

*Dare  
to  
Love Again*

DECADENCE LA, BOOK 3

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**MADDIE TAYLOR**

Dare to Love Again  
Decadence LA, Book Three  
By  
Maddie Taylor

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Dare to Love Again, Decadence LA, Book Three

Published by Maddie Taylor/Breathless Romance

[www.RomanceByMaddieTaylor.com](http://www.RomanceByMaddieTaylor.com)

Cover Design by Fantasia Frog Designs

Images by DepositPhotos.com

Editing by Decadent Publishing

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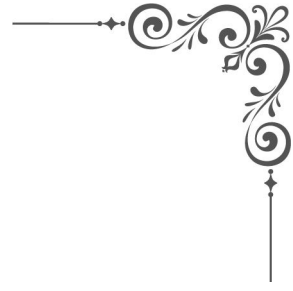
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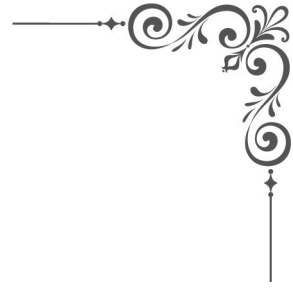
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# Dare to Love Again

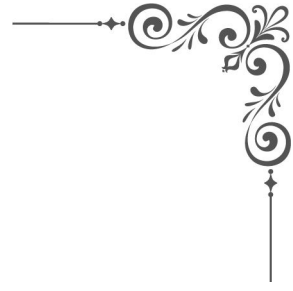
*Bit by bit, he's breaking through the shields around her heart.  
Can she find the courage and dare to love again?*



AS SHE CLINGS TO HER heart-wrenching past, Esmerelda Spade has been without the protective, quiver-inducing caress of a dom for nearly five years. Though her loneliness only adds to her anguish, this experienced submissive can't seem to find her strength or passion anywhere. Even on her best nights at Decadence LA, Esme simply watches from the sidelines, unable to walk away from the lifestyle she once thrived in or yield to any of the irresistible masters who would gladly have her.

Running the LA branch of Rossi Security leaves Keiran Finnegan no time to train a new submissive, but he's a man who knows what he wants. After one electrifying scene, he's convinced Esme is everything he's been longing for. Through his quiet dominance, skilled touch, and unwavering persistence, Master Finn reminds her how sweet surrender can be. But to claim her as his own, he must break through the walls she has erected around her heart and dare her to love again.

Publisher's Note: *Dare to Love Again*, is a standalone, second-chance romance, and book 3 in the Decadence LA series. It has been revised, re-edited, and re-covered. All the books in the series are spicy and contain power exchange and BDSM themes which may be disturbing to some.



# Chapter 1

STARTLING, SHRILL SCREAMS jolted Esmerelda Burton awake in her bed. The pitch-blackness that greeted her when she opened her eyes only added to her fear and confusion. Covering her ears didn't block out the piercing noise.

It never did.

Nothing could obliterate the sounds coming from her own throat, not tonight or the countless nights before this one when the never-changing nightmare invaded her sleep.

Esme grabbed her pillow, clutching it to her chest. While she shivered in her sweat-drenched nightgown, tendrils of hair clinging to her face and neck, her tortured cries became muffled sobs as she vented her frustration into the damp linen.

Why wouldn't the awful dreams stop? It was going on four years now.

More than subconscious images from her sleeping brain, they were vivid mental pictures that took her back in time, forcing her to relive a moment she tried her best to suppress by day. But while lying in her lonely bed every night, they haunted her tormented mind.

Something soft and warm rubbed her leg. When her face came out of her rumpled pillow, she met a watchful green gaze. If Phineas weren't a cat, she would have called the look he gave her concern. Reaching out with shaky hands, Esme scooped him up and hugged him to her chest. Any other time he would have protested, but when she woke like this, he seemed to know she needed his comfort and allowed it, if only briefly.

Several long moments passed as she focused simply on breathing. When it returned to normal, the pounding in her ears subsided and her racing heart slowed. Her hands weren't trembling quite so badly as she rolled on her hip and grabbed her phone off the nightstand. She scrolled through her contacts, hit the wrong one twice, before the name she needed appeared on the screen as the call connected.

While she listened to the ring, she silently calculated the time difference between Baltimore and LA. “Call anytime, night or day,” he always said, but she hated to interrupt his sleep, too. He had to work in the morning just like she did.

It wasn't yet midnight on the West Coast. Pax didn't sleep much, either. He'd still be up, so she didn't feel quite so needy and pathetic.

“Esme, sweetheart,” he said in greeting, his voice conveying sympathy but never annoyance.

Ryan Paxton knew what she was going through and had never once been put out with her even though this same call happened at least twice a week. She didn't call him every time the nightmare reoccurred; only when the screams woke her, which meant the vision had played through to the end and the very worst part.

“Pax,” she breathed unsteadily.

“You had the dream again.”

“I hate bothering you.”

“You're not a bother. How many times do I need to tell you that?”

Pax was her husband's best friend and partner. They'd met in college, went through the academy together, served on the same unit for the Baltimore Police Department, and they both applied for and became special agents with the FBI. During this time, she'd met and fallen in love with Andrew Burton, and Pax had become like a brother to her.

She thanked God for him every day because after she lost Andrew, she couldn't have made it without his strength to rely on, and through their shared grief, their bond had grown stronger. They supported one another, Esme being there for him when things got bad, too. But as time passed, the give-and-take became largely one-sided as he moved on, but she remained stagnant.

Pax worried about her even more after transferring cross country to the LA field office a few months ago. He'd tried to

get her to make the move with him, saying a change would do her good, but she simply couldn't do it, not yet.

"Did you take your Ambien?" he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"No, I got home late and got busy. When I remembered, I didn't have a full eight hours left, so I had to skip it."

"You know you need to plan for this," he scolded gently.

"I hate being so weak. I should be able to sleep without being drugged."

"You're not weak, Esme, you've dealt with this better than most people would. But it's worse when you don't sleep. What's your therapist always telling you?"

"Everyone grieves at different speeds." But she was going at a snail's pace. The dreams, if nothing else, should have decreased by this stage. "She thinks I should take you up on your offer."

"Of course she does. Two great minds, as they say."

"Right," she drawled, and he chuckled.

"Seriously, sweetheart, it helped me just getting away from the city."

"To an even bigger one like LA? Is it any different?"

"Yes, especially the weather."

"I don't know," she said hesitantly. Her voice turned quiet when she added, "At least I know the usual suspects here."

"Fuck!" The explosively uttered expletive made her jump. "It happened again today, didn't it? Dammit, why can't they drop it?"

"Human tragedy sells papers, except it wasn't a reporter this time."

