themselves with this tug in their chest to return to where they're *supposed* to be? Is this my life now? Constantly torn between having a little fun, and dragging my ass back to the house just to watch my son play NHL on his game's console because it's the most fascinating thing I've ever seen?

The little stitch of concentration between his eyebrows as he focuses on passing the puck on the screen. The way he mutters to himself under his breath as though he's talking to the players in the game.

I've never been more in love with a human being than I am with my son. But I want to enjoy this experience with my better half as well. Is it possible? To tuck away your parental feelings just for a few hours?

AUSTIN

He is in bed, fast asleep. Stop worrying.

Seriously, Thor. He is fine. Put your phone away and enjoy the night.

The knot in my stomach eases just a little, and I suck in a whole breath for what feels like the first time since I left the house earlier with Addison.

Thanks, man. I appreciate it. I'm having a low-key panic attack being away from him.

AUSTIN

He is good. A little wobble over bed time, but Mackenzie sat with him until he came out the other side.

Part of me is relieved they didn't get a night of smooth sailing. The thought of someone parenting my kid better than I do makes me feel... things.

We came to the club.

AUSTIN

I know, Slade already texted.

I roll my eyes. Such a fucking gossip girl.

She's nervous.

AUSTIN

She is going to be. If she was not nervous, we would both be concerned. Just make sure she feels safe, and the rest is up to her.

I know. I'm trying. I'm fighting the urge to Hulk-out and throw her over my shoulder.

AUSTIN

She does not need to be rescued from the club, Thor. She needs you to hold her hand while she explores it.

Are you sure it is not you who is nervous?

Fuck. I hate when that son of a bitch gets all shrink-y on me. I don't know him all that well, but between him frequenting the club even before he and Mackenzie got together, and the fact Slade is his mentor, I've gotten a little closer to him lately.

Dude's a frustrating fuck with the logic. And the way he never uses contractions drives me crazy too.

AUSTIN

Did I strike a nerve? Is that what I am to interpret from your silence, Thor?

"You ready?" Addison's voice breaks me out of my internal monologue. Her hand is outstretched.

I guess my girl is ready to hit the dungeon.

CHAPTER 17

Addison

I'VE BEEN IN PROTOCOL'S DUNGEON A COUPLE OF TIMES WITH Kenzie and Paige, but I've never actually *done* much of anything with anyone. I've watched, I've hung out, I let a guy put his hand in my pants in one of the watch-rooms once, but I don't think he could have found my clit with a flashlight, a map, and a guided tour.

The fact Thor knows everyone—and I mean damn near everyone in the whole building—is both comforting, and anxiety inducing. Is he even allowed to play where he works? I'm pretty sure he isn't. Is he going to get in trouble for being here with me? He doesn't seem to care, but I do. I don't want to make his life difficult.

His hand never leaves my back, not when the club's beautiful timekeeper, Phoenix, blinds us both with the brightest smile I've ever seen, not when two patrons try to flank him on either side and ease me out of the space, and not when a girl I've seen here before—Felicity I think her name is—bumps into him and throws her arms around him.

He keeps me close at all times, silent support radiating through my spine. He likes the dress. I wasn't sure about buying it, but when my best friends are enabling enablers who enable... well, let's just say my bank balance didn't stand a chance.

Thor very kindly paid me up front for my time working with Matthew. He gave me a ludicrously generous sum of money for what he claimed was a six week period of time

working with him. The six weeks it would take his mom's hip to heal, he said.

He gave me enough money that it makes me wonder what he really does. There's no way he's a nerdy science guy. I'm convinced he's a drug dealer, though I've heard rumors at how ruthless Slade is about people committing crimes in his club so it's not likely.

Maybe Thor sells to the soccer moms in the school parking lots. Either way, this guy seems to have more money than sense, and he refused to take any of it back. He's given me security, enough to take time to figure out what to do with myself once my time with him and Matthew is done.

I'm half contemplating going back to school to do what Thor does—working a few hours every day and getting that kind of cash, well, that's something I can get behind.

This dress was more than I'd normally spend on a single article of clothing, even when I made good money. But the girls convinced me I deserve to treat myself. This is the first time I've been on a night out in a while, and I wanted to make an impression on my guy.

I can't say he's found me with Cheetos or Play Doh in my hair every night when he got back from work. But on more than one occasion since I started working for him he's found me crying on the floor, or eating straight from a gallon tub of ice cream. I wanted to remind him I'm still a strong and gorgeous woman with an ass ready for spanking.

And it is. And I need him to. Spank me that is.

With every step through the basement of the club, the heaviness in my core grows. We didn't even book a room, or at least I don't think we did. Thor says it's no biggie, he has a hookup. He said it so straight-faced it made me laugh.

I'm glad they took our phones away from us, the urge to check to make sure Kenzie and Austin are still okay with Matthew is overwhelming. Even though Thor just checked in with them.

“Where do you want to go first?”

Phoenix stands in the middle of the foyer, corralling people into a semi-circle around an empty St. Andrew's cross. Protocol doesn't have demonstrations every night, but when they do, they draw a crowd.

The staff of the club are trained in a variety of kink elements. People come far and wide to see Phoenix and her floggers. A jolt of electricity zings through my muscles as she fingers the tails on a purple flogger that matches her outfit. She's wearing a matching ring master's hat with a feather out the side, her bronze skin shines under the lights, her strong, toned legs sparkling with glitter pantyhose and her new dreads hang down past her shoulders. Every time she moves they swish like her flogger.

If I was a lesbian, Thor wouldn't have a chance with me right now. I'd strip off, let her strap me to that contraption, and do what she wanted to me. She's ethereal standing there, a wide, friendly smile on her face as people gather to watch her craft.

Thor nudges me with his shoulder. "If you're curious, you should go up there."

I snort, but it's absorbed by the din of the room.

"I'm serious. She doesn't have a volunteer yet." His palm draws circles on my lower back, supportive warmth radiating with every movement.

I'm nodding before the word "okay" drops from my mouth, but I'm too slow to pick it back up again. It's out there, he heard it, and he's already giving some kind of sign to Phoenix whose eyes light up with recognition and excitement.

She spreads her hand toward the cross, inviting me to join her on the slightly raised platform. The crowd is bustling, growing bigger the longer she takes to pull someone up. Am I ready to try something new? In front of all these people?

Another zing of excitement bolts through me as my pulse skips faster in my veins. I want to do it. I want to try something I've never done before. Not for Thor, not for Phoenix, not for anyone else but me. A quick glance over my

shoulder finds Thor's eyes on me, hungry, eager, but full of pride. If I wasn't already being driven to volunteer by the curiosity tingling in my nipples, the look on his face would be enough.

“Can you unzip me, please?”

The black zipper runs the entire length of the dress at the back, when he unzips it, I work my way out of it, taking a step forward in my white lace bra and matching thong. It's not enough. Anyone I've seen being flogged here before, is naked at least from the top down. I saw a guy all-the-way naked here before. I guess it's whatever you're comfortable with in front of a group of people you don't know.

I'm not afraid for my safety. Slade runs a tight ship. Even if Thor wasn't radiating touch-her-and-die vibes from his every pore, Protocol has security. And every single unsavory incident is handled quickly and efficiently—or at least that's what I've heard.

Unclipping my bra, I slide the straps down my arms, meeting Phoenix's comforting eyes as I do. They almost look like molten gold in the light. Is she part cat?

She nods, more silent encouragement, and someone behind me sucks in a sharp breath. I'd bet it's Thor.

Bra dangling on my index finger, I reach my hand back, and I assume it's him who takes it from me. Phoenix holds her hand out to me, her palm is warm and reassuring as I place mine on top of hers and step up onto the raised stage in nothing but my strappy high heels and thong.

“You doing okay?”

I nod at her quiet question, pulling my hair on top of my head and securing it with a hair tie.

“I'm going to put you in the cuffs, okay? Wrists and ankles.”

Another nod. I'm not sure whether fear or excitement have eaten my words, but I can't seem to pull any from my body. And once again I'm agreeing to be restrained by a damn near stranger. So much for building trust.

“Do you have a safe word?”

I nod.

She giggles. “Honey, you’re going to have to use your words and tell me what it is or we can’t play.”

Swallowing down the invisible cotton ball in my throat, I try again. “We use traffic light colors.”

“If that’s what you’re comfortable with, that’s what we’ll do. Red for stop altogether? Or black?”

“Black.”

She’s nodding as she guides me toward the cross. The leather cuff wraps around my wrist as the cool wood meets the front of my body, drawing a gasp from me. There’s no padding in the cuffs, no padding on the cross, it’s just cold wood on my torso and worn leather around my wrists. This piece of equipment was not designed for comfort.

Another dart of pleasure skates up my spine. I don’t know how long it takes Phoenix to strap me to the cross, but when I’m fully restrained a beat of panic threatens to overwhelm.

As if sensing the shift in my energy, Phoenix puts her hand between my shoulder blades, her face close to my head. “You’re safe. I’ve got you, Thor’s got you, and if you feel uncomfortable at any point or want to stop, just safe word, okay?”

“Thanks, Phoenix.”

“My pleasure. And I hope it’s not too forward to say that you have an amazing fucking ass.”

That makes me laugh, drawing the tension away from my tight shoulder muscles.

“I’m going to start gently, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Phoenix addresses the crowd, talking to them about the art of flagellation, the different types of whips and floggers, and exactly what she’s going to do to me. I tune most of it out so

it's a pleasant buzz in the back of my mind while I draw in deep and cleansing breaths, focusing myself.

She explains that she's going to use two floggers. I've seen her doing this before, her wrists roll as she swings the tails. It's beautiful, it's fluid, it's as though the equipment is an extension of her body. Even watching the leather tails fall onto someone else's skin is relaxing.

When the cold tendrils of a flogger gently roll over my body, they send a shiver snaking through my body.

"I'm going to start with your back and shoulders, okay?"

I tell her yes, and drop my head forward a little. The first few sweeps of the soft leather against my skin feel like a waterfall of fabric. It's soothing, relaxing, and there's not even an ounce of pain. Phoenix swishes the tails against me a number of times, and by the time she does her first check-in, I'm aching for a bite of pain. My muscles are soft and pliable and my mind is clear. But it's not enough.

"Green." The word falls from me on a weighted breath. Phoenix talks as she flogs me, she's showing them the different places and different reactions they draw from me, where's safe to hit and where isn't. But again, I'm in a fuzzy space where I'm mostly concentrating on how nice the material feels as it kisses my skin.

Lust sits heavy, low in my stomach. The scrap of fabric between my thighs is soaking. And with each round of slaps, Phoenix alternates the speed and intensity of her hits.

I moan, right before she pauses for another check in. Her cool hand brushing over the skin on my shoulder as her fingers kiss the heating space. "You enjoying that, pretty girl?"

I'm not sure how to convey just how much I'm enjoying what she's doing to me. It's as though with every round of flogging she's driving me higher and higher, and at any point she could let go of the twisted elastic band that is my body and let me fly.

Nodding, I tip my head back.

"You're doing so well. Can I touch your butt?"

The giggles start in the pit of my stomach. “Of course you can.”

Cold fingers skim across the curve of my ass. She’s only flogged me there a little, and something tells me she’s about to level up.

“Do you want something a little stingier?”

My head moves before my brain has a moment to catch up, but when it does, it wants more as well. “Please.” I’m breathy. There’s no point in looking into the darkness in front of me to find Thor. He’s probably behind me with everyone else, watching Phoenix leave her mark on my body.

She cups my ass cheek with a gentle hand before giving it a squeeze. I’m not sure if she’s trying to turn me on, or warm up my skin. I’m not mad about it either way. I’m already primed and aching to come. It wouldn’t take much for her to drive me over the edge.

Phoenix changes out her tools, explaining to the crowd the different compositions and how they have different effects during impact.

The second the next flogger connects with my ass there’s a sting. The bite is sharper, the crack louder, the prickle spreads further and lasts longer.

This. Fuck. This is what I wanted. This is what I’ve craved. It’s not quite the deep thud of a paddle, or the quick smack of a hand, but it’s got a quick, savage bite that will leave marks on my ass.

She checks in between each whip crack now. Loudly, to be heard over the excited bustling around me. Instead of the occasional grunt every few strikes, I’m moaning with abandon with each hit.

I could swear Phoenix just said she wanted to bite my ass cheek. Would Thor like that? Would I?

My mind swirls down the rabbit hole of curiosity. I’ve never considered myself anything but straight, but the idea of Phoenix sinking her teeth into the swell of my hot and stinging ass leaves me breathless.

She's already getting me ready for Thor, isn't that the whole point of this? She's working me up into a frenzy, smacking my skin, leaving welts and burning redness, laying the foundation for him to mottle my ass with bruises when he gets me home.

A loud whip-crack splits the air before a long, low, guttural noise is dragged from my body. I'm pretty sure if Thor told me to come right now, I could make it happen without so much as a finger near my clit. Legs and arms spread, body pressed onto sweat-slicked wood, and a goddess called Phoenix thwapping my skin with bliss ribbons made from what I'm guessing is a harder kind of leather.

While Phoenix offers to answer questions, Thor is there, uncuffing my hands and feet, and covering me in a blanket. He doesn't wait for Phoenix to check in with us, he doesn't wait for the people who want to talk to me about my experience, he just bundles me into his arms and starts moving through the crowd.

He's kissing my forehead with each step. "Such a good fucking girl, kitten. Did you enjoy that?"

My head is floating, my body is hot and throbbing, and I'm so wet I'm concerned his blanket is going to be coated in my arousal when he unwraps me from this burrito situation.

"Mmmhmmm."

I don't recognize this room he's brought me into. There are no glass panes to watch anyone, and I can't see any for others to watch us either. The light is low, so I can't make out what the decor is like, but that may be more to do with the fact I'm walking on air, and my eyes keep flickering closed.

He puts me down onto something soft, comfortable, it doesn't feel big enough to be a bed, but I'm not curious enough to open my eyes to figure it out.

A door opens and closes, but Thor is still next to me, maybe Phoenix came in to check on me. I wonder if he'd let her bite my butt.

His low chuckle tells me I said that out loud. I don't know what other words betray me by slipping out of my mouth but thankfully he sticks a straw between my lips and tells me to drink.

Orange juice, no pulp.

“It's not Phoenix, kitten. It's Jagger. He brought your clothes.”

Jagger is one of the house doms, he's played with Kenzie a couple times and he and Paige play sometimes too. He's built like a brick shithouse, and in the past I have fantasized about climbing him like a tree.

“She okay?” The intruder's gruff voice is out of place in the quiet of this room. Is it a recovery room? Or is it just a room my powerful boyfriend has commandeered because he wanted to?

Thor strokes my forehead, though I suppose it could be Jagger since my eyes are still closed. I'm caught between spaces, the take a nap space, and the “I need to come before I explode space.” I'm not sure which will win, but feeling and life is coming back into my body with each sip of orange juice.

“Are you okay, kitten?” The adoration in Thor's voice makes me sigh. His pride glows from each word, and he's barely said anything at all.

Taking another small sip, I nod. “I'm okay. I need to come though.” Pressure has built in every cell in my body, my nipples are pebbled, my thong is soaked. I giggle. I bet if he twists the fabric liquid would pool on the floor.

Another chuckle, this time it's not from my very own god, it's from his god-friend. “You earned it. You did great out there.” Jagger chuckles again. “I could help with that. The coming thing, I mean.”

Thor growls. It's my turn to laugh again. “I thought you liked sharing, Thor.” My words are mumbled through a yawn, but I'm pretty sure I get my point across as I blink my eyes open.

Jagger holds his hands up. “I get it. If you were my girl I wouldn’t share after that demonstration either. I’d want to claim you all for myself. But let me know if you’re ever open to it.” He winks at me. “I’d love to help him make you feel good.”

My stomach swoops. I’ve never known people to be as brazenly open with their desires and fantasies as they are inside the walls of this club. It’s such a safe space that most people I’ve met feel comfortable enough to just blurt out things that might take people on the outside months to confess to, if they ever do.

It’s such a freeing experience. Existing as exactly who you are. No masks, no filters, no lies. Just your most authentic self.

Would I like for Thor to share me with the tall, dark, handsome man standing in the doorway? Right now, sure, my libido is off the charts, and I’d hump the leg of a chair if I thought it’d get me where I need to be.

“She’ll have to come back to think on that with a clear head.”

Damn Thor for being inside my head. His friend sure is pretty. The idea of both of them doing... things to me lights up my body even more, a familiar desire humming under my skin. He’s right though, now is not the time to make decisions about whether or not I want his friend’s dick inside me. But I’m pretty sure I do. Want his friend’s dick inside me, I mean.

“Let me know if you need anything else.” Jagger slips out the door, leaving Thor and I in the low light.

“Hungry?” Thor offers me a granola bar.

Jerking my chin at his offering, I nod. “Sure. But not for that.”

He laughs. “Take a bite, please.”

We glare at each other in a silent stare-down before I relent and take a bite.

“How do you feel?”

Glancing around the room I finally take in my surroundings. I'm on a kind of day bed at the edge of the room. There's what appears to be a throne in the center of the space, and as with every other room I've been in here, shelves. One shelf has cleaning products and the most impressive condom selection I've ever seen, and one shelf has toys.

Next to the shelves, there's a clothing rail with a selection of what seems to be role play costumes hanging and a chest of drawers made of black wood with no outward sign as to what it contains.

"It's the throne room."

"I can see that." Though I don't quite understand what that means. "Does that mean I get a tiara?"

He grins at me, taking the cup of juice away from me and placing it on a small end table. Tugging out the top drawer of the chest, his grin widens. "If my lady wants a crown..." He holds one up.

"You're shitting me." I make a move to rise, but he growls again. I don't know what it is about a man reverting to our most base instincts and communicating in grunts and noises, but it sure as hell is working for me.

Holding up my hands, I lie back down. "Okay, okay. I'll stay put. Is that the only crown in there?"

He shakes his head before holding up another one.

"Pick a good one for me." I polish off the rest of the granola bar, tossing the wrapper onto the table next to the empty juice cup. He hands me a bottle of water from one hand, but keeps hold of the sparkly crown in the other.

"Are you done for the night?"

A whimper escapes me. "No orgasm?"

"I'll happily make you come, kitten. But if you're done playing I can do that at home."

"Matthew..." No matter how much I disconnect from the outside world, my mind comes back to Austin and Mackenzie back at the house.

Thor holds up a hand. “He’s fine. He’s still sleeping. Slade is playing telephone and giving me updates every now and then so I don’t haul you out of here just to watch the kid sleep.”

I smile. I get it. He’s not even my kid and a low-level anxiety has settled under my skin all evening. “I’m not done.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that. I’d really like to worship my queen.”

I don’t know what such a thing involves, but my body really doesn’t care. It’s on board for whatever worshipping Thor is down to give. Especially if it involves his tongue. I just want to fucking come.

“I watched you.” He cants his head to the left before licking his lips.

“I know.”

“No, kitten. I watched *you*. Most people in the crowd watched your back, your ass, Phoenix as she flogged you. I watched you. Your face, your reactions, your eyes rolling back in your head, your lips parting on a sigh or a scream. I am very proud of you, Adi.”

The shiver that runs through me is charged with anticipation. His praise is like warm sunshine on cool skin, or a popsicle on a hot summer day.

He trails the tip of the crown up the inside of my thigh, my legs falling apart to grant him access on instinct.

I’m not sure how crowns and thrones play into kink, or how he’s going to fuck me senseless on that throne when it’s just a giant wooden chair with a high back and looks wholly uncomfortable, but my pussy doesn’t care.

I need to come, and I need to come now.

CHAPTER 18

Thor

THERE'S A FINE LINE BETWEEN DOING WHAT'S BEST FOR YOUR submissive, and giving into the primal desire that charges through your veins. More so when she's done something outside of her comfort zone, you're proud as fuck, and all you want to do is give her the world.

Part of me wants to push her until she breaks and can't take anymore. The rest of me wants to haul her ass home and take care of her, whispering sweet nothings in her ear about what a good girl she is.

I'm trusting that she's okay. She's said as much, she seems as much, but I know from previous experience with submissives, they aren't always as honest as they should be.

A pang of doubt slides under my fingernails, and I flex my hands. She wouldn't lie to me. Not Addison. We've talked about how important it is to be honest with each other in kink, right? All the way back to the very beginning, our first conversation in the coffee shop. I told her how important transparency is.

It's hard not to let my mind stray backwards, back to The Ex. Everyone has one. Or at least that's what everyone says. The one you thought would be forever. The one you thought you could trust, rely on, show your innermost self to. The one that broke your heart into a million pieces, taking a splinter of your soul away with them so you will forever remain incomplete.

That was Ava. I thought she was The One. My lobster. But one lapse in judgment in the bedroom, one moment of stretched truth, or outright lie when I asked her to check in resulted in catastrophe for our relationship.

Addison stares at me expectantly from the day bed, hopefully unaware of the war of emotions stirring in my chest. I crouch down to her level, brushing a stray curl from her face and aching to take the rest of her hair down from that stupid hair tie.

“You know we can just go home if you want, right?”