"Then who?"

"That writer came by the house again. He's determined to become famous by making our story into a movie."

Silence greeted this news.

“I told him no, like before. Hollywood is full of screenwriters, Pax. It could be worse out there.”

He lived north of the city, just minutes from the television and movie studios, close enough for the voracious media and paparazzi to camp out on his doorstep, and hers as long as she stayed with him.

“I wouldn’t let that happen, sweetheart. And it would help if you changed your name back to Spade.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d made this suggestion. Even after moving and getting an unlisted number, the vultures had tracked her down. It made sense, especially starting fresh three thousand miles away, but taking back her maiden name seemed like such a betrayal, as though she was trying to erase the man she’d loved then lost entirely from her life.

“He was a cop, Esme,” Pax assured her, accurately anticipating her reaction. “If he were me advising you, Andrew would suggest the same thing.”

“I should be able to live in peace without giving up my identity.”

Again, there was a pause before he shocked her by saying, “Maybe you should do it, with editorial control over the script, of course. You’d be set for life, sweetheart. Like you’ve said often in the past few years, tragedy sells, especially when there is a beautiful widow in the center of it all.”

“Lonely widow,” she corrected him. “I never said beautiful.”

“Both are true,” he returned softly.

“I can’t capitalize on his death.”

“Pragmatist Andrew Burton would tell you to go for it. Besides, the experience might be cathartic, and getting it out there once and for all will leave the scavengers nothing to pick at your bones over anymore.”

She grimaced at the visual. “That’s what Barb said, and that dealing with it might bring me to closure.”

“You’re paying \$250 per hour for her counsel; maybe you should listen.”

“I know you’re both right, but I’m torn. We grew up here, Pax. My best memories of him are here. I worry if I move, they will fade away. On the other hand, I’m afraid if I stay, the bad will destroy me.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I drove by the coffee shop by accident.”

“Sweetheart.”

“I know. It was stupid even to be close to that side of town, but I had to go by the courthouse. There was a detour, and before I knew it, there I was.”

“Come to LA. I can take time off in a few weeks. I’ll fly out, help you pack, and we’ll rent a U-Haul for your stuff. You won’t escape all the memories, Esme, but you won’t have all the triggers. And you can stay with me until you find a place.”

“You’re wonderful to offer but having your best friend’s neurotic widow underfoot will cramp your bachelor lifestyle.”

“That’s BS and you know it. Besides, I’ve found a club, so my bachelor lifestyle will be perfectly fine with you here. I haven’t told you about it, but it’s something else, unlike anything back East. When you’re ready, I’ll take you there.”

The thought of being with someone else, another dominant besides Andrew, scared the crap out of her. “I don’t think I’ll ever be ready,” she whispered.

“Don’t say that. Andrew wouldn’t have wanted you to be alone.”

And she wouldn’t be anything other than that, staying behind in Baltimore.

“How does the fifteenth sound?” he said when she didn’t reply. “I’ll take the red-eye and be there around lunchtime?”

“I haven’t agreed. Give me time.”

“All right, but not an infinite amount. I won’t see you grieve yourself through your thirties and regret not having the family you talked of incessantly for years.”

“That was with Andrew.”

“And you’ll want it with another good man when the right one comes along. Hear me?”

How could she not? His tone had deepened, taking on the stern, unyielding inflection all dominants seemed to have when laying down the law. It dripped of authority and unspoken consequences if you didn’t straighten up and fly right.

Her husband had it, but Pax had perfected it. She had often wondered if Dom 101 was a required course at the academy, or in special agent training for the Bureau.

Something Esme knew for certain. If she ever did what he said and found another man, he wouldn’t be a cop. He would be something boring, like an accountant, a nerdy computer analyst, or a librarian, with an inherently low-risk job, and utterly safe.

“I hear you, Pax,” she murmured to appease him.

“Yeah, but you don’t believe it.” His answer proved he knew her all too well.

“I’ll think about it, okay?”

“I’ve heard that before. Think hard, Esme. I want you out here with me where I can put my arms around you when you’ve had a bad dream.”

“That would be nice. When weighing the pros and cons, that’s definitely going in the plus column.”

They spoke a few more minutes, about his work and hers, then they hung up. But she wasn’t going back to sleep—not tonight.



THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, her throat was raw from screaming, and the horrific images still haunted her as she reached for her phone. He answered on the first ring and spoke before she had a chance to.

“Sweetheart—”



“I’m putting in my notice tomorrow. After that, I’m calling U-Haul for a reservation. How big of a truck do you think we need?”

“Thank God,” he uttered softly. “Go to the post office and forward your mail then start packing. I’ll take care of the truck and everything else.”

“California here I come.”

“Was it as bad as ever?”

She knew he referred to the dream. “It’s always the same. I miss him so much, Pax.”

“Me, too, sweetheart, but with us in the same city, at least we can miss him together. Try to get some rest. I’ll call you with the flight information tomorrow. Good night, Esme.”

“Night, Pax.”

She hung up, threw back the covers, and went to the bathroom to get a drink. When she returned, Phineas had made himself at home on her pillow. He didn’t protest when she picked him up, climbed back into bed, and cuddled him close.

“It’s a big move, Phinny. Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

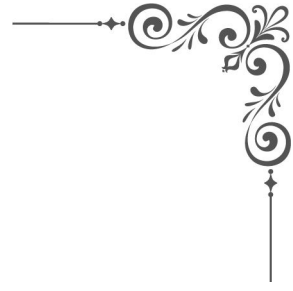
He meowed, but she couldn’t decide if that was a meow-yes or meow-hell, no.

Nothing was keeping her here. Unable to live in the home they shared and not be tortured by constant memories, she sold the house within a year after she buried Andrew. The apartment was only a little better. The drugs helped, but walking around like a zombie during the day was a high price to pay. She’d tapered them to Ambien so she could sleep, and the occasional Xanax months ago.

“We’ve got nothing to lose by going, do we, buddy?”

This time, when he meowed, he laid a paw on her hand.

Moving by mid-month meant she’d be gone before the weather turned and the snow came—another mark in the plus column.



## Chapter 2

*LOS ANGELES, ONE YEAR later...*

A hard palm met quivering flesh with a resounding crack.

Immediately after that, a throaty moan, equal parts pleasure and pain, rose in the air, further thrilling the rapt audience.

Dressed in snug-fitting black jeans and a black shirt molded to his muscular upper body, the dom leaned over the naked submissive bound by wrists and ankles to the padded A-frame bench. His chest pressed against her back as his fingers sank into her thick, wavy hair. The crowd around the station held their collective breaths as he murmured in her ear.

“Have you learned your lesson yet, Cassie?”