Her freckles bunch together as she scrunches up her face. “But I’m okay, I’m not done.” Her gaze flickers to the throne behind me. “Don’t make the decision for me, Thor. I know my limits. I haven’t hit them yet.”

The conviction in her voice is assuring. I can’t let past relationships, not even the clusterfuck with Ava, get in the way of this blossoming relationship with Addison. I said never again, and at the time, I meant it. But staring at this fiery-haired beauty with a stubborn streak a mile wide and vulnerabilities just as deep, I can’t help it.

That unfamiliar lurching in my chest of being in freefall serves as a warning. I’m too close to this woman, in too deep. But it doesn’t matter. I don’t care. It’s only been a handful of weeks but I want to see where it goes. I want to be committed to her. I want to wake up beside her every morning and poke fun at her for her silk hair cap.

As I skim her high cheekbone with my fingers, she closes her eyes and sighs. There’s something special about the level of comfort a simple touch from a dominant to their submissive can provide both of them.

The fact it’s so obvious on her face this soon into our relationship gives me comfort. She appears to be easy to read in so many ways but considering she puts her life in my hands every time she submits to me... I can’t take that for granted.

It’s my job to double check, to triple check, to make sure my submissive is okay and ready to proceed both physically

and emotionally. If something goes wrong, that's on me.

Mine.

"I'm not trying to make the decision for you, kitten." I sweep my lips across hers. "Just making sure you're really okay."

She puffs out her bottom lip. "Can you make me come now please... Sir?" The glint in her eye tells me she knows the impact her chosen honorific will have on me. We haven't discussed a formal dynamic. There's been no talk of titles, or kneeling, or daily activities that a lot of other people in the lifestyle have and use. But when she drops the 'sir' into conversation, it definitely does things to me.

It might be a keeper.

"Or would you prefer Daddy?"

My whole body shudders, and she laughs. "I thought as much."

"Before Matty, sure. Not my kink but I coulda ran with it for you. But now? Definitely gives me the ick."

Standing up, I offer her my hand which she takes, rising with a steadiness I wasn't expecting. My girl can handle more than I give her credit for. I need to remember that.

I guide her to the throne, she takes her seat on the plush purple cushion, placing her arms on the arm rests. I tug out her hair tie, freeing her unruly waves over her bare shoulders, and place the crown on her head before planting a chaste kiss on her forehead.

When I get onto my knees between her feet, her brows twitch upward. "This is new. Isn't it the submissives who usually do the kneeling?"

Pushing her knees apart just a little, I line her legs up with the cuffs I'm not sure she's noticed and clip her in. "Check in."

"Green." Her eyes are bright, her cheeks are flushed, and her answer is breathy. Excitement charges the air between us. Every breath crackling and sparking.

Realizing my mistake, I click my tongue.

“What is it?”

I shrug. “Didn’t pull that drenched thong off you before strapping you into the chair. Guess I just have to tear it.”

She grins. “Better bring your a-game. Might only be a scrap of fabric, but it’s strong. And wet, so it’s even harder to break.”

I barely let her finish her sentence before I pull the chair out into recline. Her shrieking my name was worth the wait. This is what I wanted, her splayed out in front of me on the throne, body reclined, legs spread wide, nipples hard, and that white lace thong is soaked. She’s ready for me.

My cock is hard, painfully hard, but this isn’t about me and my cock. This is about worshiping my queen, letting her know just how proud I was to watch her play with Phoenix on the stage and knowing she was coming home with me.

Fucking perfection.

I’m not fucking around with her underwear. Unclipping my keys from my belt loop, I quickly find the penknife. When I flick it open, she gasps again. “What are you going to do with that?” Her eyes are wide, but there’s no fear in them, just curiosity.

“Not tonight, kitten.” I pat her thigh. “I’m not a big fan of knife play, but I could be convinced to try it if you’d like. Just not tonight.”

She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. “Maybe.”

If I’m not mistaken, knife play is Archer’s jam—one of the house doms here at Protocol. I make a mental note to talk to him about where to start with a curious submissive. I don’t want to send her into sub frenzy, but I definitely want to fulfill her desires and leave her soaked and hungry for more. There’s a fine balance.

Making light work of the thong despite Addison’s protests about how much the postage stamp of material cost her and how she’s now got a bra without a matching thong, I grin.

Bunching up the fabric in my hand I give her fair warning.
“Kitten, enough.”

She narrows her eyes at my hand. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

She opens her mouth but I don’t give her a chance to speak, her pretty lace panties are crammed into her open mouth. “I’m a nice guy, Addison, but don’t fuck with me. I’m still a dominant, and I’ll still assert myself over you.”

Unable to make out what she’s saying around the fabric in her pretty mouth, I assume she’s telling me yes sir, and that she’ll submit and be a good little girl even though the look on her face says “eat shit and die, asshole.”

I want to reward my girl, not punish her.

Tucking my knife away, I re-clip my keys onto my pants so I don’t lose them, and pull her hips toward me on the seat. My kitten’s pussy is drenched and already trickling onto the plush pillow under her ass.

Have I ever seen a prettier cunt?

I don’t think I’ve ever seen a jucier, pinker, more enticing pussy in all my years of sexual activity.

“You’re staring.” She’s somehow worked the panties from her mouth, and they’re resting on her chest.

“You’re perfect, Addison.”

She opens her mouth again, and before she says a word I know self-deprecation is going to fall from those plump lips.

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“But—”

“If you go down this path, kitten, you need to be prepared for the consequences. If you talk bad about yourself, I’m going to make you talk good about yourself. Ten fold.”

The message hits home, and she blanches.

“You’re a strong...” I kiss the inside of her knee, and her hips tilt. “Capable...” I kiss midway up her thigh. “Stunning

woman.” I kiss a little closer to her glistening pussy. “Who needs to be nicer to herself.”

“Or what?” Despite her hands gripping the wooden armrests on either side of her, her nostrils flare, and her eyes light up with challenge.

My kitten wants to play.

“Or I’ll smack this soaking wet pussy, Addison. That’s what.”

“I hate my—”

The end of her sentence is drowned out by the sound of my slap echoing around the room. Moaning, she wriggles, her body responding to the impact.

“Thighs.”

Another slap. Harder this time.

“Thor.”

“I told you, don’t fuck with me, kitten. Tell me you’re perfect.”

“I hate my stomach.”

A rumble vibrates deep in my body as I strike her again. She squirts, screams, and shifts her weight all at the same time.

“Tell me you’re perfect.”

“You’re perfect.”

Blood pumps through my veins, mostly rushing to my cock. While she’s not an all-out brat, Addison definitely picks her moments, and when she does, I have to admit, she drives me wild.

Another slap.

Another scream.

“Please make me come, Thor.”

Another slap.

“Check in.”

She growls.

“Check in.”

She rolls her hips.

“Check the fuck in, kitten.” My words are ground out through gritted teeth.

“But I’m not flying anywhere.”

This woman will be the death of me.

“I came in here wanting to let you come for me, Addison. I came in here wanting to worship your pussy with my tongue, repeatedly, until I drained you of every drop of your cum.”

She leans up so she can meet my stare over her body. “And now?”

“Now I’m going to make you work for it. But not until you check. The. Fuck. In.”

“Green,” she barks the word at me with such bite it makes me chuckle. Her fire burns hot, and I’m only going to fuel it.

“Good girl.”

She doesn’t have time to react before I land another perfectly positioned slap on her pussy, and I barely give her time to breathe before I bury my face between her legs.

Lapping, nipping, teasing with my teeth and tongue, I make my kitten writhe and wriggle, climbing higher as she chases her orgasm. Her hips angle so she’s clamping my face against her, but I pull back.

“Thor!” Her frustrated roar echoes around the small space.

Grinning up at her, her arousal trickles down my chin. “What’s the matter, kitten?”

“You’re going to regret calling me that when I claw your eyes out. Let me fucking come.”

I wag a finger at her, satisfaction seeping through my veins. “Ah, ah. We aren’t learning our lesson here, are we?”

“What lesson is—aaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh?”

Shoving my face back between her legs, I slide two fingers inside her pressing them against her G spot. “Check in.”

“Green.” Her chest heaves with panting breaths.

“Good. Say you’re perfect.”

She growls but doesn’t answer. Pressing my fingers more firmly against the sensitive spot on her front walls, she moans. “P-p-please, Thor.”

“I told you what you need to say to get what you need.”

A pained groan rattles through her body, and for a beat I’m convinced she’ll capitulate and give in. I should know better. She throws her head back onto the seat, clamping her mouth shut.

This is the moment she’s going to regret.

I spend the next twenty minutes driving her to senselessness. Pushing her closer and closer to orgasm, but keeping her just on the wrong side of release.

Sweat streams down her face, the pillow under her ass is drenched, her legs tremble so hard she likely couldn’t support her own weight if she were to stand, and her demands and pleas fall on deaf ears.

“Check in.”

“Yellow.”

“Say you’re perfect as you are.” I rub my thumb in circles around her clit while I wait for her response. It’s a two steps forward one step back dance we know the steps to at this point.

She covers her face with her forearm. “I’m perfect as I am.” The words are mumbled quietly against her skin, and it’s not enough. I pinch her clit, making her squeal.

“Louder, kitten.” I put my mouth back over her clit, trusting she’s going to give me what I need and maneuvering her toward what she needs too.

“I’m perfect as I am.” Her voice is raw from screaming, from pleading with me to let her come, from yelling at me that

I'm a prick and an asshole, but she says it loudly and clearly. Not only that, but she repeats it, or most of it before she falls over the edge into blissful release.

She squirts all over my face as her nails cut into my scalp. If she doesn't draw blood I'll be shocked. Her thighs lock as best they can with her legs still cuffed to the chair, and her spine curves into a deep bend as she lets herself go.

A long drawn-out orgasm rolls through her body making it quiver and shake, making her muscles twitch and her eyes roll back in her head. I feel the waves crashing through her as my tongue presses against her salty-sweet pussy, demanding more.

Now that she's come for me, I want more, need more.

I need it all.

There's no comparison. Making this woman come for me, making her feel so good she can't control herself is everything. And I can't explain how content and satisfied it makes me feel while I do it.

Relentless lashes of my tongue against her swollen and sensitive clit make her scream and wriggle on the chair, but she can't escape. This is her punishment for not acquiescing to what I told her to say, when I told her to say it.

She's going to come so hard, so fast, and so often that her essence leaves her body. I'm going to suck her very soul out of her clit.

“Stop, Thor. St-stop. I c-ca-cant.”

When I don't stop, she screams through a second orgasm, with a third close behind. Or perhaps the second just lasts for a while, either way I don't give a fuck. I live for her screams, for the taste of her cum as it squirts into my face, and for the way her body sags when she thinks she's done.

I demand a check in, she's still yellow, so I replace my soaking face back where I belong. It's my favorite place in the whole world. Making her scream my name all over again as I pull orgasm after orgasm from her exhausted body, reminding her who she belongs to, showing her exactly what I'm capable of. There's no greater feeling.

“B-b-black.” Her safe word is clear, loud, and falls in the otherwise quiet room with a heaviness.

“I’ve got you, kitten. I’ve got you.” Releasing her feet from the cuffs with one hand, I stroke her stomach with the other. “Let me take care of you, okay?”

She smiles down at me with hazy eyes, and if I was a betting man I’d say she could probably have taken another orgasm or two, easily. But that’s not my decision to make. As her dominant, my call is to stop when she says she’s had enough, clean her up, take her home, and take care of her.

She says she’s given all she can give, and it’s my job to believe her. No matter what I think. “Such a good girl, Addison. Let’s get you home, okay?”

CHAPTER 19

Addison

SUCH A GOOD GIRL.

A warm hum encompasses my entire body as I stretch out. Oof. Everything hurts. All my muscles groan at the unwelcome movement. My eyelids refuse to open, but a quick pat of the mattress beside me comes up empty. Thor is gone, the sheets are cool, and I have no idea what time it is.

My curls are stuck to my face, I have no bonnet on, and another quick pat of my chest confirms I'm naked. There's also a trail of drool from the corner of my mouth.

Fuck. So hot.

Thor probably took one look at the troglodyte lying next to him in bed and fled the state.

Not sure why, I'm such a fucking catch.

Rolling onto my side, I sigh. Last night feels like a dream, a beautiful, orgasm-hazy dream. After I safe-worded—perhaps sooner than I needed to, but I didn't want to take any chances on pushing *too* far—Thor sprang into action. It's so nice being able to trust him to stop when I need him to.

My ex... well, he kinda marched to the beat of his own drum. Woke up with him inside me once or twice, and I can't say I was thrilled about it. If I'd stayed with him longer I could have seen things crossing the line. Not anything he said, or even did, just a feeling I had in my gut that I couldn't trust him to stop when I hit my limit.

Last night, I was a little out of it, fighting sleep as I lay there, ass-naked, skin stuck to the wooden throne, crown dangling from my curls. I must have looked a sight then, too.

I remember Thor's low, soothing tone, warm washcloths between my legs, being picked up and placed carefully on the day bed that was at the edge of the room. He stroked my hair, my cheek, and wrapped me in a blanket while feeding me cashews and encouraging me to drink more fruit juice.

At one point another voice entered the room. Not Jagger this time, but I couldn't place it. Thor gave him instructions about a bag somewhere, and a few minutes later I was being dressed in a pair of Thor's sweats, t-shirts, and sweatshirts. They smelled of his detergent and made me feel safe.

He carried me out of the staff entrance to the club and held me in the back seat while someone drove us home.

Home.

Stretching again, the movements feel a little easier, not as stiff, so I risk a third stretch, holding it for a beat or two.

Is this my home now? I've come to think of it as home, but part of me fears the feelings I'm developing, this growing fondness for Thor and Matthew that has taken root in my chest is one-sided.

Sure, he was all kinds of amazing last night. Our date was perfect, our playing at the club was everything I needed it to be, and the aftercare was... Well, I'd do it all over again right now if it meant my giant boyfriend turned into a tender manservant who would have given me the world with a bow on it last night if he could.

But is it just a physical thing for him? Is it just the child care and the sex?

It's not. I know it's not, I feel it in the pit of my stomach. It's more for him, too, but those deep-seated vulnerabilities aren't easy to shirk off when you're staring down the barrel of something scary and new.

Pushing myself up onto my elbows, I force my eyes open. The ache in my bones is definitely a good ache, a contented

ache, an ache I've earned. It's not bad pain. Curiosity about the marks Phoenix made on my back and ass drags me out of bed to find a mirror.

My stomach falls when there's no bruising, and a few red marks. Huh. I'd kind of hoped for something... more. A little more of a reminder of the night before. At least with harder impact I'm left with a pretty bruise covering my skin that lasts for days.

I wonder if I could convince Thor to paint my skin with his palms. I drop a text to tell him I'm hopping in the shower, and I'll be down ASAP. Reality sets in. This is my place of work. The weight of what we've done presses against my ribcage making me nauseous.

It's after ten, but Thor isn't supposed to be at work. It's Sunday, so while I wasn't supposed to take Matthew to school this morning, I still have responsibilities, and my time working here hasn't finished. Will he be mad that I slept in?

Within seconds, Thor comes into the bedroom with an appraising stare starting at my toes and scorching a path all the way up my body, landing on my eyes. "Stop panicking."

"That obvious?"

"I saw the dots moving, stopping, moving, stopping and no words actually being sent." He crosses the room and pulls me to his chest, kissing my hair like it's not a wild bird's nest on top of my head.

"Breathe. It's the weekend. And even if it wasn't? Aftercare isn't about cleaning you up and kicking you out of our bed the next morning. I can handle Matty without you, we were fine. We separated a box of Fruit Loops into different colors and made some jewelry. You needed to sleep, to recover after your busy night."

He takes half a step back, cupping my face with both hands. "How are you feeling?" He searches my face with such intensity I can't stop the question that comes out in response.

"Who was she?"

He tips his head to the side, his brows drawing together.
“Who?”

“Whoever left you just a little broken?”

He sighs, kisses my forehead again. “What gave it away?”

“The way your eyes pierce into my soul every time you ask for a check in or how I’m feeling after a session.”

“I need to get back downstairs to Matty, but the short version is that I had a submissive a long time ago. Her name was Ava. We were a long-term, twenty-four-seven dynamic, and I thought we were sound. I thought we had good foundations, good communication, and we were doing all the right things.”

My chest tightens. “You loved her.”

He doesn’t say yes or nod, but he doesn’t have to. I can feel it from the way he’s talking about her. He sweeps my curls out of my face, or rather tries to, they don’t budge much, and I can’t help but wince. It’s not supposed to be wash day, but I don’t have a choice. I can’t go outside looking like this.

“As it turns out, the communication wasn’t where I thought it was, or where it needed to be. She lied to me during a scene, told me she was fine, gave me a green check in when she wasn’t at all green.”

My stomach freefalls. No, no. I’m inexperienced, but even I know this story can’t end well.

“Some submissives tell their dominant what they *think* we want to hear.” He rubs the back of his neck while shaking his head, his light-brown hair falling into his face. “When really? We want you to safe word if that’s where you’re at. We want you to say you’ve met your limit. We don’t want anything but the truth.”

His eyes brim with unshed tears, and the pain radiates from his body. “I should have pushed back. I should have checked again, and again, I should have made sure she meant green, but I took her at face value. I took her green and kept going. She wasn’t okay. It was a disaster.”

The anguish in his voice twists my heart.

“I pushed her further than she was okay with. She dropped hard, fast, and went into a depression. We stayed together and worked through the depression, but the trust was fractured, I couldn’t... I didn’t...” He sucks in a steadying breath. “I never played with her again. I couldn’t trust that she’d be honest during a scene, and I never wanted to hurt her like that again.”

Tears are trickling down my face, and I have no idea when they started. Sniffing doesn’t stop them. “That’s why you only do one night stands.” It’s not a question. Clearly defined parameters of a one night thing are far easier to navigate than a long-term deal. It makes sense. You lay your boundaries, do your thing, get your jollies and move along before you catch feels.

He nods. “Didn’t work so well with you, kitten.” He brushes his lips against mine, sending warmth through my body. “I’m falling for you. And I’m scared. I don’t really know what to do with any of that to be honest. But I know I’m not ready for you to leave.”

I open my mouth but he covers my lips with his finger. “This isn’t about Matty. I could figure out my life with Matty without you. No offense. I mean, Mom’s going to be back on her feet in no time, and she’s always wanted grandkids to adore and fuss over. So stop that train.”

My shoulders soften, but my brain keeps churning for some other reason he’d want me around that isn’t just because he likes me.

“I’m falling for you, Addison.” The intensity in both his voice and his blue eyes brings a lump to my throat as he repeats himself.

“I thought it was one-sided.” Stupid brain letting the thoughts roll out of my mouth before actually returning the sentiment. “I think I might love you.” Jesus fucking Christ. It’s not exactly the makings of an age-old love story, but I suppose it got the point across.

It hasn't even been eight weeks. Two fucking months. And I'm in love with him. That's too fast, right? Can you love someone in two months?

He chuckles. "Good. Cause I think I might love you, too."

Huh. I guess you can love someone in under two months.

He kisses me again before turning me toward the bathroom with a smack on the ass. "Go get a shower, then we'll eat, and maybe we'll head out to the zoo?"

I like the sound of that. "Great idea. Can we get ice cream?" I say that like if he says no that'll stop me from going to the zoo, but we both know he's going to say yes.

"We'll see. If you're a good girl."

"I'm always a good girl."

CHAPTER 20

Addison

THE ZOO WAS A BAD IDEA. AS MUCH AS MATTHEW SAID HE wanted to see the animals, we've been here less than an hour, and he's been fizzing over since we got in the car to leave. I can't tell if it's the weather, the crowds, the environment, or if he's just having a big feelings kind of day but he's not handling the outing well at all.

Every time Thor or I suggest we head back to the house and do something more low-key, his lip trembles, and he pleads with us to stay. Matthew isn't the only one fizzing over either. Thor is bubbling, and I'm just hoping we can get everyone home alive before he explodes.

Thor and I agree that we can have another fifteen minutes at the zoo, and then we'll leave. That seemed to settle Matthew. He's happily reading about the Southern Three-banded Armadillo with his noise cancelling headphones on his head while his father stares at what I assume is a family with neurotypical kids.

I can't imagine how hard it is for him to have had this life thrust upon him. But he's handling it with such grace and compassion it's sometimes easy to forget that becoming a father overnight is a big fucking deal.

I reach out to touch his arm, but he pulls it away. He's stewing. If I was a more seasoned submissive, or I knew him better, or for longer, maybe I'd know how to help him. Right now, though, helplessness has settled into my bones, and I don't know how to make the situation better for either of them.

“It’s going to be okay, Thor. You’re a great father.”

Admittedly I don’t know him all that well, I don’t have his tells down pat, but there’s a storm brewing in the Snyder household. I’m not even sure Thor himself knows that he’s bubbling under that calm, stoic, controlled surface. But I feel it in my bones.

I’m in the “there’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing choices” camp, but I’m not sure that I have the right clothing to weather Thor’s storm. I guess we’ll see.