The pretty blonde squirmed in her restraints. Her body quivered and her breaths came in short, little pants as the dampness between her parted thighs grew visibly. Her dom’s fingers caressed intimately as she moaned softly. She was completely at his mercy and the sensations he was eliciting from her.

“No, master,” came her breathless reply. “I’ll need a dozen more, maybe two, and, most definitely, your cock deep inside me to drive the lesson home.”

At the audacity of her response, murmurs and startled gasps rose from the spectators, but her dominant laughed, the low, deep sound filled with delight.

His large hand fisted in her glossy curls, and he turned her head until her lips grazed his. “Two dozen sounds perfect for a naughty girl like you,” he declared in a low, seductive voice.

“Then will you fuck me, Flynn? I mean, master?”

“As tempting as you are, baby, how could I resist?” He took her mouth in a kiss so smoldering hot, one observer fanned herself. It went on for several heartbeats before he broke away and kissed a path down her spine. His fingers left

her pussy and slid up to smooth over her pink cheeks. Splayed wide, they squeezed and massaged briefly. “But first things first.”

Another swat landed, and still another, as he gave his cheeky sub the *more* she asked for. Midway through the promised twenty-four, he switched to a flexible leather paddle. The rosy tint blooming across the woman’s creamy skin grew more vivid with each subsequent swat, her ardent cries now soaring to the rafters.

Esme stood in the front row, transfixed by the erotic scene playing out before her. The chemistry between the pair was off the charts, and she bit her lip to stifle her own moans.

But it wasn’t only the couple she found arousing; it was the entire atmosphere. The audience surrounding her vibrated with excitement. Cries of pleasure mixed with the heart-pounding metal music playing in the background. The earthy scent of leather, the lemon oil they used to polish the wooden equipment and bring a shine to the thousands of square feet of gleaming hardwood floor, and beneath it, the pungent yet heady smell of sweat and sex were an intoxicating mix that stirred the long-suppressed cravings inside her. Then there was the lighting, low everywhere except in the stations, which were spotlighted from the three-story ceiling.

She found the club enthralling and utterly decadent—like its name. Whether in the lounge or the dungeon, it was as if she had stepped into a different world altogether.

As she watched the round leather paddle connect crisply with the submissive’s bare bottom, she imagined herself bound to the bench, receiving the hard yet intensely sensual spanking. It had been so long.

A shiny flash caught her attention. Squinting to focus, Esme realized it was the light glinting off the gold band on the dom’s third finger. She glanced at the submissive’s left hand clutching the padded grip of the armrest. She wore a similar band paired with a large, sparkling diamond solitaire.

Esme stroked her thumb across her bare finger. When she took off her wedding rings and tucked them safely away in her

jewelry box, the groove left behind had taken months to fade. That had been two years ago, three years after her life had been so abruptly and violently altered. Even now, the pain of losing Andrew was like a knife in her chest, the emptiness left behind enduring. But five years was a long time to be without a man, especially for a submissive, which is why she was here, like it or not.

Glancing back at the scene, she noticed it had changed. Although the paddle fell just as firmly, the dom interspersed caresses between every few swats. He gently rubbed, soothing the skin he had turned a bright rosy pink. Or he dipped his fingers between the wet folds that glistened with the proof of her desire. This altered approach had her writhing helplessly in her restraints and elicited cries which had nothing to do with punishment.

Esme closed her eyes again, trying to quell her surging need. She could block out the images, but the primal sounds and smells surrounding her were inescapable.

Most people would view coming here week after week to watch but never play as self-torment. At least three full months had passed since her first tentative visit with Pax. In the beginning, she hadn't wandered far from his side, but after a few return trips, he'd deliberately distanced himself so others could approach. As he predicted, both men and women bombarded her with offers, including a few male submissives who mistook her for an aloof domme. This had shaken her a little, but she didn't correct them.

One insistent and blatantly graphic mistress had divulged her plan to tie her face up over a wooden barrel and use a braided quirt on her breasts and pussy then lick every inch of her to soothe the pain. Esme had politely declined; then because she scared the bejeezus out of her, she'd run like hell back to Pax's side.

Topping a man or submitting to a woman wasn't her kink. Surrendering to a dominant man was and always had been, but she turned them down, too, not yet ready to do more than watch. By coming here and immersing herself in the lifestyle, she could live vicariously through others and fill a small

fraction of the emptiness inside her, which was enough for now.

At least she thought so until she came across this scene with Master Flynn and Cassie. Many of the players had the kink down pat but lacked the emotional connection. It wasn't often she found a couple who had both. When she did, it triggered a mix of bittersweet memories, intense envy, and pain.

The dom's deep voice counting out the twenty-fourth stroke penetrated Esme's thoughts. She opened her eyes to see him drop the paddle and move to the end of the bench. His fly was open and his hard cock in hand—impressive in both length and girth. Master Flynn didn't waste time with further foreplay; the entire spanking scene had been leading up to this moment after all.

He leaned over her, covering and enveloping her with his upper body, and spoke in her ear. But his words were solely for her. The observers leaned in to catch the thread of their conversation, a few outwardly frustrated when they couldn't.

While they shared this intimate moment, his hand slipped between his hips and her rosy-red bottom. From her vantage point, which was to the side of the bench, she had a direct view of what he was doing. Compelled to look away, she reminded herself they'd chosen a station in the public playroom, which by its very existence invited onlookers. Still, it seemed intrusive, but his command of his submissive mesmerized her. She couldn't tear her gaze away, not even when he stroked the head of his cock through the seam of her pussy, teasing but not entering just yet.

Esme picked up the cadence in his voice, how it rose in pitch toward the end, as if in question, but not the words.

“Oh, yes, master, please,” Cassie pleaded softly to his unknown query.

“That's my good girl,” he murmured, then his masculine hum of pleasure joined hers as his hips thrust forward and he entered her at last.

This wasn't enough for him, evidently, because his hand curved beneath her jaw and he turned her mouth to his and went in for a smoldering kiss.

Esme's heart ached at the tender yet passionate scene playing out before her eyes. This dom and sub had something special. Where one found joy in control and guiding with a firm yet caring hand, the other experienced bliss in surrender and in doing so, giving pleasure in return.

She'd had that with Andrew, as well as trust, respect, and love. Missing him and knowing she may never again experience a moment like the one being played out before her eyes made her heart ache. She had the sudden urge to lash out physically, punching, kicking, and throwing a tantrum while screaming at the top of her lungs, asking the same unanswered question she had asked so many times before—why?

Unable to watch anymore, Esme turned, winding her way through the throng of onlookers, eager to move onto the next station rather than stay for the big finish because this scene hit too close to home. As she broke through the crowd standing four and five deep, she felt a shiver of awareness shoot up her spine.