CHAPTER 21

Thor

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED THE ZOO. WE HAD AN ANNUAL PASS WHILE I was a kid—a gift from my grandparents every Christmas—and I have so many good memories of spending time here with Mom.

She used to make animal noises to make me giggle as we walked around the exhibits, and while we'd picnic in the car, every now and then she'd buy me a popsicle or an ice cream.

Now I'm the parent, and I'm taking my son to the zoo for the very first time. I've got my girl on one side, and my kid on the other, and he can have all the fucking ice cream he wants.

“Have you been to the zoo before, Matthew?” Addison hands him a map and his water bottle.

“Mom took me a few years ago. But I haven't been in a long time.”

“What's your favorite animal?” She takes a sip from her own bottle as I survey the busy entrance to the zoo.

“Polar bears.”

She gives him a soft smile. “What's your favorite animal in the zoo?”

He studies the map in his hand for a moment before answering. “I like lions.” He takes a drink. “Do you know that female lions do most of the hunting?”

Addison shakes her head. “I didn't. But that makes sense since I do most of the grocery shopping.” She winks at him and we set off on our way.

“What’s your favorite animal, Addison?” Matty’s eyes never settle on one thing as we walk, but flit between the groups of people as we pass. He’s pale, and while he seemed okay when we left the house, now that we’re here... I’m not so sure.

“I love llamas.” Addison pulls up her pant leg, showing bright pink llama socks. “They’re my favorite animal.”

“Did you know that llamas don’t bite? They spit when they’re agitated, but that’s mostly at each other. Llamas also kick and neck wrestle each other when agitated.”

She laughs. “I have, in fact, seen llamas neck wrestle. From a safe distance. They weren’t wrestling me.”

Some guy bumps into me, shouldering me with a giant cooler bag over his shoulder as he chorales the four kids around him through the space. Biting down a retort that’s dangling off the tip of my tongue, it’s hard not to yell when he doesn’t even apologize.

“Did *you* know that llamas are vegetarians? Also, a llama’s stomach has three compartments. They are called the rumen, omasum, and abomasum. A cow’s stomach has four compartments. Like cows, llamas must regurgitate and re-chew their food to digest it completely.” Sounds like Adi did some reading before she came to the zoo. Either that, or she’s a secret llama farmer. Wouldn’t put it past her.

There’s too many people. Three separate groups of school kids with chaperones bustle past us as we wait for space to move forward. I don’t know why I’m so on edge, but if one more person bumps into me, I’m going to lose it.

“Three compartments?” Matty’s eyes go wide as he slips his hand into Addison’s and she maneuvers him toward one of the groups. What the fuck is she doing? He hates crowds. He won’t want to go through them.

“Mmhmm.” She nods. “They don’t just spit a little either, they spit a lot.” Pressing her hand to his lower back, she guides him through the crowd.

“Just wait for them to pass.”

“It’s all good,” she replies, moving ahead.

A tightness creeps up my chest as they walk forward. I should have gone first, cleared some space for Matty to walk through, but Addison didn’t talk to me before she decided to just bull her way through a group of thirty elementary school kids.

When she turns and beckons me toward them, her nose wrinkles. “You okay?” she mouths.

Nodding, I step toward her. As I do, two of the kids not looking at the fruit bats the rest of their class is scrambling to see, crash into my kid, sending Matty flat on his face.

Pushing past Addison, I reach for him. He waves me off, already scrambling to his feet, his shoulders shaking as tears plop onto his t-shirt.

His bottom lip trembles as he hugs his body. There’s dirt on his knees, but other than being a little skinned, there’s no blood or any other marks on him that I can see. I offer him a hug he doesn’t accept. “You okay?” My eyes scan his body once again, making sure he didn’t land on something sharp.

“I’m fine, Dad. Just surprised me.”

He’s not fine. Neither am I. What was Adi thinking pulling him through a group of kids like that? Matty isn’t like other kids. He doesn’t like crowds, and noise, and she knows that.

As I’m checking him over for a third time, Addison’s hand touches my arm. “He’s okay, Thor. Really, he’s not bleeding.”

She crouches to look at his knees. “Barely a scratch.” She brushes off some tiny pebbles and dirt.

“What were you thinking?” Grinding the words out between clenched teeth, I look around. Teachers and helpers are watching, other parents stare as Matty’s cries escalate from his quiet shoulder-shakes to all out sobbing.

“You should have waited.” Directing my attention back to Matty, I try to offer him another hug, or at least touch his arm to try to soothe him. But he’s not interested. He bats me away

like it's my fault. Except it's not. I didn't do this. I told her to wait.

Guiding Matty out of the crowd, I search for somewhere quiet to sit him down. But the more I try to help him settle, the more agitated he gets. He throws his water bottle at a nearby wall before slumping onto the ground.

“Do you want me to try?”

“Haven't you done enough?” The words are laced with venom as they come out of my mouth, and part of me knows it's misdirected. She didn't do it on purpose. It's not her fault we can't have a “normal” trip to the zoo like I did when I was a child. This is about me, my failings as a father to provide a safe and comfortable experience for my child. But right now, right now it's about Addison and how she should have fucking listened to me when I asked her to wait.

Her shoulders slump, and part of me wants to take the words back, knowing they're hitting her in all her insecurities. My kitten doesn't back down, though. “It could help, Thor.”

It's here where I should stop and take a beat. Rationally speaking, I know I shouldn't lash out, but I don't stop myself when another retort burns at the back of my mouth. “What would you know?”

CHAPTER 22

Addison

HE MUMBLES SOMETHING IN RESPONSE THAT I CAN'T QUITE make out.

“What?”

“I said what would you know? You're not exactly all that experienced with children, are you?”

He doesn't need to mention the fact that a child under my care almost drowned, or that my sister thinks I'm incompetent and won't let me babysit for her kids. The implication is sharp and heavy in his words, and my whole body recoils.

He's just saying that to hurt me, to make me feel as badly as he does. It's classic deflection. Snap at the person trying to help make you feel better, to hurt them.

I have no idea why the human psyche works the way it does, but I know this move. Doesn't make it hurt any less, though. Misdirected anger is anger all the same.

We've gone from “such a good girl,” to “you're a shit childcare provider” in such a short space of time that I've got emotional whiplash. And while I feel for the guy, I'm no one's fucking punching bag. I didn't deserve that comment, and neither Matthew nor I deserve Thor's shitty attitude.

He and I had broached the subject of perhaps finding a therapist for Matthew. Being dumped on your father's doorstep out of the blue is a traumatic experience and will likely need worked through. But the more I see of Thor today, the more I realize that perhaps they both could do with having

some professional help to work through their issues. Perhaps even father-son therapy – is that even a thing?

I put a mental pin in it and vow to come back to the subject when Thor isn't being a raging douche canoe.

I'm sure this goes against every element of submission, but fuck him and the bad mood he rode in on. When he turns and skulks off in the direction of the “normal” family he seems to be pining over, I usher Matthew out and point the car toward home.

Thor can walk off his bad fucking mood by himself.

CHAPTER 23

Thor

IN HINDSIGHT, I PROBABLY DESERVED THAT.

But I'm still pissed as hell.

The temptation to spend hours propping up the bar at work and drown my sorrows in non-alcoholic beer is strong. The temptation to go somewhere else and drown my sorrows in *real* beer is stronger.

But I vowed I'd never be like my father, and Matty deserves a dad who doesn't numb his emotions with mood altering substances.

Addison does too.

Staring at my front door for longer than is reasonable, I sigh. I've been a dick today. She was trying to help, and I snapped at her. I don't feel much better in myself, but I need to pull it together and be the man they both need me to be when I step through this door.

CHAPTER 24

Addison

TOOK HIM A FEW HOURS TO MAKE HIS WAY HOME, AND HE'S somewhat subdued, but he's picking up the Lego blocks that somehow exploded all over the kitchen, without complaint.

Matthew has gone to bed. His stimming continued long after we got home from the zoo. He didn't eat lunch or dinner, he pulled his hair over and over until I was convinced he'd leave himself bald. And when I managed to tease his thick, blond locks from his fingers, he took to rocking back and forth.

All I could do was sit with him and wait until the moment passed. And when it did, he was so worn out he went to bed almost immediately.

Thor grips the countertop with both hands, and drops his head forward with a sigh. My heart twinges. Granted he behaved like a giant man-child at the zoo earlier, he's going through some things, and I want to be there for him, to take his pain away.

Pressing myself against his back, I wrap my arms around him, planting my palms on his chest as I inhale his musky scent. He smells like fall, campfires and fresh air, crisp leaves and cinnamon.

Grabbing my hands, he pulls my arms around him tighter.

"What do you need, Thor? What can I do?" I've struggled with the concept of submissives kneeling for their dominants, but right now? If I thought for one second it would cheer him up even for a moment, I'd kneel at his feet and offer him

whatever he wanted. It's a heady rush through my body that I wasn't prepared for.

He turns to face me, cupping my face with his warm palms and pressing a hard kiss to my forehead. "What do *you* need, kitten?" He searches my eyes, pain etched across his chiseled features. "I shouldn't have snapped like that, I'm sorry. You're great with Matthew. I've never doubted your ability to care for him."

I'm conflicted. The sincerity in his voice, his eyes, in how he holds my face so I stare at him while he speaks, it all makes a direct hit to my chest. Letting my eyes flutter closed with a sigh, I tip my head back. I'm so stressed out, my muscles are tense, my body and mind are highly strung, and I can't seem to stop the destructive narrative rolling through my head.

He might be trying to retract what he said, but those words landed on my skin like cigarette burns. I already beat myself up enough over being a colossal fuck up without having him join forces with my inner monologue, and my family's voice in my head.

"I need the noise to stop for just a minute." Opening my eyes, his are still fixed on me. "Can you quiet my mind for me, Thor?" It's probably not a fair question, I don't even know what I'm asking for, what I need, I don't know where this could lead that would help me quiet my thoughts.

I guess subspace could do the trick, it's that floaty, happy place submissives go to let themselves just be. I'm not sure I could get there tonight, though. Would spanking help? I feel like if I'm distracted by the sting in my ass I can't possibly dwell on the stinging in my mind.

And based on how much anger he had buzzing through his body earlier, perhaps letting him take a few slaps out on my ass wouldn't be the worst thing for him either, right?

The rush of warmth between my thighs tells me my body's on board. He's trailing kisses down my neck and across my collar bone while his hands rest on my hips. It's not enough. There are too many layers between us, too much space, too many emotions hanging in the air around us.

“Thor?”

His head snaps up as his gaze settles on mine.

“Spank me?”

“It’s not a good idea, Addison.”

Rationally speaking, I know this. After the emotional day we’ve just had, he’s right. It’s not the best time to jump into a spanking session. But I want it, need it. Shouldn’t I be the one to decide when I get spanked or don’t?

“Please, Sir. I’m okay. I want it.”

His eyes flare molten, but his body hesitates for just a second like he still isn’t convinced. But before I can question him, or myself, he throws me over his shoulder and makes his way down to the dungeon. Decision made.

He places me on a bench with padded rests for my arms and legs, bending me slightly at the middle, and presenting my ass to him. He makes light work of my pants and panties, a rustle of fabric the only sound in the room as my clothes drop to the floor.

“Just my hand, kitten?”

Shaking my head, my blood is rushing in my ears. I need it to hurt. “No, Sir.”

Clenching my ass cheeks together, and releasing them a few times, I sag into the leather padding of the bench. The swishing sound of him rubbing his hands together sends a sliver of lust between my thighs before he grabs my ass cheeks. Running his hands over my skin, he warms me up. Grabbing, kneading, rubbing, even dragging his short nails across me. By the time he’s done and the first slap lands, I’m a puddle of need, and my begging for more comes out a jumbled mess of mumbling.

The escalation from warm up to stinging, burning, aching smacks is fast, maybe too fast, and the number of check ins are fewer than last time he spanked me. It’s as though he knows I can take more, need more, would demand more if he didn’t give it to me.

He's holding back, though. That much I know for sure.

"The paddle, Thor. Please? Can we try the paddle?"

Pretty sure the coolness between my legs is my trickling arousal. I never knew I was a squirter until Thor drove me senseless with need. It's messy, it's loud, but the more I squirt the more savage and unhinged Thor seems to get.

He fucking loves it. He fucking *lives* to drive me to destroy the furniture with arousal and cum.

It's hot as shit.

He barely gives me warning before the first paddle smack lands. It's cold wood against hot skin, a sharp thud, followed by pain radiating throughout my ass cheek. My body releases more tension as I let the feeling pass through my body.

Fuck.

I like it.

"Again." The word escapes my lips on a pant, and my body trembles waiting for the next hit to land. When it does, my body seizes, that one was a little too hard. I try to twist to look at Thor, but I can't angle my body that way. The burn rolling through my ass is hot, and deep, and felt like quite the step up from the previous one.

He's usually good at stepping up between each impact. That was a doozy. Hissing a breath out between my teeth, I shake my head. Maybe it wasn't that bad, maybe it's just because it's the paddle and not his—fuck. Another hit lands on my other ass cheek, and it's not just me.

"B-b-black." Body sagging against the cushions, I wait patiently for him to rescue me. To pick me up off the bench and carry me to safety. So when another smack lands, ripping a blood-curdling scream from my body, the world kicks into crisis.

Tears stream down my faces as I chant "Black, black, black, black," body shaking, pain radiating through every muscle, not just the one he smacked.

I jump up off the bench, holding both hands up as I stumble away from him.

“What the fuck? Addison? Addison?” The alarm in his voice mirrors the same panic charging through my body.

Fight, flight, or freeze has kicked in, and despite being half naked, and barely able to stand on shaky legs, I need to flee. I don’t understand why my reaction is so extreme, but there’s no time to unpack it.

When he tries to approach me, to pick me up, screams rip from my body like a banshee. “Don’t touch me. D-don’t touch me.”

He’s never hurt me before. He stopped last time. All the rational self-talk I can think of isn’t helping me calm down from whatever the fuck has me so spooked.

“Addison, what happened? Talk to me. Why are you freaking out?”

The room spins as I sway on my feet, he surges forward to catch me, but I can’t let him touch me. Whatever trust we had between us when we walked through the door to the dungeon together, is broken. Maybe even gone. I felt so safe with him. He’s never hurt me before. He’d never hurt me on purpose.

Fuck. Fuck. This is my fault. I shouldn’t have pushed him. He said it wasn’t a good idea, and I made him. Fuck.

Anguish creases his face as he searches mine for answers. “Talk to me, kitten. What happened?”

“I safe worded. I safe worded, and you didn’t stop.”

His hair falls from his hair tie as he shakes his head faster and faster. “No. No. I stopped when you said the word black.”

Heaving sobs rack my body as I shiver so hard my teeth chatter. Sliding to the floor I scoot back from him until my back meets a wall. He holds his hands up, approaching me like a scared animal, blanket in hand. “I won’t touch you, but I’d like for you to put this over yourself, okay?”

On autopilot, I grab the blanket and use it to cover my bare legs, though it does little for the bone rattling shakes holding

my body hostage. “I said black before that. You hit too hard, Thor. Y-y-you... you missed the safe word.” A fresh wave of tears pour down my face.

His face is pale, contorted with torment and agony. “Addison... I didn’t hear you. I’m so fucking sorry.” He surges forward again, arms outstretched, and part of me wants to go to him. Part of me wants to launch myself into his arms and let him take care of me, but the rest, the bigger part, wants to run fast and far.

She’s the one I need to listen to.

He drags his fingers through his hair. “Fuck. I’m so sorry, Addison. So sorry.” He mumbles half to himself that we don’t have a set protocol or routine of how to recover when accidents happen. He’s cussing himself out. He made a mistake with his ex, we talked about it, that’s probably weighing heavily on his mind right now, but all I can feel is cold, right through to my toes.

“What do you need?” His attention snaps back to me with laser focus. “What can I do?” He keeps his distance, staying out of my space. “Can I run a bath? You’re shivering.”

A bath sounds good, but I’m not sure I can be alone with my thoughts right now. “Can you pass my phone, please?”

His body visibly deflates as he stands, walking to my discarded pants on the floor. When he hands me my phone, he sighs. “What can I do?”

Ignoring his question because I don’t have any answers for him, I shoot off a text to the Sub Club group chat.

9-1-1.

PAIGE

Where are you? Thor’s?

I reply with his address.

KENZIE

Is he home? Do you need help with Matthew?

He's here, he can watch Matthew. I just need out.

PAIGE

On my way.

KENZIE

What do you need?

Can you run a bath please?

KENZIE

On it.

“Paige is on her way.” I don’t meet his stare. His devastation is suffocating in the space. But I need to step out of this moment and figure myself out before I can decide how we need to proceed together.

“I’m so sorry.” His voice is shaky. If I looked at him, I’d probably see tears trickling down his face, but I can’t. I need to leave.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. I just need a minute.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Addison.” The pain that coats his voice is soul crushing. “But I understand.”

My heart splits in two at the sadness on his face, but I need space.

By the time Paige arrives and abandons her car at the end of Thor’s driveway, I’ve managed to put my pants and shoes on, and dry my tears. She ushers me out to the car without a word spoken to Thor, and bundles me inside, not missing the wince and hiss of pain as I sink into her passenger seat.

We ride to Kenzie’s house in silence.

Thor was right about not playing tonight, maybe he's right about me leaving, too. Rationally speaking, it should probably have been me saying very clearly, "Ow, dammit, I said black. That hurt."

And him saying, "Oh, shit. I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you the first time. Are you okay?" And that would be the end of it because I don't have anything in my background that would send me into a panic after a safe-word was missed.

Maybe if it wasn't a kink situation that's what this would be. But I'm not okay. My gut says to take a beat.

Austin opens the door as we pull up, and he comes hurrying down the pathway. Fifty bucks says Thor gave him a heads up as to what happened. Austin pulls open the car door, picking me up without a word and carrying me into the house.

I don't have the strength to argue. I link my arms around his neck and rest my head on his chest. When we're inside, I expect him to put me down, to stand me on my own two feet, or sit me on the love seat next to his girl.

But he doesn't.

He sinks onto the couch, still holding me tight to his chest, and he just... sits.

The final pieces of a dam I didn't know was crumbling fall away, and I sob into my best friend's boyfriend's shoulder until my throat is raw and my chest hurts. I have no idea why I'm so upset.

Austin doesn't shush me, he doesn't rush me, or move me, he just holds me. And in the moment it's all I need. Someone to hold the pieces of me together until I work through my trauma.

Because that's what it feels like, fucking trauma.

When I finally stop blubbing and whimpering enough to pull together a sentence, I clear my throat. "Did he tell you what happened?"

Austin doesn't shift under my weight. "He did not give me specifics. But he did inform me that he missed a safe word,

yes ma'am."

The silence that fills the room is overwhelming.

"It was an accident." I'm not sure if I'm trying to convince my friends and this stoic, comforting dominant whose arms are steadfastly wrapped around me, or myself.

"Yes, ma'am. It was. But that does not negate the fact that your experience was still clearly traumatic." He strokes my arm. "In every dynamic, both parties are capable of making mistakes. It is how we learn from and recover from those mistakes that is important."

"Learn from?" Wiping my face with the heel of my hand, I risk a glance up at him. His features are soft, there isn't a trace of impatience or irritation on his face. Austin really is one of the good ones. But it sounds like he's speaking from experience. "Have you made a mistake before?"

A rumbling chuckle vibrates his body. "Yes ma'am."

I chance a glance over at Kenz. "With Kenzie?"

She shakes her head as he answers "no ma'am."

"How did it feel for you?"

"When I was a newer dominant, it would feel crippling. Once I matured, I recognized it as required for growth. Ultimately everyone involved is human, and we all have the capacity to make mistakes. It is unfortunate that Thor did not discuss how you both prefer to address an error should it occur."

"I'm kind of new to this whole thing, Austin. I'm not sure I'd have had an answer for him even if he'd asked. I don't even know why I freaked the way I did. He's never hurt me before, he stopped at my safe-word last time..."

"It is a shock. You got scared, and that is okay. In some ways it can feel like you have failed. Guilt is a powerful emotion. Ultimately if you are mature enough as a couple you will talk through it. That does not fix things by any means, but it makes a difference and can leave you second guessing and underperforming in some cases until the confidence returns."

Nodding, I follow his words, but right now the idea of ever being in that space again is a hard no. “How do you fix something like this? I can’t even imagine...”

He tightens his grip around me, his thumb still stroking my arm. I feel like I’m being irrational right now. But I can’t shake the unease holding my body hostage.

Mackenzie worries her thumb nail between her teeth, leaning forward, elbows on her thighs, and while I can’t see Paige in my peripheral, I feel her discomfort. I imagine she’s been here a number of times, as a switch, maybe even on both sides of the fence.

“If I care for the person I have hurt or crossed a line with, I revert to the basics of our dynamic and rebuild our communication. Lots of work on providing feedback. Only entering a session if there will be consistent, almost over the top checkpoints. Simultaneously working back to the tool or activity where the error occurred.”

I re-bury my head in his shoulder, his heartbeat thumping against my body in a calming rhythm.

“I need to be confident in my submissive before I can be confident in myself. If I cannot trust that person to communicate clearly I will not enter a scene, and it is grounds for removing the dynamic.”

I gasp. “Breaking up?”

“Typically it is recoverable. But in some cases it becomes clear that a submissive is a red flag. There are as many red flag submissives out there as there are red flag dominants.”

Silence fills the room again as I mull his words over in my head. “I don’t think this is red flag territory. I think this is just a really awful accident. He even said earlier we shouldn’t play, but I convinced him...” My breathing is shuddery as I try to steady myself. “It’s just about figuring out how we can both move forward from this.” Shivering, I pull my arms tight around my body. “I don’t think I ever want to be spanked again. Ever.”

Even as the words come out of my mouth I'm aware that they're a lie. I love being spanked. I can't imagine a world where I don't get a bruised ass ever again.

Perhaps never again with a paddle.

"I do not believe Thor to be a red flag dominant. But only you can know if your dynamic can recover from this. If the trust is lost completely, it can be hard to repair. But the relationship is often stronger because of it."

It takes another fifteen minutes of sitting in silence listening to Kenzie's boyfriend's heart thrumming in his chest before I'm ready to stand up. Kenzie hurries through to the main bathroom, topping up the now cool bath with fresh hot water.

She turns to leave, but I grab her hand. "Can you both stay?"

Paige, who still hasn't said a word, nods, stepping toward me. "Of course we can." She helps me get undressed, and it's hard to miss the wince when Kenz spots the already blossoming bruise on my ass.

If I'd gotten it the regular way, working up to it, earning each small increase in his strikes, I'd be wearing it as a badge of honor right now. But all I feel when I catch a glimpse of my mottled butt in the mirror as I climb cautiously into the tub, is sadness.

CHAPTER 25

Thor

ADDISON

Staying here for the day tomorrow, I'll be back x

AUSTIN HAD ALREADY GIVEN ME A HEADS UP THAT ADDISON was staying over at their place. Kenzie stopped by to pick up an overnight bag after Adi went to bed. I half expected Kenzie to punch me in the face, but she surprised me with a bone-crunching hug instead.

“She’s okay,” she assures me. “She’s asleep. Exhausted.”

Nodding, I sink my teeth into my lip in a bid to avoid the tears threatening to spill down my face. I did it again. I pushed a submissive I love across the line. I let my emotions get the better of me, played when I shouldn’t, and Addison paid the price for my stupidity and arrogance.

“You okay?” Kenzie’s piercing blue stare weighs heavily on my face. “Stupid question. Do you have someone you can talk to? Do you need me to send Austin over?”

I already told Austin no, twice. He insisted I needed to talk it out and that everything would be okay. I wish I had his faith. Addison doesn’t want a fuck up for a dominant. She deserves better. If it was a one off, I’d say it’s fixable, but this is the second woman I’ve hurt.

I knew we shouldn’t have played tonight. I fucking knew it. But instead of listening to my head, or my heart, I led with my cock. What a fucking idiot.

I guess technically I led with my hand and a paddle. Fucking idiot.

Self-loathing crawls over my body like fire ants, each waiting to take up position before they all sink their teeth into me at the same time.

“I’ll be okay.”

She doesn’t look like she believes me. I don’t blame her, I don’t believe me either. Slade’s visiting Protocol Cedar Rapids, and while part of me is tempted to hop a flight to Iowa to talk to him, that feels like somewhat of an overreaction.

Maybe.

Is anything an overreaction when it comes to the person you love?

After an hour pacing the floors of the house, it’s obvious I’m not going to pull myself out the other side of this by myself. Mom’s still in Seattle, she won’t be here for another couple weeks, and I can’t leave Matty by himself upstairs.

He deserves better than to wake up in the morning to a fucked up father. I owe it to him to figure this out.

With a heavy sigh, and an overbearing sense of epic failure, I shoot off a text to some of the house doms asking if anyone is free and able to come to my house.

It may be the middle of the night, but many of us are night owls. Jagger replies that he’s with Archer, and asks if it’s okay for both of them to stop by. Since Archer is a newer dom, he doesn’t have much experience and tends to hang out with one of the club’s more experienced doms whenever he can.

Instead of learning from one mentor, he’s learning a little bit from all of us. It’s a smart strategy, and if a dominant ever needed to learn anything about the lifestyle, it’s about how to recover from a fuck up. Maybe between the three of us we can come up with a way for me to salvage the remnants of my relationship with Addison.

When I open the door to my colleagues, Jagger thrusts a six-pack at me and pushes his way into the house. “Is it the

mom? Did she come back and take the kid?"

I can't help the chuckle that bubbles into my chest. "No, Caz hasn't come back for Matty."

Jagger is terrible with names. Probably terrible with faces too, but he rarely spends enough time with the same one for it to make much of a difference. He's even worse than me.

The broody fucker makes his way straight to my fridge and helps himself to a poor man's charcuterie board grabbing a block of cheese, a few packs of lunch meat, and a bag of grapes like he lives here.

With a shake of my head I grab the bottle opener, popping three beers and passing them around. Jagger doesn't ask where we're going to sit before he drops all the food onto the dining table and starts tearing packages open.

"Hungry?"

He tilts his head as though he's contemplating my question seriously. "Snackish."

Archer sits sipping on his beer. "Have you tried to find her?"

Jagger and I exchanged a confused look before Archer qualifies his question. "Matty's mother."

Shrugging, heat creeps up my neck. Not only have I not tried to find her, but I haven't given her much of a second thought since she didn't even have the decency to escort our son to my door. She just dropped and ran.

"All I have is her name from Matty's birth certificate. She must live locally, otherwise Matty would have had to change schools and the transition would have been a bitch."

"She has to have come to the club before, right? Otherwise how would you have met her? You know as well as I do that our circle is pretty small, all things considered." Archer takes another gulp of his beer. "You probably could have found her if you wanted."

He's not wrong. I just didn't want to. Does that make me a terrible human being? Maybe. But she knows where both

Matty and I are if she wants to see us. She hasn't made any effort to get in touch, so I'm giving her space.

"Kind of hard when your one-night-stand dumps a kid on your door and flees like she's on the run." Jagger carves a piece of cheese from the block with a knife he pulled from his cargo pants.

"That better be clean." I point at the weapon he's raising to his mouth with a small wedge of cheese stuck to it.

"My tools are always clean," he deadpans. For the strong, silent type, he has a sharp, dry wit and a comedic timing that could have him onstage. If he wasn't a scary motherfucker anyway. "He could have met her at The Cage." Jagger points the knife at Archer. "Didn't you used to go there?"

Jagger mentions the other BDSM club across town. Despite my comfortable living, The Cage is somewhat above my pay grade. "Never been. Some of us don't make enough money to frequent such fancy places."

Slade has been a few times. He and Austin are friends with the owner. I always thought multiple niche clubs in the same town would be fiercely competitive with each other, but as it turns out, they all play nice together. In fact, sometimes they even exchange staff for training and demos. It's so fucking weird.

"So it had to have been in Protocol." Archer states the obvious. A minute later, his brows shoot up. "Did you bang someone when you were on shift?"

"I wasn't at the club eleven years ago. For all I know I banged her in a bathroom somewhere and barely looked at her face." I wince. Such disrespect, but also so true. I haven't always been the nice dom I've built my reputation up to be. I'd have fucked anything with a face in my younger days.

I wish I was joking.

Jagger places his bottle on the table with a little more force than is necessary. Story of his fucking life. "If we aren't here to talk about your baby mama, then why are we here?"

Archer nods like he'd been trying to find the words to ask the question without being rude. He's the quietest of the house doms, but he has potential. He needs to find his feet and channel his inner dominance. It feels like he's dominant, rather than *a* dominant. But he'll grow into it. I'm sure of it.

“Addison.”

Archer's brows twitch. “What happened?”

Dropping my face into my palms, elbows on the table, I groan-growl. A pained sound somewhere between frustration and agony. “I fucked up.”

I tell them everything. About the trip to the zoo, about the bubbling anger and frustrations under my skin all fucking day, about Matty having such a hard time, about feeling like a fucking failure as a father. When I get to the point I got back to the house and made the stupid decision to play with Addison when I knew deep down that I shouldn't have, Archer whistles through his teeth.

Jagger isn't so kind. “Stupid fucker. You know better.”

I'm pretty sure they removed his brain-to-mouth filter at birth. If you don't know him all that well, he seems cold and aloof, quiet, stoic, doesn't say shit about shit. But once you crack his grumpy armadillo shell, he's blunt as fuck and not afraid to tell it like it is.

“I know.” I don't need him to tell me how badly I fucked up. I was there. The scars run deep in my chest. “Being with Addison has given me a lot of time to think about how things went down with my ex. I know that what happened with us wasn't my fault. At least not all my fault. But this... I should have known better, done better... How do I fucking fix it?”

“Is she safe?” Astute questions like that are part of the reason Archer's going to make an excellent dom someday. He's already miles ahead of some of the sensationalized doms who've joined the club after the explosion of BDSM in pop culture.

“She is. She's with Austin and Kenzie.”

“Good.” Jagger pops a grape in his mouth, frowning at me like he doesn’t recognize the man sitting across from him. “It’s not like you to make such dumbass mistakes, Thor.”

“I know.” He’s not wrong. I’m usually meticulous. I dropped the ball and I hate myself for it. My jaw trembles as the sight of Addison backed into a corner trembling and afraid of me invades my mind for the millionth time tonight. Her reaction felt extreme, but, again, I have no right to judge how anyone reacts to my actions. I just need to fix it.

Archer sits forward, covering my hand with his. “Take a breath. We’ll figure it out. Won’t we, Jagger?”

A grunt comes from the giant. I’m pretty sure Archer kicked him under the table.

“Unfortunately, the biggest way to fix this is patience and time.”

Groaning again, I smack my head on the table as I bend forward. I was afraid he’d say that. “Don’t you have a magic fix that is quicker and easier than that?”

Archer laughs. “Most things that are worth it take time and patience.”

Fucker’s parroting my words back to me, words I told him when he first joined the club a few months ago. “I hate you right now.”

He shrugs. “I learn from the best.”

“Did you give her the paddle?” Jagger takes a huge bite, before chewing slowly.

Shaking my head, I sigh. “She didn’t give me the chance. Not that I blame her. She freaked out and called her girls. I haven’t seen her since.”

“Good place to start.” Where Jagger is putting all this food is anyone’s guess. “Hand it over to her. Or leave it on her bed with a note if you can’t bring yourself to find the words. It won’t make it right, but it’ll show her that you’re handing her the power to decide whether it ever gets used again. Make sure you communicate that to her too. She’s a newer sub, right? She

might not understand the gesture if you don't spell it out for her. It's probably why she reacted the way she did, too. First time experiencing a fuck up tends to be the worst."

"If she didn't get it, her friends would explain it to her." But it would be better coming from me than from anyone else.

He waves a grape my direction. "Paige's friend, right?"

"And Kenzie's." Archer grabs a few grapes from the bag, shoving a couple into his mouth.

"You should still be clear with her." Jagger wags his finger.

"I'm with Jagger. Clear communication is the foundation of the lifestyle."

It's like he's reciting the BDSM manual to me one line at a time.

"He's gonna punch you." Jagger says, slicing another piece of cheese and offering it to Archer who peels it from the blade of the knife.

"He's gonna punch himself."

Accurate.

"What if I can't earn her trust back?"

They both stare back at me with sympathetic eyes. Ugh. I fucking hate this. I'm usually the one coaching someone through a fuck up, not the one doing the actual fucking up.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Thor. You know better than anyone that this is a learning moment, even if you hate it, even if you feel like shit. You just need to let Addison process the situation herself and figure out how she needs to move forward." Jagger looks pleased with himself for his little lecture, don't blame him, he's good at giving advice, it's why Archer's hanging out with him.

"And in the meantime, make sure you don't drop. Sleep," Archer glances at his watch. "Eat well, exercise, take care of yourself so that when she's ready to come back to your dynamic you're not even more fucked up than you are now. Get ahead of the drop."

I can't remember the last time I dropped. While Doms don't generally advertise the fact they drop too. It's becoming something we talk about a lot more than we used to. Every con I go to there is at least one session that discusses it. The community has come a long way in that department, but it still makes me feel... feelings when it's me that's dropping.

Archer has dropped twice in the short time I've known him. He's sensitive, emotional, and hugely empathetic which is both a challenge and one of his greatest strengths.

"People should talk about it more, you know." Archer finishes his beer. "I think the fact everyone thinks dominants are invincible, strong as fuck assholes with no feelings really does us a disservice." Not sure that he's talking to anyone in particular, but he also isn't wrong. Again. Fucker.

"So you're telling me to get the fuck to bed, have a good breakfast, be patient and wait for her to be ready to talk it out, and hand over the paddle until she's ready to use it again?"

Both men nod.

"I hate you both."

Archer shakes his head, standing and picking up the three empty beer bottles. "If you hated us you wouldn't have sent up the dom-signal."

"That's not a thing." Jagger grunts.

"Should be." Archer shrugs. "I bet the submissives all have some kind of association."

"It's called Sub club." Standing, I stop dead in my tracks. Did I just breach the confidence of the three submissives in my circle? Shit. I can't seem to stop putting my foot in it.

"Kenzie and Addison?"

"And Paige." I walk them both to the door.

"Paige is a switch," Jagger points out.

Shrugging, I step aside to let them out. "Still works though. Not sure if it's a closed group or if they're going to become a thing."

Archer purses his lips. “I can see a whole line of Sub Club merch for the club.” He’s the marketing and PR director for Protocol—all of them, well, Minneapolis and soon-to-be Cedar Rapids, so far.

“I’d hold fire and talk to the girls first. I’m sure they’ll be down for the idea, and they’ll probably have suggestions of their own.”

He nods at my suggestion, but his brain is clearly already bubbling over with ideas. I predict we’ll have Sub Club merchandise samples within a week, and a full line available in the club and online before the end of the month.

While I don’t feel any better about my current clusterfuck, my mood is lighter for having spoken to my colleagues. I guess there’s a lesson in there somewhere, but next time something happens I bet I’ll still pace around my floor for an hour before calling in the cavalry.

Checking on Matty one last time before I climb into bed alone for the first time in weeks, my heart is heavy and my soul unsettled. The only thing I can do is hope and pray that Addison comes back to me, but right now, staring at the ceiling, I wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t.

CHAPTER 26

Addison

BEFORE I EVEN OPEN MY EYES, MY ASS MUSCLES GROAN. There's going to be a giant bruise on my butt, and no amount of wishing it away will make it go anywhere. Rolling over onto my side, I stretch out an arm, knowing all I'm going to find is cool sheets and empty space.

Staying here was probably not the best idea, the only person I want to see this morning is Thor. And Matthew. But mostly Thor. My heart aches more than the tender flesh on my butt. He probably feels so bad for how things went last night. And all I could do was run away. Did he talk to anyone about it? Does he have friends to step up and help?

Was Austin supposed to go and help him and instead he was pinned under my sobbing ass on his couch?

My phone vibrates on the bedside table, lifting my spirit. Thor's calling, and we're going to make things okay. Except when I pick up my cell, it's Mom's face flashing on the screen. Biting back a groan, I pick up. "Mom?"

"Your sister says you're shacking up with some guy with a child, Addison." Her exhale is so heavy her phone probably buckles under its weight. "When will you learn? Are you pregnant? Is that what's going on? Did you have an oopsie in the bedroom and now you're stuck with some bartender waster?"

Oh no, she did not.

"Mom."

She keeps talking, not stopping at my interjection.

“Mom.” My repeated word is louder, firmer, more commanding, but she doesn’t stop until I yell at her. “Mom, stop.”

Her words trail off, and it takes a moment for the shock of me stopping her mid-sentence to sink in. “Addison, what has gotten into you?”

“Mom, I’m not going to sit here and listen to you trash my boyfriend.”

At her predictable gasp, I continue. “He’s a great man, a kind man, an understanding man, and he believes in me more than any of you ever have.”

“But, Adi, what are you thinking? Putting yourself in a position where you have to care for a child? With autism at that.”

“Mom, he *is* autistic, he doesn’t *have* autism.” You’d think she’d know how to speak about autism having an autistic grandchild. She just doesn’t want to learn sensitivity. Not even for her granddaughter.

“Thor and—”

“Thor? Like the cartoon character?”

Pressing my finger and thumb to the bridge of my nose, I squeeze, silently count to ten. This woman will be the absolute death of me. Do my family have any redeeming qualities at all?

“Mom, I’m not having this conversation with you. I’m a grown woman, and I can make—”

“Your own mistakes, yes, I know. I just wish you’d think before you jump in with both feet.”

I hang up the call, silence my phone and roll over onto my stomach with a groan. A long, loud, screech into my pillow.

“Today’s getting off to a good start then, eh?” Kenzie’s voice starts far away, but by the time she finishes her sentence, she’s standing next to the bed. Or pretty close.

“Go away.” When I breathe in, a mouthful of pillow makes me cough. “I’m staying here forever.” If only that were possible. Sleeping away my life sounds pretty good about now.

“Oh, please.” Paige’s eye roll is clear from just two words. Might be a record. “Get your ass up. There’s French toast downstairs.”

My head snaps up at that, and my stomach growls. Mackenzie is crossing the room toward the window. She reaches for the curtains before I can object and tugs them open, blinding sunlight streams into the room.

Rude.

Smushing my head back into the soft pillow, a low groan is half muffled by the fabric smothering my face.

Paige claps her hands together. “Up, up, up.”

There’s no way Kenzie is that obnoxious.

Flipping her off, I push myself up onto my elbows. “Just ‘cause you’re a domme sometimes, doesn’t mean you get to boss me around. You’re not the boss of me.”

She smirks. “You wish.”

Actually, I can only imagine how much of a bitch she can be in the bedroom, so I’m pretty glad she’s not my domme. But I’d never tell her that out loud.

“I can hear your thoughts from here, Adi. I’m not that bad.”

Apparently my facial expression betrayed my thoughts. “Come on. Food’ll be cold when we get there.” I drag my ass out of bed.

“Or Austin will have eaten all the bacon.”

Kenzie stops dead at the bottom of the stairs, Paige crashes into her back, and I stop myself at the last second before I smack right into her. “What the fuck?”

Everyone’s staring at Kenzie’s open front door. The air in the house shifts as they both step aside.

In my periphery, Austin and Matthew hover in the doorway to the living room. My heart twitches. Pushing past the girls, I walk toward the little boy. I've been in his new home almost every single morning since he moved in with Thor. Except today.

"Good morning, Matthew." I offer him a small smile, a guilty smile. I hope he'll forgive me for changing his routine.

He gives me a shy wave. "I missed you this morning, Addison." There's sadness to his voice that deepens the crack in my chest. "Are you coming home today?"

Holding my arms open to him, I nod as he comes at me for a hug. "Of course I am." Trying to be light while wanting to fall to pieces on this kid is so fucking hard. "Assuming you and your dad didn't get too used to me being gone last night." I wink at him as he pulls back. "Just a girl's night last night. My friends needed me."

He nods, smiling. "I'm glad you're coming back."

As he turns to walk back to Austin, I reach out to touch him. "Hey, Matthew?"

He cants his head.

"Did you know that the Minnesota Wild have retired two numbers in their history?"

His eyes light up as he grins at me, nodding. "Number nine for Mikko Koivu."

"And number ten for Marian Gaborik," I finish for him.

He looks so fucking happy that I learned a factoid about his team as he disappears into the living room.

Turning back to the front door, Thor stands patiently waiting, smiling. His hair's pulled into a tight bun, his face is ashen, and his eyes have dark circles underneath them. His shoulders curl forward. He looks as good as I feel.

Not good at all.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm running at him. It might be ten feet to the door, but I'm running all the same—

and I never run. It's not a good look for me.

He barely manages to open his arms before I launch myself into them, and for the longest moment in the history of the world, we just stand there, holding each other, as tears stream down my face.

A million things fight to come from my brain out my mouth, but nothing makes it past the wad of relief at the back of my throat that he's standing here in front of me. He showed up for me even when I panicked and ran away. He didn't hide, or leave, or knee-jerk break up with me, he's here.

"I wasn't sure whether I should come or give you space." His grip on me tightens, his voice thick with tears of his own, and damn if my ovaries don't fucking implode knowing that my giant, strong, dominant as fuck boyfriend is crying because he hurt me.

"I shouldn't have stayed here last night. I should have come back to talk it out. I just wasn't sure what I needed."

He shushes me, stroking my back, kissing my hair, and telling me he's sorry. When we both settle down enough to stop crying, I take a step back and look up at my guy. He sweeps a couple tear soaked curls off my face. "It's okay to not know what you need, kitten. We'll figure it out together."

My heart swells, threatening to break open my ribcage. "We will?"

He nods, almost looking convinced, but his eyes betray an insecurity that crushes me. "If that's what you want, we absolutely will. If you need time apart, I understand that too. I damaged our trust, that's on me. If you think it can't be fixed, then it can't be. And that's okay too." His voice breaks, tears welling in his eyes as they search my face.