She twisted back and scanned the observers. Everyone was facing front, captivated by the scene, except for one. On the far side of the station, on the outer fringe of people, a man stood with his arms crossed over his chest, body angled in her direction, ice-blue eyes intently focused on her, not on the spanking bench nearby.

She'd met him when she'd applied for membership to the club, an interview with the master dom required for all candidates. Eric Dupree was intimidating, and not just because he was huge. Most of the club masters were. They seemed to grow bigger here than back East.

After that first meeting, she'd avoided him, wanting to keep a low profile and go unnoticed. Today, she caught his attention for some reason.

Deciding not to hang around to find out why, she inclined her head politely. Snubbing any dominant, let alone the one in

charge, was never a good idea. Then she got lost in the sea of bodies, not daring to glance back and assess his reaction, either.

On a Friday night, most of the membership turned out to play. Esme used that to her advantage, working her way to the back of the room. To further avoid the master dom's potential pursuit, she squeezed into an especially large group gathered at a station. She pretended to watch the scene with the others but kept her sidelong gaze fixed on the flow of people on the "circuit," a path that wound through the main floor and around the constant activity in the stations. She'd hide out here for a few minutes then make her way up front and call it a night.

But a sound reminiscent of the prize wheels at the church bazaars she'd attended as a kid made her turn her head. She'd have to be blind to miss the man strapped to the eight-foot slowly revolving wheel. He was naked except for the steel cage enclosing his tender male bits. Esme didn't have the same anatomy, but even she winced on his behalf. Though it wasn't something she'd ordinarily watch—hell, it wasn't something she'd ever seen—she couldn't avoid it while wedged deep in the crowd.

It also meant she couldn't escape easily when the scene took a turn, and the sadistic mistress halted the wheel, hung weights from the poor man's balls then sent him spinning again. From the groans emanating from the sub each time she flicked her crop on the weights, or in an upward slap directly between his spread legs making him squeal and sweat, he was enjoying his torment.

To each his own.

While she accepted that motto, it didn't keep her face from flushing hot with squeamish embarrassment. She didn't doubt it glowed brightly, like Rudolph's nose on that foggy Christmas Eve. If not for the spinning wheel of torture, which even six-foot-plus Master Eric wouldn't be able to see over, her face would have led him to her location like a beacon.

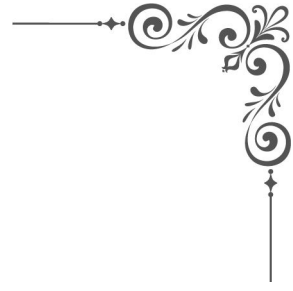
By the time she collected her shoes, keys, and phone from the women's locker room it was past midnight, and she'd



convinced herself she'd imagined it. If Master Eric wanted something from her, he had a dozen dungeon monitors to help find her, as well as a slew of other dominants and several hundred submissives who would narc on her in an instant.

She entered the lounge overflowing with people and music blaring from the live band on stage. The purplish glow of the lights reflected off the massive mirror behind the bar. Tonight, she could have used a drink. Two per night came with her membership dues. It was also the limit on playing in the dungeon was out. Esme wasn't getting her money's worth because she never partook. Instead, she skirted past the dance floor and headed to the lobby. As usual, she didn't make eye contact with either the receptionist or the security guard on duty up front.

This past month, since Pax had been gone on assignment, she came and went alone. She'd been lucky his job hadn't made demands of him before now. As unobtrusively as possible, she watched, soaked up what she could of what she missed so desperately, but like a coward, slunk away alone and unsatisfied. Then she made her sad trek to her modest Northridge home—the price of which would have bought three times the house back in Baltimore—and continued her dismal solitary existence.



## Chapter 3

KEIRAN HEAVED A SIGH of exasperation as the ringing phone pierced the silence of the empty office. It hadn't stopped all day. And now, even after hours, it refused to cease. He could feel his patience wearing thin when he glanced at it, and a blinking red light came on, indicating yet another missed call.

He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face with both hands. His eyes burned from the harsh light of his monitor that cast a bluish glow on the otherwise dark and quiet workspace. The air was heavy with the scent of stale coffee, making it difficult for him to concentrate. He should go home and get some sleep, but as he eyed the stacks of files and reports on his desk, knowing it would take days to sift through them all, he couldn't afford to.

At the shrill ring of the phone yet again, he said a few choice words in Gaelic before he reached for it.

"Finnegan here," he answered, managing not to snap rudely at the caller, although just barely.

"It's Tony."

He glanced at the clock, seeing it was after 9. San Antonio was an hour ahead. "You're working late."

"Since your office closed hours ago, I can say the same about you."

"Yeah, but I don't have twins, a new baby girl, and a wife waiting for me at home."

"Megan is upstairs, putting them down for the night. At least I'm home, my friend."

He'd known Cap Rossi for years. Skilled, tough as nails, and highly respected, when the CEO and founder of Rossi Security recruited him after he'd left the service, Keiran hadn't hesitated. He'd worked for him in San Antonio for a few years, and when they expanded to LA and offered him a percentage buy-in, he'd jumped on it. Now, along with being

partners in the Rossi branch here, they co-owned the bondage club across the street. Keiran also considered Cap a good friend.

“Home for me isn’t as sweet as what you’ve got going on, Cap.”

“Yeah, you need to do something about that.”

Keiran had been thinking along those lines more often of late. Only, when did he have the time? LA was bigger than San Antonio; he expected the new location to grow fast, but not at warp speed.

The clients here were different, most in the entertainment industry and in need of security systems for their multimillion-dollar mansions. Some were looking for personal protection and they’d already investigated several stalker cases the overworked police departments didn’t have time for. They also did venue security when they needed beefed-up protection for special events. Then there were the high-profile stars wanting their cheating spouses caught in the act to activate the non-payout infidelity clauses on their prenups.

Clients with deep pockets paid big bucks to ensure their safety and mitigate the financial risk from their affairs. According to Eric, who doubled as the agency’s CFO, besides taking on investigations and running the club, their profits were through the roof.

But these types of cases took manpower, something they couldn’t seem to get enough of. Turnover wasn’t the problem. They couldn’t hire and train staff fast enough to keep up with the influx of cases. Working seven days a week left him little time to himself, let alone to enjoy the perks of co-owning a sex club. Submissive women who wanted to settle down and play house didn’t just fall into a man’s lap—unless you were Cap. Seriously, the man had the devil’s own luck.

“Talk to our CFO who’s sitting on employee requisitions,” Keiran muttered.

“Do what I do, don’t ask permission. Bring on the men you need and let your staff work out the details afterward.”

“Easy for you to say when Eric’s thirteen hundred miles away. His office is across the hall from mine, and I have to listen to him bitch.”