I'm not sure what he's looking for, a decision, anger, some sign that I'm relenting one way or the other, maybe even confirmation that I think there's something worth saving. But his eyes burn intensely as they hold my stare.

"I'd like to try to fix things, Thor."

The relief that floods his features seeps into his muscles, his body sags. “You do?”

Nodding, I bite my bottom lip. “Can we go back to basics? Start over? Lay some stronger foundations so the next time this happens we’re better prepared for it?”

“Absolutely. I’d love to say this will never happen again, but we both know there’s always room for mistakes. We’re going to do all we can to make sure it doesn’t happen again though, okay?”

I believe him, but actions speak louder than words. We both need to want it to work, we both need to make an effort, and we both need to ensure we do all we can to avoid this happening again. I nod, slipping my hand into Thor’s and tugging him toward Kenzie and Austin’s kitchen. “They made French toast.”

CHAPTER 27

Thor

WATCHING MY GIRL WITH HER FRIENDS THIS MORNING WAS everything my heart never knew it needed. Austin nods at me as he hands me an empty plate and gestures at the stacks of French toast piled high next to plates of bacon and turkey bacon.

Addison is relaxed, smiling, and before she puts a single piece of food onto her plate, she darts into the next room to check on Matty and give him another quick hug. The way he hugs her back warms me all the way to my toes.

Pangs of fear shoot into my chest. The seed of concern about his mom coming back into our lives to take him away from me takes root. I should probably consult a lawyer to make sure she can't just appear at my door and take him away as quickly as she arrived and dropped him off.

It has only been a matter of months, but I've come to love Matty with everything I have, and now I don't want to lose him. One of the biggest things I think I've been afraid of since he arrived at my doorstep was that I wasn't going to be able to make him feel better. As a dominant, I take such pride in being able to help submissives find their calm, to nurture and take care of them, even if it's just a one night stand.

The fear that I wasn't going to be able to help him settle, help him grow, be as good as his mom was to him for the first eleven years of his life has been quietly consuming me from the inside, and I had no idea.

What I learned last night when Addison fled the house is that sometimes it won't be me that does the calming. And I need to be okay with that. I need to be okay with the fact that sometimes my kid, my girl, my friends... sometimes they won't need me. Even if I want them to.

We eat breakfast with our friends and it feels... normal. There's a comfort to being surrounded by people who know both Addison and I and who have mostly met Matty.

When breakfast is over, Kenzie and Austin kick Addison and me out to go and talk. They tell us that Matty will be fine, and without hesitation I trust that he will be. The car ride back to the house is quiet, not a comfortable quiet either, it's charged with anxiety and laced with fear. Adi refuses to make eye contact, in fact, she stares out the window the whole time.

Knowing my girl is afraid of me turns my insides to mush. I'll do whatever I have to do to ensure she never feels this way again.

Back at the house, I sit on the couch, opening my arms to her. She doesn't decline, but she doesn't jump into my waiting arms either. She lies down and rests her head on my lap.

Stroking the side of her face, her hair, and telling her I'm sorry three thousand times doesn't feel like enough, and when she falls asleep I watch the rise and fall of her chest. Her rhythmic breathing must send me off to sleep too, when I wake up it's after lunch time, and she hasn't moved but she's awake.

"I'm sorry, kitten."

She nods under my fingertips. "I know. I think we just went too far too fast."

She's not wrong. I should have known better, did know better, but I got caught so up in the new dynamic and being a father that I lost sight of my foundation.

"My dad left when I was a little boy." Dunno why I'm sharing this with her, maybe being vulnerable, showing her my damaged underbelly will help mend our relationship somehow.

“Did you spend forever blaming yourself?” She’s astute, and on the nose with her assessment of the situation.

There’s a lump in my throat that doesn’t shift when I try to clear it. “I did. Mom never did, at least not out loud. But I convinced myself that it was my fault, that she was alone because of me.”

“Have you seen him since he left?”

“No. When I got older she told me he was an alcoholic, abusive, mostly emotional abuse, yelling at her, at me. We don’t even know if he’s still alive.”

“Oh, Thor.” The sadness in her voice burrows into my chest.

“I’m not telling you for sympathy. I don’t... Opening up about my childhood isn’t something I do very often.”

“You’re trying to let me in.” She’s smiling now, and the warmth of her smile gives me the strength to keep going.

“From the moment Dad left, I did everything in my power not to disappoint Mom. Top of my class, good job, I was the perfect student, the perfect son, and excelled at everything I turned my hand to.”

She stays quiet, but strokes my leg.

“Except relationships.” Swallowing hard, I blink back tears. I can generally talk to anyone about anything, but bringing up my failures... that feels like a wall that can’t be scaled.

“It takes two, Thor.”

“There’s a reason I’m a one and done kind of guy, Addison. I hurt her, my ex.”

“The long-term submissive?”

“Yeah.”

A heavy silence hangs between us, she’s waiting for more information, and I’m not sure I have it in me to share with her. Not least because she probably has one foot out the door of our relationship.

“Austin said there are as many red flag submissives as there are dominants.”

Austin is a wise man.

“He’s right, there are. Some submissives are so broken they’d do anything to please their dominant. It’s why our roles are so important, it’s why paying such close attention, learning our partners so intimately is so important.”

“She lied to you about being okay.”

“It was still my responsibility to protect her.”

“You can’t protect someone from themselves, Thor.”

“No, kitten, I can’t. But I can protect them from me.” A huge sigh makes my body sag. “I thought I’d make a good father someday, be a better father to a child, or children than my father was to me. Be a better partner to someone than my father was to my mom.”

At that, she bolts upright. “You’re going to be a great father to Matthew, Thor. You already are. You stepped up when he had no one.”

As nice as her words are, as comforting as it feels to have them sink into my chest, I struggle to believe her. “It feels like the goal posts are constantly moving with Matty. That day at the zoo, it was a bad day on the back of a few good days in a row. Looking back I realize I’d found myself hoping that we’d found a new routine, a new normal, we’d found level ground.”

She climbs into my lap, resting her head on my shoulder. “You can’t *fix* autism, Thor.”

“I don’t want to fix him, I don’t want to fix autism, but I want to make his life easier, I want to take away the hard days so he only has good days. I thought we’d figured it out.” And it needs to be okay that we haven’t, that we may never.

“Without the bad days we don’t appreciate the good. That goes for all of us, not just Matthew. We can’t only have good days. Life would be boring.”

“It’s so hard to watch him bang his head off something, or rock back and forth for hours like he’s in physical pain. I’d

take it from him in an instant if I could.”

She stares up at me, tears glistening in her eyes. “How can you question whether or not you’re a good father, Thor? Listen to you. You’d walk through fire for that little boy, and some days it probably feels like you do. He knows you love him.”

“Does he?” Hating myself for the quiver in my voice, I shake my head. “We barely know each other. Does he miss his mother? Would he go back to her and never want to see me again if she showed up?”

“I don’t know the answer to those questions. But I’ve seen you with him, I’ve seen you learn and grow and love. As a parent that’s all you can do.” Her face is serious. I love how her nose wrinkles and her freckles stand out when she frowns.

“I shouldn’t have made that comment about your experience with children. It was low as fuck and totally out of line. You’re so good with Matty too you know. I know you’re still unsure about your ability to be around kids, but you shouldn’t be.”

She nods. “I’m starting to figure out that a lot of things I believed about myself and my inability to be left alone with children stem from other people feeding my insecurities. It also helps that Matthew is a pretty amazing kid.”

She has no fucking clue how strong she is. Or perhaps she *had* no fucking clue how strong she is. There’s a flicker of something in her eyes I haven’t seen before.

“I made the mistake with the neighbor’s kid. I did. I got distracted and took my eyes off him for a hot minute. But I also acted quickly and saved him, too. The more parents I talk to in the park, the more I realize that kids are unpredictable creatures, accidents happen... while I don’t forgive myself for what I did yet, I’m trying to show myself more grace about the whole thing.”

Pride swells in my chest as I tuck her closer to me. “You’re right. You know that, but in case you need validation, you’re right.” I kiss her temple. “I know we’re not out the other side of this, and we’re probably going to have many more

discussions about our self-beliefs, but while you're feeling strong and confident, I wanted to suggest something to you that I've been thinking about."

She tenses in my arms, but doesn't react otherwise.

"Your clothing line."

"What about it?" Her eyes narrow.

"I think you should make your sketches come to life from those pages."

She stares off into the distance, apparently the bay window is suddenly super interesting. "I was thinking about it. I have a little money now, thanks to you." Her cheeks turn pink. "But I don't think it's enough yet to establish a small business."

"Then let me invest in your company. Let me help you get your dream off the ground."

"You don't need to do that. I know you feel guilty but—"

Covering her mouth with my finger, a tingle of smugness starts in my gut. I knew she'd jump to believing I only want to help her because I fucked up, but little does she know this has been on my mind since it first came up. Luckily for me, I have an email chain to prove this isn't an unplanned reaction, it's not some grand gesture to make up for the fact I messed up in the bedroom.

"I wrote to my accountant weeks ago, kitten. I've been talking to him about my finances, I've done a little research into how much something like this would cost. And I've also brought it up with Archer, he does marketing and PR for Protocol."

Her mouth hangs open like she's catching flies.

"He's talking about doing a Sub Club line of merch for the club too. I may have let it slip that you and your friends call yourselves the Sub Club."

She groans, but she's smirking. "You didn't."

"I did, I'm sorry. But he's taking the idea and running with it. As long as you ladies are okay with the idea of course. I

figured you may have some ideas for those designs too.”

She fixes her stare onto a picture of Mom and me on the wall, falling quiet for a couple minutes. “Comfort items would be a great place to start. Oversized shirts, hoodies, boy shorts, even branded stuffies and blankets.” Her eyes light up as she talks. “He’s really expanding the club into merchandise?”

Shrugging, I kiss the tip of her nose. “I think so. He was talking about it anyway. Depends on whether or not you’re opening your books to new Sub Club members or not. If not, he’ll need a new catch name or catchphrase, but he seemed to think it would be a good idea.”

She nods slowly, the cogs in her head still turning. “It is. It would be a great way to get word of the club out without paying for advertising. It could be a talking point for people too. If someone stopped me in the street and asked me what Sub Club was, it becomes an opening to normalize talking about kink.”

She’s making connections in her head, seeing a few moves down the board. Her strategic mind coming to life in front of me is a thing of beauty.

“Can we circle back to your business, please?”

She shakes her head, her hair swishing in its ponytail. “Not yet. I’ll need to think on it.”

“So the answer’s not no, it’s maybe?”

She relents with a smile. “Maybe.”

Pressing a kiss to her forehead, I can’t help but grin. “I can work with maybe.”

CHAPTER 28

Addison

“WHAT’S ALL THIS ABOUT?” BUTTERFLIES SWARM IN MY stomach as he leads me upstairs to the bedroom.

Matthew is downstairs reading, so he’s not leading me up here for anything fun. At least, I don’t think he is. And while his Mom’s recovery is going well, she’s still not due out here until next week, we still need to be responsible adults.

Thor situates me in the room facing the bed. “Don’t turn around yet.” After a long beat and some shuffling, he speaks again. “Okay.”

When I turn to face him, he’s got the paddle in his hand with a bow around it, holding it out to me. A barb of fear slithers up my spine, but he shakes his head. “I’m giving this to you, kitten. I hurt you with this item, and you can hold it until you’re ready to try again.” He scratches the back of his neck with his free hand. “Or, forever, if you need forever. But I wanted to give you this.”

He shrugs, his face going pink. “It’s symbolic, I guess. You’re taking back control of the item that hurt you.”

It’s an adorable gesture, and he’s right, it feels like I’m taking back control over the piece of wood as I accept it from him. As I turn the paddle over in my hand, my shoulders loosen. “I don’t think it’s forever, Thor, just a little while. I know I should have listened to you when you said we shouldn’t play that night.”

He nods, but doesn’t say anything. That’s just my guy, not wanting to say he was right and I was very, very wrong. “Do

Doms ever use safe words?”

“Sometimes. I feel like more of us could do with having them.”

“How about we give you one? So next time, when you think playing isn’t a good idea, you can safe word, and we won’t go any further.” I’ve been thinking about it for a little while, and from the way his face softens and he doesn’t laugh at me, I relax. It doesn’t seem to have been a stupid idea after all.

“That’s a great idea, Kitten. Anything but—”

The word pops out of my mouth right as it pops out of his. It’s the most stereotypical safe word I can think of. “Pineapple!”



THE PADDLE WITH THOR’S NOTE AND PINK BOW SITS ON A shelf in my closet. It’s only been two weeks since we had our mishap downstairs, but we already feel like we’re on more solid ground than ever.

He has gone out of his way to make sure things didn’t fall apart. It hasn’t been easy. We haven’t been back in the dungeon since that fateful night, we haven’t gone back to the club, and we’ve not done anything kinky. We’ve also only had vanilla sex a couple of times.

Living in a house where Thor parades around with water sluicing down his bare chest after showers, and where he goes running in skin-tight cycling shorts and shirts that seem to be spray painted on his toned body feels like a special kind of torture.

Tonight might be the night, however. His mom gets in this morning from Seattle at long last, and while we’ve chatted a

lot over video calls, it's the first, official, in person meet-the-parent I think I've ever faced.

I'm excited. Mostly because she's in town for two whole weeks, and our goal for that time is to head out to the club with Mackenzie and Austin. Since I started dating Thor it's been either, or. Either they go to the club while we're at home with Matthew, or we do while they Matthew-sit. And while I'm eternally grateful to have such an unwavering support system for our little family, I really want to go to the club with both of my friends.

Thor has no idea. He thinks I just want a date night, a night where I get dressed in one of my deliciously daring dresses, and he takes me out for dinner. Which, obviously I want. But I mostly want to rip the Band-Aid off the healing wound, and get back on the horse. The kinky club horse.

There's a nervous energy that has been racing through my veins for days, I couldn't place it at first, but after a quick touching base with the Sub Club, Paige suggested it might be because I need a good fucking.

Despite her candor, she's probably not wrong either.

Pulling out a pair of jeans and a shirt, I flop onto the bed face first with a groan. What if Matthew doesn't take to Thor's mom Ella? What if he takes to her but they aren't at "leave the two of them alone together for a few hours" level of relationship before Ella has to leave?

It's selfish. I know this. The guilt I'm feeling at even allowing such selfish thoughts to invade my mind is crushing. But I *really* want some alone time with Thor. I *really* want to make things right between us sexually. I'm not in "give him back the paddle" territory, not by any means, but I definitely want the sting of a slap across my ass, and soon.

The unmistakable click of the front door closing makes me spring up from the bed and pull my clothes on.

"Adi?" Thor's voice echoes around the house.

"Up here! Be down in a sec."

By the time I get downstairs, Ella is in the living room being introduced to Matthew. Thor stands nearby, uncertainty in his eyes and tension holding his body rigid. Ella offers a book to Matthew, it's a book about the history of hockey. Part of me wonders whether she had help from Thor about what to bring as a gift for her grandchild, but it wouldn't surprise me if she picked up his love for hockey over the video calls and ran with it herself. From what I've seen when speaking on our video calls, she seems a thoughtful sort.

After a few minutes of chatting, Ella asks Matthew if she can hug him. He bristles, shaking his head.

"That's okay, sweetheart. You don't have to. But if there's a time during the course of my trip where you feel you'd like to hug me, please do so, okay?"

He nods, but his gaze is glued to the book on his lap as he opens the hardback cover.

"Addison!" Ella bounds off the sofa, heading my direction with the clear intent of crushing me in a hug. I can't wait. I can't remember the last time I had a mom hug. I guess part of the consequences for being a screw up is not getting the same level of affection as the successful siblings.

My stomach squirms at the thought and sadness ripples through me. When Ella's arms pull me into a warm embrace, tears prick my eyes. "It's such a pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh. I'm exceptionally grateful for technology, don't get me wrong. But nothing beats a good face to face meeting where one can scrutinize the chosen partner of one's offspring." She grabs my chin as I'm sure all color and warmth drains from my body.

"I'm fucking with you, hon."

"That's a swear word, grandma. Dad says I shouldn't say those, but he never tells me why."

She winces as Matthew scolds her.

Rolling my lips between my teeth to fight the smile teasing my face, I can't stop my shoulders from shaking in silent laughter. Matthew always needs to know the why. And when

we can't tell him why, when we can't give him a clear explanation as to the reason he can't or shouldn't do or say something, he hates it.

Case in point, "because it might offend people" isn't a good enough reason for Matthew to accept he shouldn't walk around dropping the F-bomb. Not that he does, he's incredibly eloquent and well spoken, but when Thor corrects people for cussing in Matthew's space, Matthew can't understand why.

"It's just words, Dad."

"Yeah, dad. It's just words." Ella copies her grandson with a smug smile on her face. The next two weeks are going to be fucking awesome. Ella seems to *live* for poking fun at her son. And the pink tinge to his face and the way muscles feather in his cheek as he grits his teeth suggests it's going to be way more fun for me than it is for him.

"I figure since we're all here together it's the best time to let you all know I've started my move back to Minnesota." Ella's casual declaration that she's moving cross country lands on stunned silence from both Thor and I.

"Mom... I..." Thor's face contorts as a multitude of emotions flit across his features. "But you love Seattle."

"I do." She nods somberly as she steps back from me and a little closer to Thor. "But I love you more." She cups his chin with both palms. "And now that I have a little grandson here whose life I've already missed too much of." She shrugs. "It was a no brainer."

My heart may explode. The act of such sturdy support from his mom makes my chest ache. It's perfect. It's everything he doesn't know he needs yet.

"When do you move, Ella?" Trying to give Thor a couple of seconds to breathe, I gesture for her to follow me into the kitchen where I start the coffee maker. This situation calls for something stronger, but I don't think people would look fondly on day drinking with the mother-in-law the second she stepped off the plane.

Ha. Mother-in-law. I'd best not let Thor hear that thought out loud, he'd shit his pants. It would definitely be the straw that broke the shocked camel's back right now.

"I already did, Addison." She opens her arms wide. "House is packed up and being transported as we speak. I have an offer on a house not too far from here, I'm just waiting for the real estate agent to get back to me, and here I am." She says this so matter of fact that I'm the one who seems strange for even asking the question.

This woman packed up her entire life, did long-distance house hunting, and moved across the country without so much as telling her grown son, all while recovering from a broken hip, and *I'm* the one out of the ordinary for asking her about it?

Ella is a freakin' force of nature. I'm in awe of her strength. "In truth, I'm amazed you haven't asked me to come back yet, Thoren." She turns to him, wagging her finger. "Too stubborn to ask for help?"

Huh. So I guess Thor is a nickname after all. It's hard not to giggle as he gets a dressing down from his mama.

He shakes his head. "No, Mom. Not senseless enough to think you'd do it, or selfish enough to consider asking you to. You have your life, your home, your friends."

She dismisses him with a wave of her hand. "I'll make friends here. I'll be closer to you three. I'm not missing out on Matthew growing up, Thor." Her voice hardens in challenge, like she's daring him to confront her, or say something else. "Especially now that..." She glances over her shoulder before dropping her voice. "You're pursuing sole custody. You're going to need a little help, son."

While Matthew's mom had severed all ties, there was still a fear lingering over Thor that she'd find a way to come back and take Matthew from him. He's working with a lawyer to make sure there's no loophole, but has decided that if she wants to pick up a relationship with Matthew in the future, she can. If that's what Matthew wants, anyway. But he wants full parental rights.

Instead of arguing, he crosses the kitchen and throws his arms around her. “Thanks, Mom.” His voice is heavy, thick with emotion as he hugs Ella.

Some women don’t dig the giant, burly, strong men getting emotional thing. But it works for me. Works a lot. Works so much I’m contemplating grabbing him by his collar and dragging him downstairs.

For me? Men showing emotion is the greatest turn on. Like, ever.

Fuck. My Lady Box needs an ice pack right now.

“Are you hungry? We could go to our favorite local cafe for lunch.” Thor steps back, pours three cups of coffee from the now-brewed coffee pot and passes them out.

“I’d like that. But first, tell me, Addison, have you been convinced to let my son help you achieve your dreams?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “And if the answer’s no, then why the fuck not?”

I snort as Thor groans. “Mom...”

She waves him off again, with a gesture I’m pretty sure we’ll all be intimately familiar with—by the end of the damn day at this rate.

“We’re talking about it.”

“Talking isn’t doing, hon. You’ve got to *do*.” She levels me with a stare that suggests she can see through my flesh and right down to my bones. “Whatever’s stopping you... whatever’s making you stand in your own way, move it, climb over it, blow it the fuck up.”

“Grandma!” Matthew’s voice carries into the kitchen. “Swear word!”

After a heavy pause she laughs and shakes her head. “Sorry, sweetheart. I feel like we need to get a cuss-jar. This kid is gonna bleed me dry.” When she turns her attention back to me, her eyes narrow. “I bet it’s you, right? You’re standing in your own way and you don’t know how to unfuck yourself.”

“Grandma!”

“Mom!”

Another dismissive sweep of her hand. “Feel the fear and do it anyway, Addison. Do you know how many kids, how many parents you’ll help with that range of clothing?”