“Yeah, there is that,” Cap said in sympathy.

He’d had Dupree to deal with when they’d both been working in San Antonio. They shouldn’t complain. The man knew his way around investments and expense reports, which had made them all wealthy men, but he could also pinch a penny tighter than Ebenezer Scrooge.

“You didn’t call to commiserate with me over the skinflint ways of Eric Dupree.”

“No, I wanted to thank you for locking down Cassell so quickly. I still can’t believe we were providing security service to a drug trafficker and indirectly made it possible for him to move thousands of kilos of narcotics between here and LA.”

“As soon as you learned of his involvement, you took measures to shut it down, Cap. His corruption does not reflect on you.”

“That we took so long to discover it doesn’t look good; and that it went on right under my nose makes me physically ill.”

Silence fell on Tony’s end of the line. They’d shut down a major drug cartel operating in south Texas, only to have this fall in their laps not long after. Keiran knew he took this personally; he’d heard the fury in his voice when he’d called.

Roger Cassell, a local furniture manufacturer, had contracted with Rossi to upgrade their warehouse security after a series of break-ins. What they were really after was protection for their drug distribution center—alarm systems, perimeter alerts, and video surveillance.

Tony hadn’t thought it unusual; they’d been in operation for decades and made quality furniture. What he didn’t know about was their side line—cocaine, heroin, and meth—which they shipped inside their legitimate products to retail stores across the country.

It turned out, three were in LA, owned by Cassell, and managed by an underling, his cousin, Martin Lopez, who got greedy and was also implicated in the two-city sting.

Working with the San Antonio and local police departments jointly, they'd netted thirty-four illegal firearms, over five million in cash, along with ten kilos of heroin, and twenty-five kilos each of cocaine and methamphetamine. But their drug pipeline had been operating for years, and the impact on the families of San Antonio in terms of addiction and lost lives was unmeasurable. It's what Tony Rossi, family man, father of three and native San Antonian found the hardest to bear.

"You need not thank me, Cap. Your team was integral to the arrests. Let's chalk this up to another win for the good guys."

"Yeah," the man agreed, though to Keiran, he didn't sound convinced. "Want me to talk to Eric about your staffing?"

"No. I'll handle it. He can be a pain in the ass, but he's reasonable. And, even though he's an inch taller, I outweigh him by twenty pounds, and since he has seven years on me, I can kick his ass if need be."

"Don't hurt him too bad, or you'll end up running the club while he heals."

Echoing Cap's earlier words, Keiran stated, "There is that."

This got him a chuckle before Tony said good night.

He'd no sooner logged back into his computer, which had gone to sleep while they'd spoken, when the phone rang again.

With a long-suffering groan, he answered, "Finnegan here."

"I know you're there. The question is why?"

Speak of the devil. Keiran would have recognized the wry comment if not the voice.

"Paperwork ain't gonna do itself, Dupree."

“Neither are submissives going to restrain, spank, and fuck themselves, my friend.”

He dropped his pen and pressed his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. “Another night.”

“That’s what you said last week, and the week before, and the week before.”

“Are you keeping tabs on me? That’s intrusive even for you.”

He heard Eric’s grunt before he replied, “We keep attendance logs, which you’d remember if you dropped by the club every once in a while.”

“I’d like to get home and to bed before midnight. Is there a point to your call?”

“You owe me about six months’ worth of DM duty. I’ve got three club masters out of town. It’s time to pay up, bud.”

His sigh was audible. “I should wrap up my current case on Friday. I’ll come by that evening.”

“And Saturday,” Eric insisted.

“Seriously, man. I planned to get some sleep.”

Another grunt came through the speaker, one of disgust. “You’re too young to spend your weekends in bed alone.”

Keiran silently groaned; he’d heard this from his friend before. “I might squeeze in more DM time if you’d approve the staff requisitions I sent you two weeks ago. We’re flooded with new cases.”

Eric sighed. “When are we not? As soon as we train a new group, we need more.”

“Which keeps our bank accounts healthy.”

There were nine owners between the two business lines, Rossi Security, Inc., and Club Decadence, but the founding six, all retired military, were back in San Antonio. He had a team of trained professionals working for him, but Eric only had a few paid staff and relied mostly on volunteers from the membership. Some submissives offset their membership fees,

which were significant, by working in the lounge and as receptionists, and Eric relied on the most experienced doms, whom they called club masters, to help monitor Keiran included.

“I assumed being in LA among the rich and famous, our caseload would be mostly celebrity security,” Eric commented, sounding tired and overextended himself.

“You’re not the only one. After the mess in San Antonio, I was hoping for a few boring investigations where I didn’t have to don a flak jacket.”

“The Lopez case got messy,” his friend stated quietly.

“I expected illegal drugs and gun running being this close to the border, but not by way of Texas. Who knew they’d have roots way out here? And despite the eighty-plus arrests the LAPD made earlier this year, it was barely a minor blip in their operation.”

“You’d have thought his arrest would have had more of an impact.”

“Yeah,” Keiran agreed tiredly, “but it did nothing to affect the legal ports of entry, where the vast majority of the shit is entering in the first place. Besides, I don’t think he was the top man.”

“Shit is right. I thought we’d get away from some of it with the move.” He laughed humorlessly. “What was I thinking? But that case is closed, and it’s back to protecting divas and providing security to the stars.”

“But Rossi’s reputation is a double-edged sword. Everyone from divas to detectives is knocking on our door. At least you drew the long straw and got the club.” Keiran looked at the stacks of files and asked, “Want to trade?”

“Fuck no. I get to combine work and pleasure. Which brings me to the point of my call. You need to get over to Decadence more and enjoy the perks of the job. Life’s too short. Soon you’ll wake up a dried-up old man in his forties, like me.”



“Dried up, my ass. You run circles around the younger guys when you’re in the field. I wish I could use you more.”

“The numbers ain’t gonna crunch themselves, man.”

Keiran chuckled, getting his words turned back around on him.

“Which brings us back to those requisitions. Louise, our new office manager, is so afraid of your arctic death glare, she won’t process any new hires without one. And fuck you for hiring her while I was off on a mission. She thinks she reports to you instead of me.”

This time, Eric chuckled. “She’s a smart girl. I knew she’d be perfect for the job. And she’s submissive. She just hasn’t allowed herself to admit it yet.”

“She’s also young, beautiful, and single, working with a bunch of testosterone-charged ex-military and law enforcement types. One of them will steal her away, watch and see.”

“Shit,” Eric muttered.

“Yeah. Next time, I’m doing the hiring, and I’ll be looking for a ball-busting domme who won’t turn anyone’s head. In the meantime, sign the damn requisitions. I’ve got four guys champing at the bit to get started, but they expect to get paid.”