Thor couldn’t look any more sheepish right now. I didn’t tell Ella what my project was, we didn’t talk specifics. Thor must have clued her in and given her the details. He shrugs, gesturing to her as though it’s obvious he didn’t stand a chance in the face of his mother’s sheer presence.

I’m not mad about it. Her energy is contagious, and her belief in me despite barely knowing me is convincing. Thor’s too. This is a family with strong influence. I feel like I can’t say no to the woman. In fact, she’s probably counting on that.

“Did your friend at the club talk to her about the merchandise too?”

Thor groans again before taking a large sip of coffee, burning his mouth, and coughing until tears roll down his cheeks. Now he’s done that, I can’t recreate the moment and do it to avoid the inquisition.

Instead, I pull out my sketch book from the basket next to the dining table and show her my Sub Club merch designs. I have a meeting with Archer tomorrow. The girls and I have spent the last two weeks coming up with everything from branded water bottles and t-shirts to note books and pens for submissives to journal.

Our list of merchandise ideas is growing by the day, and Archer is here for all of it. His excitement is contagious, and from the reaction of the few people we’ve talked to at Protocol about it, it’s going to be a success.

“These are gorgeous.” Ella skates her fingers across the top of the page. There are beanies, and ball caps, and hair ties underneath the t-shirt designs we’ve come up with so far. “You really are talented.” She flicks through the book, her eyes filling with tears at the g-tube covers, and sensory aware pants I’ve been trying to get perfect.

“You need to do something with these, Addison. You’re too talented to keep that light under a bushel. Let that sucker burn brightly. You owe it to yourself. Fuck your parents.”

Thor does an entire body cringe.

“Grandma!” Matthew’s voice is laced with laughter as he scolds his grandmother. I’m sure by now even he knows it’s a pointless exercise, but he continues to call her out, and I love him for it.

“Oh.” She lowers her voice. “Am I not supposed to know that your mother is a bitch to you?”

The woman’s frankness makes me laugh out loud.

“Well, she is. And no matter what happens between you and Thoren, I want you to know that I’ll adopt you as my daughter if you’d like. I’ll kick you in the ass when you need it, and I give the best bone-crunching hugs around.” Her self-assuredness is impressive, and contagious.

“Wouldn’t that be awkward?”

“You mean because my knuckleheaded son will have let an amazing woman slip through his hands? Sure, it would be awkward. But I’m sure I’d find a way to keep loving him all the same.”

Thor rolls his eyes, but I can’t stop the laughter that bursts out of me.

“Mom...”

“As you can see, my son spends around eighty percent of his time despairing at his mother. It’s a thing. He mostly spends his days groaning ‘mom’ at me. On repeat. It’s not at all annoying.” She grabs his cheek and squeezes. “You’ll be glad I’m back. Just wait and see.” She pats where her hand gripped his cheek. “It’s going to be a lot of fun.”

“I don’t think that word means what you think it means.”

“Nonsense.” She claps her hands. “Okay. Let’s drive by my soon-to-be new home before we eat. I want to make sure it’s close enough so I can drive you kids up the walls.”

Thor looks at me like he's waiting for me to save him from spending time with his eager mom, but I'm a billion percent here for this. It makes me kinda wish my mom would bug the shit out of me like Ella does.

She winks at me, throwing me a casual smile so warm I feel it all the way to the pit of my stomach. It feels pretty good to feel a part of something, to have people around me who believe in me. Maybe I can achieve my dreams after all.

I just have to shake off that fear and take the first step.

CHAPTER 29

Addison

I'D BE LYING IF I SAID THE ADDISON THAT'S WALKING through these doors is the same Addison who walked into Protocol a few weeks ago. Or the Addison who walked in a couple months ago.

I've changed. Something inside me is different. In many ways I feel more vulnerable, more exposed and unsure, and in others I feel stronger, more sure of myself, more confident. It's a weird space to navigate but I'm trying to give this new Addison space to grow and breathe without clipping her wings.

Not working for Thor anymore, but still living in his space, as his girlfriend, hasn't been as uncomfortable as I expected. And having Ella in the house for the past week has been helpful for all of us. She's been bitch-slapping my self-confidence left, right, and center. It makes me wonder what kind of things I'd have accomplished if I'd had her in my corner my whole life, which stings.

All I've gotten from my own family is a chip on my shoulder, an unhealthy dose of self-loathing, and insecurities.

Thor's mom has been in my life a week, and I'm already questioning every foundation my family laid. So much so that I called my old therapist and set up an appointment. If I'm going to encourage this new Addison to transform and spread her phoenix wings, I'm going to need support, boundaries, and positive reinforcement.

Tonight isn't about any of that, though, tonight is about showing my guy that while it hasn't been all that long since our mishap in the basement, I still love and trust him.

And I do.

The past couple weeks have been everything I needed them to be. He's been attentive, patient, and most of all he's tried hard to forgive himself. The first few days were rough as hell, watching him drag himself over hot coals for making a mistake hurt my heart. But he's getting there, each day I see another sliver of guilt melt away and his confidence is returning, a little brick at a time.

We've colored together, we've cooked together, we've even exercised together. Our routine has become one of my very favorite things about us. While there's a lot we do independently, we do a lot together, too. Getting to know this man, even passively through things like watching him mow the lawn, play video games with Matthew, and interact with the neighbors on his street is a pleasure.

But I'm ready. It's been too long since I've had him the way we both need to have each other. A healthy dose of nervousness is okay, but the crippling anxiety I felt at the thought of him slapping me a couple weeks ago is almost entirely dissipated.

Paige comes stomping toward us with a scowl on her face. She's wearing knee-high pleather platform boots, black fishnet tights under white fishnet tights, and a collar. I haven't seen her wear a collar in a long time.

She's wearing a black, cap-shouldered dress closed across the chest only by two leather buckles so you can see the swell of her epic tits. The dress flares out at the waist with a skinny leather belt with chains hanging from it and comes almost to her knees.

Completing the outfit she has fingerless wrist-length gloves, black lipstick, and her jet-black hair falls loose in long beach waves.

She usually wears the punk look well, but tonight she is smoking hot and her attitude radiates from her person. Dunno what her deal is, but I gotta admit, I'm half tempted to kneel at her feet to see what she'd do.

"You look fierce." She gestures the wristbands in her hand to my thigh-length pleather dress. I only bought it because I liked the crisscross strings across the front, the largely backless reverse where only a handful of leather straps cross my shoulders and back, and of course the fact it has easy access.

She nods approvingly at my shoes. These heels might break my ankles, but they look hot as fuck with this dress, so I'll endure whatever blisters they throw at me. They'll be worth it.

"Thank you. You too. Are you doing a demo?"

She shakes her head.

"Waging war?" The only thing missing is black stripes across her cheeks. She's geared up and ready to destroy someone, I just can't figure out who. Maybe she finally gave in to her base instincts and fucked Slade.

Shit. That could make things awkward if they break up, considering how volatile they are, it could happen. That said, probably couldn't make it any more awkward than they already are. Every time we see him she snarls at him, or tells him to eat glass while he just smirks at her like he knows all her deep dark secrets.

She hands me the two armbands, and I pass one to Thor, who looks fucking delicious with his hair slicked back into a bun, and an open necked black shirt complementing his dress pants.

"Addison." Archer's voice has me turning to find him. "You look fantastic. You both do." He nods at Paige. He hooks a thumb over his shoulder. "He's in back."

Her frown only deepens. "I don't know who you're talking about." She tips her chin in challenge, clearly not leaning

toward submission tonight. Or if she is, she's going full brat. Like, a brattier brat than I've ever seen.

Archer sighs. "If you say so." He turns his attention back to me with an eye roll that tells me Paige isn't fooling anyone. Maybe she just got dressed up to tease Slade, that would absolutely be her jam. Make him see what he's missing by not snatching her up.

Except from what I've seen, she's the reluctant one. And I can't for the life of me figure out why. She never answers when I ask. "Mind your business," is as far as I get.

"I got the first merchandise samples for Sub Club." Archer's smile is wide. "The woman who runs the printing company, Felicity, brought them over this morning. She's eager to help us get this line off the ground."

"And Archer is eager to get her *on* the ground." Thor smirks as he takes a sip of his alcohol free beer.

Archer ignores the quip, but his ears turn pink. "She might be worth talking to about your *other* endeavor too."

We're all-in. Thor has bankrolled my project, but I'm getting splinters on my ass while trying to decide where to start, how to start, and what I need to do to make my dream become a reality. Determined not to make this fail, it feels like I might end up procrastinating the shit out of this until it's too late.

I'm kind of stuck.

Not for long, I'm sure. Ella squealed so loudly this morning when Thor told her, that all the birds in the trees in the yard flew away in a mass exodus. She'll want an update soon if I don't get ahead of her and give her one. Which means I need to take a shit or get off the pot. That's probably why he told her in the first place.

"Want to touch base tomorrow and see what you think?" Archer seems to be in the 'keep pressure on her so she makes a decision and starts chasing her dreams' camp too. He's not taking his foot off the gas with this.

Nodding, I can't fight the smile that spreads across my face. "Yes sir. I'd love to."

Thor's hand presses against my lower back like he's claiming me at the honorific I bestow onto his friend. He knows it's a respect thing, but he's still asserting his presence, and I'd be lying if I said that wasn't on my mind when I let the words tumble from my lips.

Archer smirks over my shoulder at my boyfriend.

"I have another couple of ideas from the girls, too. Branded wash cloths, and first aid kits, for example." Thor hands me a drink, and I take a sip, enjoying the sharp explosion of citrus on my tongue.

He nods, eyes lighting up like he should have thought of those things himself. "Great ideas. An all-round Protocol care kit. I'm here for it. If I don't see you downstairs, I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay." I always thought it would be weird, people you see fairly regularly witnessing you in various states of nakedness—but it's not.

Most of Thor's colleagues saw me in my underwear handcuffed to the St. Andrew's cross in the main demo space, and none of them have made it weird. I'm also not ashamed. There's something empowering standing in your underwear as a bunch of people witness you being turned on. Even for a bigger girl like myself.

To be fair, though, I don't think there was a single person in the room who wasn't turned on by Phoenix that night.

Paige follows Archer, Kenzie and Austin arrive a few minutes later, and once we've all finished a round of delicious mocktails, we head down the long staircase into the basement. Sterling is on the main stage tonight in the demo space. He's got a woman kneeling at his feet as he strokes her hair. Her palms face up, resting on her thighs, and her gaze is on the floor.

I can't imagine ever being so well disciplined, or so eager to kneel at a man's feet, but the serenity on her face is

something I envy. Would it turn off all the outside noise to just kneel and focus my attention on being submissive? Could be worth a shot. Would Thor be interested in having a more traditional submissive?

Sterling alternates between talking to the building crowd and telling the submissive at his feet how good she is, how patient and how proud of her he is. The shift in his tone from when he addresses a woman he at least respects, and at most adores, makes my heart flutter.

“You want to watch?” Thor’s voice is so close to my ear I jump at his words.

“No. It’s okay. I was thinking that the way he dotes on her, the way he caresses her face, her hair, speaks to her with such reverent tones... It’s...” Unable to find words, I press my hand to my chest.

He kisses my temple. “The lifestyle lands differently when you’re in love with the one you’re playing with, kitten.”

Tears prick my eyes as I turn to face him. “You really love me?” We’ve already kind of acknowledged that we’re falling in love. It seems like this shouldn’t be surprising or any kind of panicky for either of us. But I still can’t stop myself from asking.

Cradling my face, he gets real close. “If you have to ask then I haven’t done a particularly good job of showing you, have I?”

It’s as though no one else in the room exists. There’s just Thor, and me, and the L-word. I pause, staring into his blue eyes. While I’m falling for him, I can’t bring myself to say the words out loud yet.

He sweeps his lips against mine, sending a shiver all the way to my toes. “You don’t have to say it back. But I wanted to show my cards early, in case you wanted to run off with my boy Archer.”

Snorting, a laugh bubbles up inside me. “Maybe I do. You think he cuts his toenails over the bathroom sink?” The words are barely out of my mouth when the ground shifts from

underneath me, and I'm over Thor's shoulder. With a squeal, I wriggle and squirm, but he doesn't let up. In fact, he gives me a sharp smack on the ass that silences my protests and draws a moan from me.

It's been so fucking long.

Too long.

My ass tingles in anticipation while my pulse thrashes faster and faster with each step. Are we going back to the throne room? A different room?

I need to count the different rooms within Protocol. I think there are twelve semi-private rooms, all of the play at Protocol kind of happens out in the open. Paige told Mackenzie and I that it's a safety thing. How else do you monitor what's happening inside the rooms?

A public club isn't going to want to be held liable if a predator sexually assaults someone in a room like that. If they're all viewing rooms at least one of the dungeon monitor's team can see what's going on and make sure everyone is safe.

Where's he taking me? Do I care? If he dropped me right here and bent me over would I mind being watched as he spanked me?

Ugh. His grip on my legs means I can't clench my thighs together. Not that it does much good at all. I'd much rather grind my crotch against the corner of the dining table to help with delicious friction. Despite having thick thighs, I can't figure out a way to make them rub together and give my clit friction. Maybe I'm doing it wrong.

Another smack on my ass tells me Thor's noticed my squirming. "Easy, kitten. I don't want to drop you on your pretty head. I'll mess up your curls again, and you'll get mad at me."

He's not wrong. Since I moved in with him and Matthew, he's been a menace to my curls. He's always twisting them around his fingers, spearing his hands in them, or pulling off my bonnet so he can stroke my hair in bed.

I'd love to even pretend I'm mad about it, but despite the additional frizz, increased number of days where my hair is either tied up, or higher frequency of hair washing, I kind of love it. I might kind of love him, too. But I'm keeping those words inside me and focusing on his ass filling out the dress pants as he strides with purpose toward wherever the fuck he's taking me.

"Hey, you okay?" Thor's question isn't to me, another pair of legs stop next to his.

"Fine." Slade grunts, but it's not convincing. "You?"

"Nice try. We'll circle back to that, I've got an ass to spank."

Slade chuckles. "Public or private?"

Dangling like a ragdoll over Thor's shoulder, I wiggle, twisting to look at Slade. "You can watch if you want to."

"You heard my girl." He smacks my ass again, the smile clear in his voice. "She's good with you watching."

Thor carries me to one of the rooms with one way glass, I think there might be rooms with two way glass, but I'm not sure. People can see into our scene, but I can't see whether anyone is in the viewing room attached or not. I'm okay with that. It'd probably just distract me and make me self-conscious. As it stands, I can pretend it's just Slade in there, maybe Kenzie and Austin. It's not really a big deal if my friends watch.

Thor drops me onto the couch at the side of the room, kneeling between my legs and brushing my hair out of my face. "You sure you're ready?"

It's so fucking sweet that he's checking again, but the fire burning in my core is relentless. If he doesn't spank me, and soon, I'm going to spank my fucking self.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, kitten. It's my job to check you're okay."

Nodding, I roll my shoulders with a slow release of breath. "I need this, Thor. Please?"

Concern swims in his eyes, but there's a flicker of something else in those baby blues, too. Lust. Knowing this man wants me without him having to say a single word, makes me wet as fuck. Knowing he's held off from playing with me because we've been rebuilding things between us is so damned hot.

I need his help getting me out of my pleather dress, but when I step out of the pool of fabric, he whistles. "Kitten." He adjusts his cock in his dress pants. "You are spectacular. Let's spank that perfect ass."

CHAPTER 30

Thor

I'M FUCKING TERRIFIED.

It'll be fine. I know it'll be fine. We're stronger as a couple, we've worked on communication over the past few weeks, and I'm aware of what went wrong last time so I won't make the same mistake again.

But I'm still fucking terrified.

She's naked, face down on the bench, arms and legs resting on the red leather. She's a sight to behold, a gift, a goddess, and she's all mine.

What did I do to get this lucky?

Dragging my fingers through my hair to pull it on top of my head, I buy a few extra seconds. She wiggles in anticipation, but the cold hard grip of fear of hurting her won't let go of my body.

Crouching down next to her, I tip her head so she looks at me. "Would you mind if Slade comes in for a second please, kitten?"

She glances over at the window, the reflective coating making it impossible to know who's behind it, watching. Fifty bucks says Slade already has his cock in his hand, and two pretty brats on their knees ready to blow him.

"You're still nervous?"

Nodding, I hate myself.

Shouldn't Dominants be better than this?

Shouldn't we be able to get a handle on our fears, our insecurities, put them out of the way in favor of giving our submissives what they need?

She's very clearly consented, she's ready, waiting, and I bet if I spread those cheeks I'll find the new, pretty pink love heart butt plug I got for her last week inside her. Finding a way to suck it up and smack those plush cheeks is my priority, but something inside me isn't settling right, and I can't ignore it.

"Of course he can come in, Thor. Whatever you need."

"He's known for keeping submissives safe."

Nodding, she strokes my cheek. "He is. We don't need him, but if you want him here, I'm okay with that. Whatever it takes to help you feel steady in yourself again."

Kissing her on the forehead before dropping my head to rest on hers, I sigh. This woman has no idea how much calm she brings to me.

"Slade?" With a jerk of my chin at the window, he doesn't waste three seconds before the door to the room opens.

"What's wrong?"

"Performance anxiety?" Dunno why that's a question, it's very clear that's what my issue is. "I'm afraid of missing a cue and hurting her again."

My friend, mentor, and boss walks toward me shaking his head. "You won't." He reaches a hand toward Adi's head and we both nod our consent for him to touch her.

"How do you know I won't?"

As he strokes Adi's hair, her head falls back into position on the bench with a sigh. "Because you're aware of where you went wrong, and you're determined not to make that mistake again."

"Can you stay in here so I don't miss a cue?"

"You don't need me." Slade's face is etched with concern. "But you know I won't let you fly solo if you're not comfortable. Are you okay with that, pet?" His question is

directed to a practically purring Addison as he still strokes her hair.

“Yes, sir.”

That’s my kitten. She’s never played with another Dominant before, we’ve never even talked about protocol, or possibility. But watching him touching her like that, caring for her, it stirs something inside me that I’m definitely going to come back to.

Slade points his free hand at a stool in the corner of the room, and I bring it to him. He’s keeping her calm, his fingers having moved from caressing her hair to trailing the skin of her bare shoulders. “Is this okay?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Use your words, kitten.” I put the stool down for Slade and he sits on it.

Leaning forward close to her ear, he nods. “He’s right, we need verbal confirmation that my touching you here is okay.”

“Yes, sirs.”

The rumble in my chest makes Slade smirk. “Are you ready to be present, pet?”

She smiles up at him. “I’m ready to be spanked, yes sir.” She wiggles her ass again, as though taunting me. She has full confidence in me right now, and I need that more than I’m comfortable admitting.

The temptation to half-ass the spanking is overwhelming, but she deserves better than me holding back because of my fear.

“What’s your safe word, kitten?”

“Black.”

“Good girl.” Kneading her ass, my dick is already hard. I was right, there’s a plug between her cheeks.

“Please, Thor. Please.”

Slade's smirk grows. "Give your girl what she's begging for, sir."

When the first smack lands, she squeals with glee that lights up the room before panting out a "thank you."

"Check in."

"Green."

She counts out loud, five on each side just to warm up, and I'm meticulous about checking in between each and every one. Her ass is warm, pinking up nicely, and when I skim my thumbs through her lips, she's soaked. My girl loves impact.

"Harder, Thor."

Slade's head tips back with a groan. "You're making it very hard not to fist my cock here, pet."

Addison remains silent.

"He's hot for communicative women." I explain. "Five more?"

"With the crop, please?"

Is she topping from the bottom? Perhaps. Do I need the additional support and encouragement tonight? Absolutely.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Sir."

Slade nods at me over her back. He's being respectful, but the bulge in his pants looks pretty damn painful as it stretches the fabric.

"Five each side?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Count them for me. If you lose count, we start over."

After each smack on the left with yet more check ins, she gets the numbers right. But when Slade starts murmuring in her ear about how beautiful she looks getting her ass colored by me, she starts trembling, her arousal clear from a couple feet away.

“What number are we on, kitten?”

“Th-three?”

“No, kitten, we’re on four.”

Thwap.

“One.”

“Good girl.”

“She is such a good girl for you, Thor.”

She arches her back as the second smack lands. Her responses to him make me want to ask her to do more with him, but that’s not how any of us work. Something like that requires planning in advance. It requires sitting down together and going through Slade’s procedures, coming together to form a plan. But I’ll be damned if I don’t want her sucking his dick while I pound into her from behind.

When she gets to five, her ass is a pretty shade of red.

“I need to fuck you, Adi.”

She moans.

“I’m going to ask Slade to hold the wand against your clit while I fuck you. Is that okay?”

She shifts her legs a little further apart on the bench, popping her hips higher as though creating space for him. “Yes, Sir. I’d like that, thank you.” Her voice is shaky, breathy, but she’s coherent.

“That okay with you, sir?”

He nods. “Next time we do a little more advanced planning, okay?”

Nodding, I regret having to do this on the fly. A million thoughts invade my mind at the different things I could ask Slade to do to her, but I’ve already committed to the wand.