“I’ll see to it first thing in the morning.”

Keiran relaxed. Although four wasn’t nearly enough, it was a start. “The team would be obliged, as would I. I’d like to enjoy my hard-earned salary occasionally, when not completely exhausted.”

“So, I can expect you Friday night?”

“As my sainted grandmother always said, if the good Lord is willing and the creek don’t rise.”

“We say that in Texas,” Eric replied with a laugh. “I didn’t know it was also an Irish expression.”

“It’s not. Despite the accent and hair, which I inherited from my father, my mother was born and bred here in the

States, in Georgia.”

“That explains it. The subs will be happy to see you. They’ve been asking where you’ve been. As Val says, they’re all agog over your brogue and melt when you turn your Irish green eyes their way.” He said the last part with a healthy dose of disgust.

“A brogue is Scottish, my man, and only your Val would use the word agog.”

“I’ll let you advise her of both when we see you Friday at eight.”

“Slave driver,” Keiran muttered, though good-naturedly.

It had been weeks since he’d been to the club and even though he’d be monitoring, he was already looking forward to the break. And if that creek didn’t rise, he’d squeeze in a scene with a warm and willing sub after midnight, even if he had to drink a pot of coffee and take a quadruple dose of vitamin E.

“Seriously, though, thanks,” Eric replied. “Without enough DMs, I was afraid I’d have to shut down the theme rooms and end up with a riot on my hands.”

“Even more reason to get those requisitions to Louise. The four men I want to hire all asked about membership at the club.”

After he disconnected, he looked at the pile of paperwork on his desk. Contracts in need of review, invoices to be signed, and his calendar was full of appointments with more potential clients. He was a field man, had been ever since he’d enlisted and for the ten years he’d served in the ARW, the special forces division of Ireland’s Army. A desk job wasn’t what he had in mind when he said yes to Cap and took this gig.

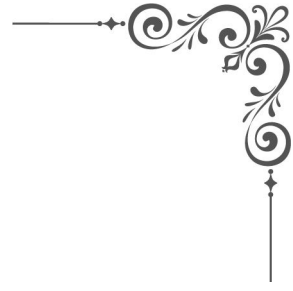
He needed to get these new men trained quickly and hire an assistant to help with some of this administrative crap so he could get back out there, close their backlog of cases, and find himself a sweet subbie who made him obnoxiously happy like Val did Eric.

At thirty-five, a revolving door of submissives was getting old. Having one to come home to after a mission and warming

his bed at night was becoming more appealing with each passing year. And he wanted kids, several, and would like that seen to before he was too old and busted to enjoy it.

Both dreams were still far off, especially if the only time he could carve out at the club was for DM duty.

With a long, drawn-out sigh, he reached for the tallest stack, the contracts, and got started on the four hours of paperwork ahead of him.



## Chapter 4

SEEING BARE SKIN EVERYWHERE, Esme's fingers tightened their grip on Pax's muscular forearm as she tried to steady herself.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered, "it's just—"

Stopping short, she almost swallowed her tongue when a woman on a leash wearing a cupless bra and an ass-baring thong walked by with her master. Proving it was an equal opportunity bondage club, a mistress led a man past them sporting nothing other than assless, crotchless chaps.

Esme cleared her throat and finally finished her thought, "A bit of a shock."

He chuckled. "I felt the same way at first. After a few visits, your eyes will unglaze, and you'll see more than bare tits and asses every time you walk in."

"I don't know. Just walking through the lounge, I felt overdressed. In here, I feel positively Victorian."

In the bar, she saw bare shoulders, a back exposed by a daring dress, and smooth legs revealed beneath an up-to-the-ass micro miniskirt. It seemed bar attire was more circumspect, but once inside the dungeon, it was no holds barred. Or more aptly put, no holes barred.

Exposed nipples were commonplace for both male and female attire—the subs, mostly—and bare bottoms came in all shapes and sizes. Again, not gender specific. And genitals were on open display as if they were no more intimate than an earlobe or an elbow.

Esme could only stare, entirely at a loss for words.

No, wait. She had two—holy crap!

Glancing down at her own attempt at sexy fetish wear—a leather corset which revealed a modest amount of cleavage and a skirt that fell to mid-thigh—made her feel like a nun. A

flash of memory took her back to her days at St. Anne's Catholic School. She imagined the good sisters' expressions upon witnessing the spectacle before her and would have laughed if she weren't so stunned.

"You're beautiful, Esme, and you don't have to bare it all to fit in here. They take all comers here. When you find someone you're comfortable playing with, you can negotiate how much you're willing to expose in the scene or go upstairs for more privacy. They monitor the theme rooms just like the main floor." He squeezed her hand. "You're shaking, sweetheart. Are you sure you don't want to go back to the bar, have a drink, settle your nerves, and talk about what you can expect? It's been a while for you, and LA is not Baltimore."

Truer words...

As the memory of that first night faded, Esme looked around and realized how right Pax had been. Standing inside the gothic doors now, she no longer saw only yards of skin, bare boobs, and exposed bottoms, but the people behind the BDSM trappings, or lack thereof.

Underneath, they weren't much different from those she knew in the lifestyle back home. Out of the mainstream, they sought acceptance, kinship, and connection with a community. All of which could be found here at Decadence.

Aside from kink in every manner imaginable, there was also—extravagance. From the exquisite marble fixtures in the bathrooms to the plush furnishings and rich décor in the lounge and bar, and the custom-made bondage equipment that filled at least thirty stations in the playroom and the dozen theme rooms upstairs, they had spared no expense.

They even had heated floors! Rightfully so, since the rules stated submissives went barefoot once inside the dungeon. She found it ironic how no one blinked at the crops and paddles connecting with bare subbie bottoms and other tender parts, but heaven forbid their toes get cold.

Unable to help herself, a giggle escaped her lips, causing a few passersby to turn and stare. Because attention was something she tried to avoid, she smoothed out her features,

averted her gaze, and headed down the few steps to the main floor. Immediately, she sensed a heightened energy she hadn't noticed in her previous trips. The room was buzzing with excitement broken by the frequent and loud crack of a whip. Esme looked toward the back of the room. The lights were up, which was unusual. There were whipping posts and large cordoned-off spaces, but she'd never seen them used before.

Something was going on tonight, and she wasn't sure what. She missed having Pax at her side. Half of her wanted to hightail it out the front door, but morbid curiosity drew her deeper into the room, and the farther she went, the bolder the play became.

She'd been to clubs before with Andrew, and a few times by herself about a year after he died. She was depressed and lonely, and like now, Pax had been out of town. But the dungeons back East were nothing like Decadence. The clientele wore leather and took part in scenes, but the most daring things she'd observed were the paddling of a male sub on the seat of his leather pants and a female submissive bound to a cross. Although her short skirt and skimpy top left a lot of bare skin exposed to her dom's lash, all her important parts were covered. It was the same at all the other clubs she'd visited; nudity was against the rules as was public sex.

Here, the submissive men walked around in cock sleeves and nothing else, or harnesses, which were mostly a series of thin straps, buckles, and rivets—or completely naked.

Not to be ignored were the pussies, also exposed and in varied presentations, from smoothly waxed to neatly trimmed and in vintage style—full 1970s bush. Some were clamped, others had a single piercing, and a few looked like they'd spent considerable time in the tool-and-die shop being modified with O-rings. Still, others were bejeweled and bedazzled, and a few had dangling weights. Ouch!

Where sex only happened behind closed doors at the public clubs she'd attended, at Decadence, it was going on everywhere. Not your average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill missionary-style sex, either, but raw, undiluted, kinky sex. In pairs, trios, and groups with more participants than she could

count. There was even a solo performance or two going on. Directed by a crop-wielding dominant, naturally.

The variety of implements didn't stop there. While walking the circuit, she saw paddles, floggers, and whips in a variety of colors and lengths. A few were full-sized bullwhips worn coiled at the waist of a scary-looking leather-clad man, although she had seen a red, braided quirt carried by a woman.

Tonight, the members didn't limit the kink to basic bondage and impact play; it was edgier. Pax may have steered her away from the hardcore stuff on prior trips, but he couldn't have concealed the crackle of a violet wand or the smell of acrid smoke from the fire play scene she'd glimpsed in a dimly lit corner. And she couldn't have missed the cries of pleasure or the screams of pain that sounded more strident and frequent than on previous nights. The most voluble, if she had to rate it, came from the brightly illuminated scene toward the rear of the enormous space. Curious, she wandered over for a peek, but the crowd was shoulder to shoulder and at least five gawkers deep.

"What's going on here?" she asked the woman beside her who was also up on her toes, but she had the arm of the man beside her for support.

"A lacing demonstration. I'd love to try it. Mistress Melissa's corset designs are so beautiful, but I have a needle phobia."

"If this is something you want to try, we'll work on that, Chloe," the man beside her said. "But for now, hush, so everyone can hear her instructions."

"Yes, master," the blonde dutifully replied.

Esme couldn't understand what was so fascinating about watching someone being laced into a corset, but this couple and the other onlookers appeared transfixed. It became clear when a few people in front of her shifted.

A submissive lay facedown on a bondage table as her *domme* stood over her, hands expertly lacing a crisscross pattern down her back. At first glance, it seemed innocent, the



black and ivory laces a beautiful contrast to each other and the woman's fair coloring. On second glance, she noticed there was no corset. Instead of boning and satin, there was only the sub's pale skin, and rather than metal grommets to thread the laces through, they were looped around parallel rows of needles embedded into the woman's skin running the length of her back on either side of her spine.

"Oh, my stars, that must be excruciating!" Esme whispered in horror.

The man standing next to her glanced over with his eyebrow sharply raised. "Take another look. The mistress uses fine gauge needles and they only penetrate a few millimeters beneath the skin."

Squinting, she peered closer, noting that the needles were almost perpendicular to the sub's skin, nowhere near as deep as it first appeared. Still, it was shocking and to someone squeamish like herself, disturbing. "Won't they scar her back?"

"This is your first piercing demonstration, isn't it?"

*And my last* was on the tip of her tongue. Wisely, she answered with, "Yes, sir," instead.

"When done correctly, in a controlled setting with precautions taken to prevent infection, needle play is quite safe. Note the gloves the domme is wearing. They are sterile, as are the needles, and she took care to prepare her sub's skin with an antiseptic in advance. It's a work of art when finished, but more so than aesthetically pleasing, it's erotic. With the excitement of the scene, the crowd looking on, and the needle pricks, not to mention the high she gets when she surrenders completely to her mistress' care, a flood of endorphins are coursing through the girl's system. Look at her face, and listen to her moans," he directed. "She's in subspace and has been since the fourth or fifth needle went in."

Looking at it through fresh eyes—ones that were calm, not shocked and horrified—Esme realized it was true. The sub's eyes were half closed, her lips slightly parted as she kept up a constant moan, which sounded nothing close to pain. She

flushed, realizing she'd jumped to a conclusion, which considering where she was and what else she'd witnessed tonight, was wrong and narrow-minded.

The man leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Next time, little newbie, I suggest you gather your facts and reserve your judgment until after you do."

Though softly worded, it was a scolding all the same.

"Another thing that should put you at ease," he continued. "We always have medical personnel on standby on nights like tonight, just in case."

Good to know, but was that supposed to be reassuring? She lifted her gaze to the towering figure standing next to her, grateful he had turned his attention back to the performance. The thought of piercing her skin anywhere, including her earlobes, made her stomach queasy. No freaking way!

She murmured, "Thank you for the lesson, sir," then was out of there so fast, she accidentally stepped on a few bare toes and ran headfirst into another dom. He steadied her and glowered when he didn't immediately get the requisite apology, but she didn't stick around for another scolding.

Leaving behind thoughts of needles in tender places, no matter how sharp or how small, she wandered to the back of the main room and the stairs leading up to the second-floor theme rooms. In Esme's opinion, the elaborate fantasy suites were where the Decadence magic really happened.

There was an authentic school room complete with a blackboard and a naughty-girl stool in the corner, an office with a large executive's desk where she imagined more than a few subs had spent quality time taking more than dictation, and a private torture chamber which was straight out of the Middle Ages.

As she passed by the dungeon, she saw the observation windows were open and she stopped to peek in.

Flickering bulbs in the wall sconces cast eerie shadows over the iron shackles mounted to the walls. There was a set of wooden stocks and a bondage table that looked an awful lot

like a rack. And hanging from hooks on the back wall, every punishment implement imaginable. But tonight, the main attraction was the iron slave cage and the willing victim inside.

On her hands and knees, the sub had her face pressed to a rectangular opening on one side of the cage and her bottom against one on the opposite end. Her two strapping “guards” were availing themselves of what she offered, one sliding his cock in her mouth while the other took her hard from behind. From the moans emanating from within the iron bars, she seemed far from tortured.

Moving on down the long corridor, Esme paused to take in the scene at the next room and the next. She could exit medieval Europe, enter a CEO’s office, and then be in a modern-day schoolroom all in the span of a few moments. Walk another thirty feet, and she could step into the opulence of a Sultan’s Chamber in Istanbul, complete with a huge four-post bed with silk bed curtains.