He connects the wand and points it at me. “What setting?”

“Always two or six. Dealer’s choice.”

With a wicked grin, he pushes the head of the wand against her clit before pushing the button six times. My kitten has no fucking clue what's about to happen to her. The squeal of delight that rings out around the room sets fire to my blood.

I'm balls deep in her before she can adjust to the pulsing rhythm of the wand, and I'm not holding back. Between the thrusts of my dick, the wand against her clit, the butt plug, and the well timed slaps on her ass cheeks, she's squirting around my dick like a fucking champ.

"I need to come," she screams, her voice raw.

Slade's free hand is stroking her hair and shoulder. "Ask him nicely, pet. Don't forget your manners."

"Fuck manners!"

At her declaration, I slap both cheeks at the same time, careful not to lose my balance and enjoying the pained moan it draws from my girl.

"P-p-please, Thor. Please let me come for you."

Slade mutters "that's better," but I'm driving into her harder and faster, and with each slap of my balls against her, I'm closing in on an orgasm of my own.

Her walls flex and tighten around me, her slick heat making it easy to move inside her.

"Come for me, Addison." I've barely finished my sentence before I'm seeing stars. She's clamped around me so hard she's pulling me over the edge with her. Hissing and cussing through gritted teeth, I ride the waves of a release I wasn't expecting, my eyes rolling back in my head.

Fuck.

Slade's telling her how pretty she looks when she comes for me. If I hadn't already blown my load, hearing my best friend tell my girl how good she looks when she comes for me would have sent me off the deep end.

After a quick clean up, I circle the bench and crouch down in front of Addison. Wisps of hair stick to her sweat-sheened forehead.

“Are you okay, kitten?”

Her glassy eyes meet mine, her cheeks are flushed, there’s a lazy smile on her face, and she’s biting her lip. “Yes, sir. Can we do that again, please?”

Meeting Slade’s eyes over her still-red ass, he tilts his head with a grin. “Sure thing, pet. Let’s talk about it.”

Cleaning up my girl and carrying her to the car, then into the house, is easy with clouds underfoot. I’m more relaxed than I’ve been in weeks. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to go through with it. Making that level of mistake felt unrecoverable, but the reality is, that if both parties want it enough, there’s nothing in the world they can’t face and overcome together. My girl and I are ready to take over the world.

Epilogue

ADDISON

(Two months later)

I THINK MY F5 BUTTON IS BROKEN. AND MY MOUSE. AND THE whole internet.

No amount of refreshing the fucking page is changing the fact I haven't had a single sale yet.

Granted, my website went live about, uh, crap, three minutes ago now, so there's probably something to be said about that watched pot never boiling.

With shaky hands I turn to face Thor, his presence protruding into the room before he made a single noise to announce it.

“You ready to go, kitten?” His smile is like a warm blanket on a spring day.

With a nod, I stand up, sit down, then stand up again. “Maybe I should just stay here and make sure the site stays live.”

He moves toward me, shaking his head. Cupping my waist with his hand, he guides me toward the door. “Maybe you should just come out to lunch and celebrate your huge success. You planned, created, and launched a business within eight weeks. You're super woman. You will achieve your goals with this company, Addison.”

An attempt to deflect tickles the back of my throat, but I swallow it down. “Did you sign the paperwork?”

He nods, a mixture of sadness and contentment on his face. "I did."

Matthew's mom mailed Thor paperwork a couple weeks ago to hand over all parental rights to him. He's been sitting on it ever since. Even Ella couldn't get him to do what he needed to do with it. I guess he needed to come around on his own.

Becoming a father to Matthew overnight was a big deal to him, it would have been a big deal to anyone. But I guess signing documentation, making it all legal, makes it final, real. It's a big step, one he doesn't take lightly. If he did, he wouldn't be the man I fell in love with.

"Is Matthew still excited about the game tonight?" I don't want to push him to talk about something he doesn't want to trawl through. He'll let me know what he's feeling and thinking when he's ready.

He nods, a smile bringing a sparkle back to his eyes. "Austin and Kenzie will be here for dinner. I think he's more excited that he gets to nerd out with Austin over a real life, in the flesh hockey game than anything else." He holds out his hand for me, when I cross the room and slide mine into his, he tugs me to his chest, wrapping me up in his arms and sniffing my hair like it's the first time. Every time.

"He's gone above and beyond to make sure that Matty's taken care of at the arena. He's gotten us box seats, he's making sure Matty has space somewhere quiet for the pregame, and we're all ready to leave if things go south. He's also put together a meet and greet experience for him too, if he has the mental spoons by the end of the game."

He's still holding stress in his rigid muscles as he talks. We both know that even the best laid plans can fall apart, but he wants this so bad for Matthew that it makes my heart flex.

This man. This fucking man. He invests his whole self into everything he does, and everyone he loves. Stepping back I gaze up at the man who holds my heart.

Matthew and I have been working on something together for the past few days, out of eye and ear shot of Thor. Matthew

hasn't known the details, but he's enjoyed helping me come up with the scavenger hunt clues. He thinks we're sending Thor on a hunt for the signed jersey Austin dropped off for him yesterday. He dropped off one for Matthew and I, too. But Thor doesn't know about it yet.

The truth is, I've hidden my paddle in the bedroom. Once Matthew sees Thor find the jersey, Ella can watch him for a hot minute while I follow Thor trying to figure out the last clue.

Ella basically lives with us these days, there was very little point to her buying a house other than to say she has her own place. She's here more often than not, and in all honesty, I think both of my boys need her around.

She brings a grounding kind of playful chaos to the house that we sorely needed, and she's freakishly good at reading the room. Knowing when Thor needs sent to Daddy Timeout is a skill I can only dream to possess someday. I'm sure I'll get there. I will. And I don't feel shit about the fact I'm not there now. I'm just glad she's around to help balance out the testosterone in the house.

"I love you, kitten." Thor sweeps his lips across my forehead in a kiss so tender my ovaries hurt. I don't know what the turning point was for this commitmentphobe, or when he stopped being afraid of whatever was stopping him from seeing girls more than once and settling down. I don't know what I did to deserve to be the one he's picked to share his forever days with, but I can't wait to make the most of every second.

Epilogue

THOR

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON, BUT MATTY IS alive with excitement as he hands me the last clue. “Here you go, Dad.”

It was under the vase of almost dead flowers sitting on the dining room table. I really need to replace those. I learned the hard way that while Addison is a goddess, she is most definitely not the goddess of nature. She kills plants. Like, not maliciously, but for as capable a woman as she is, I’d question her ability to keep even a succulent alive.

Since moving in with Matty and me, she’s damn near killed every plant I owned. It’s almost a fucking talent. So I’ve taken to buying her fresh cut flowers. All she needs to do is change the water out every couple of days, trim the stems, and stay the hell away from my houseplants. It’s working out much better for both of us, and my Zen has returned to a nice warm glow, rather than a constant anxiety about which of my precious girls she was going to kill off next.

When I open the door to the oven, there’s a bag inside. Matty is clapping, smile wide on his face. “Open it!”

I never realized how much he loves games, and I make a mental note to start including more games like this in our lives. Hiding his birthday presents for example.

The hockey shirt inside the bag is epic. I’d say I wonder where Austin finds his contacts, but the man’s the son of a billionaire who played college hockey, he knows people. This gift is too much, and when Matty tells me he and Adi got

shirts too, well, I'll be having words with my far too generous friend.

That or I'll buy his girl a million gallons of sweet tea to make up for it. That might last her a week or so.

Before Matty heads back into the living room, he gives me a hug. "I love you, Dad."

Overwhelm crashes into me as I dig deep to answer him. "I love you too, buddy. So very much." Dropping a kiss on his forehead, he smiles up at me. I hadn't realized what a big piece of my life was missing until Matty arrived, and it fell into place. He heads into the living room where Mom tells him she's going to kick his ass at whatever game he chooses.

His laugh is light and joyous, and we all know there's no way she's beating him at anything.

"That was fun." Brushing a curl off Addison's face, her eyes are glassy and her cheeks are flushed. A sure sign my kitten wants to play. "Now?" Tilting my head, I caress her cheek, enjoying how her eyelids flutter closed and the tiniest moan escapes from between her perfectly plump pink lips.

"There's one more clue." Her voice has that breathless quality she gets when she edges, so my dick is already rising to the occasion.

She hands me an envelope, the card inside doesn't have a clue on it as much as a location. *Bedroom.*

When she wants to play, we usually go to the dungeon, so the curiosity that prickles up my spine makes my breath stutter. Turns out I might like games too.

She races upstairs with me hot on her heels, and when she stops next to the bed and turns to me, there's a mixture of hope and just a dash of unease in those telling eyes of hers. She jerks her head to the bed.

The paddle wrapped in a bow sits on top of the quilt, with a little notecard that simply says, *please, Sir.* My brain short circuits as my wide eyes flicker back and forth between the paddle and my girl who must have seen something in my

reaction because the hesitation, the caution is now gone. The only thing in her eyes now is lust and joy.

My kitten wants to play. With her paddle. She wants me to make her ass turn pretty colors and make it hard for her to sit down at the game later. And I'm going to fucking give it to her.

Tipping my chin to her, I give her the only word she needs to hear in this moment. "Run."

With a squeal she flees the room and barely touches the stairs as she sprints. I jump the bannister at the last few stairs and land in front of her with an animalistic growl. We stare at each other for a long fucking minute, a minute that's charged with promise and raw want.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you take Matty for a walk?"

Mom giggles, Addison giggles, her face turning a shade of red I've not seen before. There's no hiding precisely what I'm feeling from the tone of my voice. I couldn't even if I wanted to.

"Of course." Mom says something that I'm sure should have been under her breath about missing having someone to service her in the middle of the day, and it almost kills my boner. But Addison cups my face, bringing my attention back to her, and Mom's sex life gets set to the side never to be unpacked or even talked about again, because my girl needs me.

Throwing her over my shoulder like a fucking caveman, I carry her into the dungeon. I barely manage a word, a grunt, anything more than the heaving breaths to keep oxygen charging through my body before I rip her clothes off and throw her onto my bench.

"Hold on tight, kitten. This is going to be quick and dirty."

She jiggles her hips, a sure sign that she's eager. I can't help my fingers from wandering into her pussy while she's

presented to me so prettily. Jesus Christ she's soaked with arousal. Curling my tongue around my fingers, her salty-sweet taste explodes on my tongue. It takes almost a full minute to decide which I want more, to color her ass with bruises, or to feast on her like she's a five star meal served on the finest China.

Ultimately, my girl's needs win out. She needs this. She's been so brave and strong, she's overcome her fear, and we've rebuilt our trust. It's time to show her that I can give her what she needs.

"Check in."

"Green."

"No counting today, kitten, okay?"

She pants heavy breaths, making her body rise and fall on the bench. "Yes, Sir."

Slapping the paddle against my palm, my dick twitches. Precum already seeping into my underwear, and I'm painfully fucking hard.

Squeezing and rubbing her cheeks to get the blood flowing under her skin is tough. I want to launch right into the smacks but I need to do right by her. No cutting corners, no getting carried away, no jumping ahead, even if it feels like we both desperately want it.

Smacking a few times with my hand on each side to get her warmed up, she responds like the beautiful little pain slut she is. Moaning, holding perfectly still for me, and her pussy is now glistening.

Huh. I wonder if she'd like to be called my beautiful little pain slut. I've never thought about it before, never talked about it, but it could either go really wrong or really right. Questioning myself isn't a fun space, and I almost swallow it down and put it aside for next time, but something about the phrase tugs at me until I circle the bench and crouch down in front of her.

"Kitten?"

She looks up at me, allowing me space to trail my fingers over her warm skin.

“How do you feel about me calling you my pain slut?”

She purses her lips like she’s thinking about it, but her body tells me everything I need to know. Her eyes light up, her breathing quickens, and if I’m not mistaken she’s trying to grind herself against the bench.

“Can we try it and see?”

“Of course, kitten. And if it doesn’t land right, or you don’t like it, you tell me okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Check in.”

“Green.”

Before long I’ve lost track of time and the number of smacks I’ve given her with this paddle. I’m checking in every couple of hits, and so far she’s taking it like the fucking queen she is. Her ass is coloring nicely, not just surface level coloring. Parts of her skin are starting to bruise already. It’s going to be a very uncomfortable night for my kitten at the game.

Freeing my cock from my pants with one hand, I pump it slowly, enjoying the beads of precum sliding down the shaft. She moans, wiggling, mumbling about how she wants more.

“What’s the matter, kitten? Does my precious little pain slut need more?”

She squirts a split second before she starts pleading in earnest. “Please, please, please, Thor, please, I need more.”

“Are you sure, kitten?”

“Yes, Sir. Please?”

Grabbing her ass with both hands I squeeze, drawing a guttural moan from her. “That’s my good little cum slut. I could do this all fucking day.”

By the time I blow my load all over the bruises blooming on her skin, she's a mindless, soaking mess. She's come twice on my cock, screaming my name, unbridled wails falling from her lips. The feeling of peace in my chest that my precious kitten has trusted me with such a gift again when I almost lost it is overwhelming.

Before moving her, I pull my phone from my pants and shoot off a text to Austin telling him I'm probably staying home with Addison instead of going to the game. He'll understand why when he comes by to pick up Matty and Mom.

I should have been smarter about how I handled this, knowing we had plans. But I got caught up in the excitement. Matty only wants Austin at the game anyway, the rest of us are passengers, and hopefully it won't be his last.

Torn between my son's first hockey game, and my girl's aftercare feels like my heart is being pulled in two directions. But I did this to her, I put her in this space, I made her ass throb and ache with pain. If she's not up to the game, it's my responsibility to take care of her. More than that, it's all I want to fucking do.

As I clean her up and get her off the bench, I tell her she's beautiful, that she's made me so proud, and thank her a million times for trusting me with her paddle again. This is just the beginning for the two of us, and I can't fucking wait to see how far I can push her limits. But for now, my girl needs cuddles and aftercare.

And that's exactly what she's going to get.

If you're not ready to be done with Thor and Addison, I've put together an extra spicy bonus MFM scene between her, Thor, and Thor's best friend Slade. Please note, Adi gets dicked by both Thor and Slade. You've been forewarned.

Sign up to my newsletter to get this juicy bonus!

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/u2e7870w0q>



If you enjoyed appearances from Austin and Mackenzie in Control, their story, *Two for Boarding* is ready to read here:

books2read.com/twoforboarding



Mackenzie

“Heavens to Betsy, y’all, are we in a... a... sex club?” As it turned out, Mackenzie’s whisper, hadn’t been much of a whisper at all. Her blurted-out question drew narrow-eyed, suspicious looks from the two women leaning on the bar to her right. The taller, skinnier one with a striking inverted bob dressed in a skin-tight, PVC French maid’s outfit, smirked at her corset-and-collar-wearing friend who rolled her eyes.

Kenzie’s traitorous bestie, Addison, shook with laughter and grabbed Paige’s arm as though she might collapse from the hilarity of it all. “Uh... Surprise? Welcome to Protocol.” Addison reminded her of her sister Bea; she was the light to Kenzie’s dark, headstrong, beautiful, and lived for the smug satisfaction of being right.

“So this is why I’m dressed like I’m performing at a burlesque show.” Kenzie tugged at the hem of her studded leather skirt. It barely covered her ass cheeks. And while she wasn’t a prude, she also didn’t think the whole world needed to see her booty. “This is the last time I follow y’all blindly into the unknown. No more ride-or-die. I’m done with you bitches.” She waved her hand at them. “When I get home I’m finding new best friends on Craigslist.”

Her friends’ giggles continued as she made her way to the bar. Her heart pounded in her ears and pulsed in her temples as she attempted to take in the bustling crowd clad from head to toe in leather and PVC, trying desperately not to stare too hard, or seem too out of place.

“Bitches.”

The French Maid raised her eyebrows as a wave of heat flashed across Kenzie's cheeks. "Not y'all. Y'all aren't bitches. They..." She pointed over her shoulder. "They are the bitches."

French Maid and Corset-and-Collar picked up their drinks and fled out of sight before Kenzie could suck in another breath to explain any further. She didn't blame them, she was acting a little odd and needed to calm the fuck down. While she wasn't generally someone to yuck someone's yum, as a former Sunday school attending, pageant girl from Pearland, Texas, she was most certainly in over her head.

Her body-hugging purple corset with black lace trim grew tighter as three men in dress pants and pressed shirts walked by her. "How come they didn't have to wear pleather skirts that barely cover their butt crack?"

The giant, bartender with a brown man-bun to her right, laughed. "You didn't either. Can I get you anything?" He placed a black, square drink napkin with an emblem printed in silver and the word 'Protocol' above it, on the shiny black bar top in front of her. It looked like a yin yang symbol with three of the darker, yin shapes. She traced her fingers over the three "arms" curving out from the center and merging with an encompassing circle.

"Yes sir. New best friends?" She groaned, dropping her forehead to the back of her hands on the cool surface.

"We don't serve those here. At least not behind the bar. But I could provide you with a delicious beverage that might take the edge off. Who knows, maybe your new best friend is out there waiting." He jerked his stubble-encased chin at the space behind her. "Give it a chance. I get that it can be intimidating, but you passed the first hurdle of getting in the door and not peeing yourself or running away screaming."

She pointed her index finger at him as someone bumped her from behind with a muttered apology. "You don't know that I haven't peed myself. And maybe I haven't yet bolted because my legs don't work anymore 'cause I'm frozen in place. Have you considered that... Thor?"

His broad shoulders shook as he laughed. “I get that a lot.”

“Must be because you look like a Viking.”

He winced and covered his heart. “I always thought it was because I look like a god.”

She rolled her eyes. Another bartender, seemingly half the size of the giant and in every way his polar opposite appeared and patted Thor’s expansive chest. “He likes to think that. Thor, Melissa called in sick. It’s just you and me tonight, your god-ship.” The second bartender’s lip rings glinted in the light as he grinned and the much narrower man, with wild short red hair bowed at Thor and smiled at Kenzie.

He made his way past Thor to the far end of the bar where he took orders from the three men in dress pants without a notepad. She envied people who could keep everything in their head. There wasn’t a day that went by when her to-do lists didn’t sprout to-do lists just to keep her on the path to successful adulting.

She narrowed her eyes. “Is your nickname really Thor?”

The giant with almost inhuman blue eyes shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe I’m the real Thor of Asgard and I’m here to protect you from all the PVC and kinky fuckery that’s afoot behind you with my massive hammer. Maybe I really am the God of Thunder.” He wagged his eyebrows and pointed behind her. “Ask anyone, they’ll corroborate my identity.”

In her haste to get to the bar, and cover her behind with a high-backed barstool, she hadn’t truly stopped to take in her surroundings. She’d glanced around and panicked at her instant overwhelm. She wasn’t sure she was ready to look at what was behind her, no matter how curious she might have felt. She groaned and her head thudded against the bar. “Ugh.”

“I’d ask if it was your first time, but you have this blinding neon sign right above your head. It’s kinda distracting.”

She sat up as he leaned on his forearms in front of her. “What can I get you, sugar?”

“Three margaritas. Espolon if you have it. Salt rims.”

“She likes her rims good and salty.” Paige snorted as she and Addison joined Kenzie at the bar.

The corner of his lips twitched.

“What?”

“Most clubs with play are dry spaces.” He grabbed a glass from the rack overhead.

“Sometimes they are BYOB. We have timekeepers and dungeon monitors to ensure that anyone in the play spaces is not under the influence. It becomes risky for consent as well as activities that require coordination. As a general rule, most believe that there is no space for alcohol or drugs in the kink community during play, or introductions, for safety reasons. A common mantra at the places that do have a serving option is ‘kink then drink’. We are not one of those places.”

“No tequila?”

He shook his head. “’fraid not.”

“I hate you both.” She flipped her friends the bird.

“If that were true, you’d have ordered only one margarita, not three.” Adi slipped her arm across Kenzie’s shoulders. “Admit it, you love us.”

“Maybe I planned on drinking all three. Fine. Virgin margaritas then. I’ll imagine the tequila.”

“So... you want lime juice and sugar syrup?” Thor was doing a terrible job at hiding his amusement at the situation unfolding in front of him.

“Do you have a better suggestion?” She shivered as someone opened the door behind her, sending a blast of frigid November air through the bar area. She was already regretting her outfit choice even despite her heavy coat, which she was clinging to like a life raft.

“Pfft. Don’t insult me.” Thor flashed a grin. “I make the best virgin cocktails in the city.”

“It’s true.” Paige nodded. “We’ll take three citrus sippers please, Thor.”

“What the fuck is a citrus sipper?” Kenzie folded her arms. The night was going downhill fast.

“Lime, cranberry juice, ginger ale, and white grapefruit juice.” Thor answered, as he assembled the ingredients on the bar in front of them.

“Sounds distinctly lacking in tequila.”

He was already making their drinks and shook his head. “Give it a chance, lady. If you hate it, you can always leave, no one’s tying you up unless you want them to.” He winked at Addison whose eyes bugged out of her head. “Plus, you can always grab a ‘don’t fucking talk to me’ wristband if you want to.”

“A wristband?”

Both Paige and Addison waved their arms in front of Kenzie’s face. She grabbed Adi’s arm. “What does orange mean?”

Addison squared her shoulders, casting a furtive glance at the tall and totally-her-type bartender. “It means taken but exploring submissive. It means I’m not all the way in the ‘don’t fucking talk to me’ camp. I mean, I’m single...”

She batted her eyes at Thor who did little to hide his approving gaze as it traveled down Addison’s face, landing on her ample cleavage. “But I want to play it safe for the night. If that means pretending I’m in a relationship to ward off the throngs of potential suitors...” She shrugged.

She also wore a corset, but hers was brown, steampunk in style, and had leather straps crisscrossing under her bust. Her cheeks pinked. “This way I have an out for not hurting anyone’s feelings. I can just flash my band and say I’m taken. Just cause I’m single doesn’t mean I’m open to just anyone. A girl’s gotta have standards.”

Thor handed her a tumbler of pinky orange liquid. “She does indeed, my lady. And if anyone gives you any hassle here tonight, you come find me. Thor of Asgard will take care of you.”

“With his massive hammer.” Kenzie tugged at the top of her corset and turned her head to avoid the come-fuck-me eyes her friend was giving the giant bartender they’d just met. One of the three dress-pant-clad guys at the end of the bar looked vaguely familiar from his profile, but she couldn’t place him, and he and the two men he was with were gone before she had a chance to confirm.

“See?” Paige elbowed Kenzie in the ribs. “Thor here says it’s all good. If you wanna play you can play, if you wanna watch you can watch, if you want to leave... we’ll be very sad about it, won’t we, Adi?”

Addison still made gooey heart eyes at Thor, but she nodded.

“Y’all made me dress up like this when I didn’t have to. If I wasn’t so dang self-conscious about what I’m wearing, it wouldn’t be so bad.”

Paige snorted. “Lies. If you were wearing jeans and a Brett Young tour T-shirt from five years ago you’d still feel out of place and even more self-conscious. This is better.” She clutched her glass and gestured it up and down in front of Kenzie’s corset. “This is hot as fuck. And you do have to. There’s a dress code.”

“She’s not wrong.” Thor handed Kenzie her glass and she ignored the straw in favor of chugging half of the cold, bitter-sweet mixture in one go. “Dress codes keep people from showing up who are not part of the community.”

“What is the dress code?” The more he talked, the more her curiosity grew.

“A good rule of thumb is “no pink” should be visible on men or women. For men, a well-tailored suit is often all that is required. Black and red are often easier to pass. That is the easy entry. I have also worn chest harnesses with jeans and button down shirts, carried a rope, or worn other leather gear on the outside of my clothing. The biggest piece of importance is that the clothing fits. If it looks like you borrowed someone else’s suit, you will likely not get in.”

Kenzie tugged on her corset, thankful it was hers from the previous year's Halloween costume and that she hadn't gotten turned away at the door for her overwhelming ignorance at what she was about to walk into.

Thor mixed more of their mocktail and refilled their glasses. "Men and women have to meet the dress code alike. Even still there are often boys who enter the club with a thought process of getting the opportunity to beat on a woman and a guaranteed line up of vaginas in front of them."

Kenzie gasped, but Thor continued. "Often the DM's will spot and remove these individuals quickly, but there are cases where people have been seriously injured."

"Dungeon masters." Paige correctly guessed that the abbreviation was lost on her.

"Are all clubs the same? Do they all have dress codes?"

He shook his head. "Entry to dungeon spaces typically requires a strict dress code. The more the location focuses on targeting swingers vs general kinksters, the more likely it will have a vanilla vs strict dress code. If you have stocks and gags, it is likely a dungeon and there is also likely a dress code in place." He sighed and threw his cloth onto the bar. "I feel like I need to adequately prepare you since your friends were idiots and didn't."

"Hey." Addison's protests were drowned out by Thor not pausing for breath.

"There's a staircase that takes you to the basement." He pointed over her left shoulder. "Most of the time play happens in private and there are a lot of rules around more public play and what is allowed. A good rule is also to ensure you ask prior to using any equipment."

Two men called out their drinks order, and Thor grabbed their alcohol-free beer without missing a beat. "There are a lot of signs around the club to remind you of the rules. Even sober, people have a tendency to forget it's generally not a free-for-all play space where you can let loose anywhere. Penetrative activities and those that would result in body fluid

etc. are in more enclosed areas. For safety reasons. But you're still going to see things."

Her heart quickened. Watching people do... things... was one thing, but all out intercourse?

Or rather all-in-tercourse? Shit. Her face burned. If her mama could see her now she'd have her hauled down to Pastor Mullholland's church for a conscience cleanse.

"A sex dungeon." Addison clapped her hands, her eyes wide and sparkling and a grin that could light up the Houston power grid spread across her face.

He nodded, returning her grin. "We have 'house doms' resident in the club. They will be more front and center in a shared space to perform some acts for those interested. It's a way to introduce spanking, flogging, whipping, shibari, wax play..." His approving gaze swept over Addison, making Kenzie blush.

"Shibari is rope play," supplied Paige, sipping on her second drink.

"Consent, as always, remains important, even with our house doms who have a release you sign prior to engaging. When you leave the dungeon, you enter a lounge with traditional drinks. The lounge also has a separate entrance where you can choose to only attend there for drinks without passing the dungeon. No play is allowed in that space. I'd suggest you get a wristband like your friends – unless you're into being dominant rather than submissive, in which case you'll need a different color to both of them."

She sipped her drink in silence as her friends both turned to stare at her with round, hopeful eyes. Addison kicked the heel of Kenzie's over-the-knee black leather boots. "Come on K-K. Pleeeeeease? You've been so busy since you started working with those fucking Snow Pirates that we hardly get to hang out anymore." She threw a pointed glare at Paige as if to encourage her to join in.

Thor quirked his brow. "You a student at the U?"

Kenzie snorted and rolled her eyes. “My college days are far behind me.”

“She’s right, Kenz.” Paige slurped at the remaining liquid in the bottom of her glass. “I’ve wanted to check this place out for ages. If we’d waited for you to get on board, we’d have grown old and died.”

They weren’t wrong. As it turned out, working as a physiotherapist for the local college hockey team was sucking her of all her energy.

“All work and no play makes Mackenzie a dull girl. And by extension, her friends.” Addison sipped her drink. “If you really wanna leave, we can. But Paige and I will go take a quick look around first.”

Kenzie stared at the slow melting ice cubes in the bottom of her glass. She’d played by everyone else’s rules for so long when she lived back in Texas – her estranged husband, her family, society – everyone and their grandma had their own opinions of how she should look, talk, act. But in Minnesota she could be anyone she wanted to be. She’d left that old life behind.

She’d changed her name, her hair, and her attitude. In Minnesota she could be the fun-loving Mackenzie Abbottt who went to the local sex club with her friends and wasn’t embarrassed to admit to herself she was all-the-way curious, and more turned on than she expected to be.

“Fuck it.” She drained the last of her drink. “I’m in.”

Paige bounced on the balls of her feet and clapped her hands. “Whoop! If you get uncomfortable and want to leave, just holler. We should give her a safe word.” She rolled her lips between her teeth. “If you need to escape the kinky sex dungeon just say... uh... starfish.”

“Starfish?” Kenzie tipped her head.

Paige shrugged. “It’s mine.”

Thor wiped the bar with a washcloth. “And if you end up comfortable and want to have sex with a stranger, the dungeon has cleaning stations with safe sex supplies, spray, towels,

wipes, etc. You are expected to clean a space before you leave so the next person can enjoy it safely. The monitor or timekeeper quality checks before allowing the next person in the space.”

A shiver rattled through her from head to toe. Clean up team. Condoms. Kink. If the entire room wouldn't see them every time she moved in such a short skirt, she'd have hurried home to put on her Big Girl Panties. But for the moment, she, and the only black thong she owned, had to pray everyone else had better things to look at than her big butt.

Paige looked like all her Christmases had come at once. She slipped her red velvet jacket off her shoulders to reveal a black dress. A tulle panel across her chest exposed her breasts, and she had diamanté crystals covering her nipples under the sheer fabric.

Under her bust, a leather insert pulled her waist in with what looked to be a corset – held together with braided leather and golden hoops. There was more tulle at the bottom to create a pleated skirt.

Coupled with her boob-length, jet-black wavy hair and blood red lips the look had even Kenzie questioning her sexuality for a moment. “Wow. You came prepared. Wait. You're not wearing an orange band.” She grabbed her friend's arm. “What does green mean?”

“Available switch.” Paige's grin was hungry and wicked.

Addison's arched eyebrow suggested she was every bit as lost as Kenzie was. “What the fuck is a switch?” She handed her empty glass to Thor.

“A switch is someone who goes back and forth between dominating and being submissive depending on their mood, circumstances, and the vibe between partners.” Thor smirked. “This isn't your friend's first rodeo.”

Paige shrugged. “It was time for you guys to see my dark and twisty side.” She jabbed a finger at Addison and Kenzie. “No judgment from you bitches, or I will cut you.”

Addison held her palms up to Paige. “Girl, you didn’t judge me for that abomination of a dye job I got last year. Or that guy who brought his mom to our first date. Let that freak flag fly. Maybe I’ll find my kink tonight.”

A jolt of excitement rippled through her. Maybe Kenzie would, too.

Read Austin and Mackenzie’s story now:

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NOVELLAS

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Author Note

New penname.

New series.

New subgenre.

What in the name of all that's holy was I fucking thinking? Can someone tell me, please? And if there's a next time, can someone adult for me and hit me upside the head?

Y'aaaall. This one was a doozy.

I started this manuscript in April 2023 when I had plenty of time to get it ready for my June editing appointment with the exceptionally patient Editor Jess. She even messaged me to check that a May plus June editing schedule wasn't too much. I told her "I've got this."

Man, oh man, did the universe shit on that. Like a giant, stinky shit. Serves me right for being confident in my competence, right?

Sickness hit the house a number of times over April and May, for both me and my little boy. Mostly me, and that wasn't fun. My personal life took a curveball when my sister—who I've been estranged from for three and a half years—reappeared in my life and asked if we could talk and maybe make amends. I finally got myself an appointment with an OBGYN who listened to what I have to say and was proactive in diagnostics. And my kid had more days off school in May than we knew what the hell to do with.

Q2 was a big quarter, there was a lot of emotional shifting under my feet and finding stability and the clear air to focus on giving Thor, Addison, and Matthew the story they deserved wasn't easy.

For those of you who have already read my books under my original penname Lasairiona McMaster, you'll know the concept of Protocol, my BDSM club was created in Mackenzie and Austin's story, *Two for Boarding*. When Paige and Addison showed up as Kenzie's best friends, y'all went feral for them.

I'd always planned to do a Protocol spin-off, but when so many people started asking for it, I felt the crushing pressure to do it justice too. Not just Adi and Paige's stories, but the whole series.

BDSM romance tends to live in the shadow of a couple of main books/series, and while there is most definitely a place for those stories in the world, I wanted to write something a little more accessible.

My romance novels tend to be 'real people' romances. No billionaires, no stuffy strict rules, just regular people falling in love and doing regular things. So despite the segue into a new subgenre, I wondered if there would be a space for me to write what I always write, and still find readers in the BDSM space.

The general thought that only quiet women can be submissives, or that "all dominants" need to behave a certain way beds under my skin and makes me itch.

Regular guys and girls can be kinky too, mothers and fathers with a house full of chaotic children can still find time for their dynamic.

The most wonderful, freeing rule of BDSM/kinklife is that there are no fucking rules. Live loud, live free, and as long as you get consent from the person you want to play with, then the world is your oyster.

It's that simple. It's that beautiful basic that you just figure out what you like and do it. If a 24-7 dynamic doesn't work for you, that's cool. If you're a Little, or a sissy, or a femme, or you're none of those things, that's okay too. If you just want to call your husband *Papi* while he rails you against a tree in the forest, girl, live your best life.

The kink community is the most accepting of all. There. I said it. All you have to do is find your kinks and run with them.

You do you, boo.



Obey

TALIA & JAGGER

Grumpy/Sunshine, forced proximity.

We all know how it goes.

When the tall, dark, built like a brick shit house man gets on the plane and there's an empty extra leg-room seat next to the bright-haired, bubbly little pixie, they're destined to fall in love and get married.

So when the giant brooding bastard—who looks like he should be a marble statue in a museum—boards my plane and has to hunch his shoulders and make himself small to fit in the cabin, I'm already picking out my dress.

Tipping my head back, I thank past Talia for splurging for the extra legroom. Though I kinda wish she'd have made me keep my waxing appointment. Can't sit next to the man of my dreams with prickly legs, and I certainly can't join the mile high club with an unruly bush.

My body heats as he approaches. I have my bestest, peopliest smile ready to go. There's no way this cantankerous hulk of a man will be able to resist me. This is it, the moment I meet the man of my dreams. Sucking in a breath, I prepare my greeting, but he keeps walking.

Huh?

Read Talia and Jagger's story :

Books2read.com/protocolobey



Acknowledgments

Lewis – If you know anything about me by now you'll know I start every acknowledgment section with a shout out to my little boy. He's nine right now, so a little young to be reading about kink and spanking, but when he's older I hope he makes the time to read these books, to learn about consent, hurting people when they want to be hurt, and working with your partner to find a dynamic that works for both of you.

Who knew that when you were hounding me to get sticky notes tacked off the wall that I was writing about all this 'stuff,' hopefully when you're old enough to understand, you're not grossed out, you're proud and will encourage your friends to read your mama's books too. Okay, fine, maybe that's a step too far, but still.

Lisa and Matthew – Thank you for letting me interview you, Lisa (repeatedly!), for letting me peek inside your special world and relationship with Matty and for letting me use elements of your story, to tell Thor, Addison, and Matthew's. I knew when I met my yoga mum friends they were special, but the more time that passes, the more I learn just how special they are. I am so honored to be your friend. I love you <3

Tracie – Q2 sucked balls, and we fell off the wagon, hard. We didn't do nearly as many 6am sprints as we wanted to, life kicked us in the cooch, and we floundered, but we got through our deadlines together. I'm looking forward to getting our shit together and getting back to it, we're unstoppable when we work together. Despite our lack of consistency in May, this book wouldn't be here without you. You keep dragging me up off the mat every damn day, and I'll forever be grateful for you believing in me more than I do. I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I sure hope I keep doing it.

Karina – I had no idea when you messaged me in January '23 that we'd become such fast friends. You said to me this

morning at The Prom that you're not sure how we work because our strengths are so opposite, and while I'm not going to pick it apart to figure it out, sometimes the cosmos puts people in our paths that are supposed to be there. You're one of those people, and I'm so glad you hit me up when you did. Our Monday working breakfast – AKA avocado days – have become a highlight of my week, and without your help in plotting Thor, and encouragement to get me through each micro-goal throughout the novel, he wouldn't be the book he is today. No matter what he says. Thank you!

Becca Syme – I feel like it's only fair that the girl who keeps sliding into your DMs with life issues and crises should write you into the acknowledgements of the book that wouldn't exist were it not for you and Becca Nation. Huge thank you for helping me figure out which strengths are playing up, how to untangle them and get them to sit the fuck down and shutup, and how to move forward through the chaos.

If you're an author reading this and don't know who Becca is, shame on me! I haven't done my job at pimping her out to everyone I talk to. Google the Better Faster Academy and sign up to one of Becca's courses – you can thank me later.

Andrew – I can't believe we're closer to the two decade mark of you being one of my very bestest friends than we are to one decade. When I sent you a message telling you I sucked so bad at this book, that I wasn't going to make this deadline, and that I wanted to set the whole book and series on fire, you stepped up. I can't say you stepped up in a way I've never seen before, because looking back over almost twenty years of having you around in my space, this is your jam. Pulling me back from the edge of self-destruction is what you do best. Figuring out what my crisis is, how to help me through it, and how to help me chase my goals and dreams with an almost unhinged determination and discipline is a special skill that I'm pretty sure only you possess.

Thank you for reading this book and giving me insight and input in the story. Thank you for demanding more words when you got to the end of each chapter. Thank you for making me

laugh, incentivizing me with snacks when all I wanted to do was bury my head in the sand, and for holding me up when I felt like I couldn't stand on my own.

Shaun – Who are you? And what have you done with my pain in the ass friend? Real question. Thanks for not being a dick for a hot minute and for being there for me while I finished delivering this book baby. It was a complicated process, I wasn't sure I could do it. You gave me the friendly nudge I needed to get the damn thing over the line. Now I really want some butter tarts.

Ivy – I can't thank you enough. I know you've been slammed with your own stuff and you still made time to read this for me because you knew I was having a breakdown about it. Your support and encouragement, your kink-checking for the things I haven't personally experienced, your friendship, I appreciate every tiny little bit. And I miss your face. I owe you a flight! <3

Heather(s) – What can I say? Going from breakfast with one Heather every week to two different Heathers on two different days has kept me going through this ordeal. Yup, writing this book was a crotch ache, but knowing I'd get to escape my manuscript on a Wednesday and Thursday morning for an hour or two was just what it took to make me push forward through the slog. Thanks for being moments of calm and laughter throughout a tumultuous couple of months. I needed it more than y'all know.

Fancy – Every book gets harder. Every book I complain and have a crisis of faith and existence and every book you kick me in the feel box and say bitch, you were born to do this, go fly. But this book was different. This year has been hard for me, trying in ways I hate being tried, and most of the time I couldn't see the why, or the growth. Thank you. Thank you for letting me lie my head on your epic boob-pillow while you hug me through my tears and tell me I'm a boss ass bitch. I couldn't do this without you as my emotional support barnacle.

Stephanie Kay – Our friendship kind of came out of nowhere. I about shit myself when you said you were reading

my Snow Pirates, and I'm pretty sure I didn't breathe until you'd finished them. When you coaxed me through Ares I knew we were end game friends. I knew when you stuck through my whining and complaining about that SOB that you were in this friendship forever. And if that wasn't deliberate then too bad, sucks to be you. Thank you for your check ins, your support, and your encouragement. Also thank you for your impatience to read the next book – it makes writing a lot easier knowing there's at least one someone ready to hide in the closet for a day and read my book. Love you!

My Alpha readers—Amy R and Katie 'Violence' Wilks. Y'all make me laugh every day, whether it's memes, reels, Tiktoks, or simply just from a voice message or text that lands at the right moment. I never imagined becoming such good friends with some of my readers, you know I've been burned a few times over the years, and I've been cautious. Y'all have been my rocks, a constant source of feedback and hair-strokes when I'm falling apart. And I'm so fucking grateful y'all picked up my books and are in my life.

My Editor—Editor Jess at heauthorservices.com—this is our *counts on fingers* 5th(??) book working together. The last Snow Pirates book, three Raccoons so far, and now this one. Every time I sit to write a book I feel equal parts stronger and weaker. Some things I get better at, some I get caught in my head about, and others I'm sure you want to shake me because this is book five, and I'm STILL making some of the same mistakes. I'd love to say opening your feedback gets easier with each book but that would be a bald-faced lie. It doesn't. But what *does* happen is that I grow, I improve, and I don't hyperfocus on the things I did wrong and instead force myself to improve on all the things you teach me.

I know authors spend a lot of time grumbling about their editors and editing (it's me, I'm 'authors') but I am truly grateful for your time, your sense of humor, and that beautiful brain of yours. I'm also soooo grateful you helped me get the cover for this book sorted too. You're shamazeballs! If you're not a hugger you'd better let me know in your feedback to this manuscript so I can start preparing for your visit, cause otherwise I'mma crush you so hard!

My cover designer—Lori Jackson—It's never easy working with a new designer, there's always an element of anxiety. Are we going to vibe well? Is she going to understand my vision? (As someone with strong communication skills I get terribly frustrated at myself if I can't communicate my vision.) Are the covers going to look okay when we're done? Thank you for making something that was new and scary so accessible. Your patience and expertise are both appreciated. Between my input, and Editor Jess helping me out with the second round, you produced a great cover with Victor on it, and an equally great discreet cover. I am so grateful for all your hard work!

And finally, my proofreader Corinne, my ARC readers, my Facebook reader group [*Margaritas, Men, and Mischief with Lasairiona*](#), and to each and every one of you who pick up this book: a bazillion thank yous. I truly hope you loved it enough to pick up the next one. Tell your friends! And if you're not in my group—come join us, we don't bite (unless you ask us to!)

About the Author

Lasairiona Lewis writes sassy, classy and badass women and strong, yet vulnerable men. She challenges reader's expectations by openly dealing with mental health issues, often exploring tough-to-handle topics and 'taboos' and books with a whole lotta heart.

She can either be found enjoying a gin and lemonade by the Irish sea, or baking sweet treats in her kitchen while singing at the top of her lungs. When she's 'home' in Texas, and isn't eating fresh-popped popcorn while buying things she has absolutely no need for in Target, she can be found at Chuys eating her body weight in chips and queso and washing it down with a margarita swirl. She loves to make friends out of strangers.

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