Most of the rooms had their doors flung wide and the sliding glass observation windows open, inviting people to stop and watch. Esme had figured out why, pretty quickly. The membership was heavy into exhibitionism and loved holding demonstrations. She’d seen them before, mostly stilted, boring, anticlimactic how-to sessions. But once again, at Decadence, there was a difference. They were a step above, and neither boring nor stilted, and more like choreographed mini-dramas. And, when it was an actual how-to session, Esme noted they were often interactive with the audience, like in the medical room which she came to next.

A man in a crisp white lab coat, presumably playing the role of the doctor, addressed the crowd peering in through the open observation windows. Beside him, calmly watching from atop an authentic-looking gynecological exam table, lay a strapped-down, stripped-bare submissive with her legs in the stirrups.

“The elusive G-spot,” the doctor was saying. “Does it exist? And, if so, how does it work, where do I find it, and how can I make my partner explode with a deluge of passion? How many of you have asked these questions?”

Affirmative answers rippled through the crowd from both the men and the women.

The doctor grinned. “Tonight, we will prove it is more than a myth by making Ellie, my beautiful assistant, a very satisfied and extremely dehydrated girl. Who’d like to be my volunteer for this demonstration?”

Hands shot up in the air. Too many to count.

The lucky man selected entered the room as the rest of the spectators pressed closer. They looked on in eager anticipation—or in Esme’s case, gaped in horrified fascination—as the man donned a pair of long gloves that went well past his wrists.

Considering the man’s large hands and the sub’s smallish frame, Esme hoped she was wrong about what she suspected was coming next, but knew down deep, after cage sex, needle play, a fire scene, and everything else, she wasn’t.

Under the direction of the man in white, the volunteer coated his hand liberally with lube and stepped between the stirrups. Then, he slowly fingered the woman, building her arousal and penetrating her one digit at a time until she had taken four fingers inside her. Her cries rolled through the room and out the window to the onlookers, becoming gasps of pleasure-pain when the volunteer folded in his thumb and sank in up to his wrist.

The sub whimpered and moaned continuously now, tossing her head from side to side, but she wasn’t asking to stop, or crying in discomfort, and, much to Esme’s amazement, no safeword had passed her lips.

“She’s nearly there,” the doctor dom murmured. “Add clitoral stimulation with your other hand, and when you press the knuckle of your thumb against the anterior wall, stimulating her G-spot, she’ll erupt like Old Faithful.”

In seconds, as predicted, the woman let out a sustained wail and shuddered. Next, her body convulsed, and she bucked wildly against the restraints. Then she came with such

intensity, it forced the man's fist from her pussy, along with a spray of liquid.

The crowd cheered while the man in the lab coat urged his volunteer to resume.

“Fisting gets her excited. Keep going; she's good for at least three squirts per session. Sometimes more.”

Esme didn't think it possible, but to the voluble approval of the crowd, he fist-fucked four screaming orgasmic eruptions from the bound woman. Amidst the clapping and murmurs at the conclusion of the scene, she heard a man comment that Dr. G-spot—how she would refer to him from this point forward—was a real-life gynecologist.

Overwhelmed and in a daze from the barrage of extreme activities she'd seen, some she didn't even have names for, she wandered back downstairs.

Standing on the main floor looking around her, she decided what she needed before leaving was a nice, normal, flogging scene. She headed to where she knew one of the several spanking benches was located. When she got there and found a domme painting her sub's testicles with drop after drop of melted red wax, she resigned herself to the fact nice and normal weren't on the agenda tonight.

She whispered to the woman standing beside her, “Things seem a little intense tonight, don't you think?”

The stupefied look she got was almost comical like she'd sprouted antennae on top of her head, or a third eye or something.

“You're serious?”

Esme nodded.

“Are you new?”

“Um, not really. I've been a member for several months.”

“Don't you read the newsletter?”

She was too embarrassed to admit she didn't. Pax had always kept up with the special events and planned

accordingly. Since he'd been off somewhere in parts unknown, she was rather out of the loop. He'd warned her, however. "I must have missed this month's edition. What's going on?"

"Tonight is Edge Night, advanced players only." Her eyes dipped to her throat and grew big. "You don't have a ribbon."

"Yes, I do," she exclaimed while fishing it out of her corset where she'd tucked it when the stiff edge—likely off the end of the roll—kept scratching her skin.

All uncollared subs got one at the door when they signed in. Either red, pink, or white, it identified their experience level to the other members. White stood for someone inexperienced, interested in learning what it was all about, though if not handled with extreme care, could bolt, and never return. Since it was Edge Night, she doubted there were any subs in white ribbons running around.

On the other end of the spectrum, red indicated a sub with tons of experience, who felt comfortable negotiating whatever they wanted on their own. Esme had selected a pink ribbon when she'd signed in, meaning she was somewhere in between. She had some experience, was open to playing but within limits, and a scene with her would need to be carefully negotiated with those in mind.

None of the ribbons told the submissive's interest in sex. The willingness to take a scene to that level was never a given for anyone in the club, and consent in advance had to be clearly established.

The woman blew out a relieved breath. "Good. I was afraid you were a white ribbon who'd gotten in by mistake. Better put that back on. Without a collar, that ribbon might be the only thing that saves you tonight."

"Come on, Becky," a man, appearing suddenly by her side, ordered with urgency. "Our bench is open. I can't wait to try out the new labia clamps and plug."

She grinned then waved over her shoulder as her dom pulled her away.

Edge night—no wonder!

What she'd experienced in five years as a submissive didn't compare to what she'd seen in the last two hours.

"I should have asked for white when I checked in," she muttered.

Swearing to read the darn newsletter before coming back, she thought it wise to make a hasty exit. She hadn't taken two steps when hard fingers encircled her wrist. Her head snapped up in alarm, and she met the blue-eyed gaze of an incredibly handsome, black-haired, bronze-skinned man.

"Come with me," he barked. She processed little other than a light Spanish accent before he announced, "I have a station reserved for us."

With no preliminaries and zero negotiation, he pulled her through the crowd, moving against the flow of traffic that seemed to circle the stations continually.

"I, um...perhaps you have me mistaken for someone else?"

"No mistake. Your red hair is appealing, and your fair skin will display my marks beautifully, I think."

She didn't think so.

"I'm here...with, uh, friends...sir," she lied, stammering as she tried to keep up, afraid if she didn't, he'd drag her as the image of a caveman came to mind. All he lacked was the off-the-shoulder animal-skin tunic and a club. "They're leaving soon. Some other time, perhaps."

She only added the last bit to be polite, having no intention of ever agreeing to a scene with this pushy dom.

"They can wait until I'm done with you," he replied.

"Sir, please," she appealed again while trying to twist her wrist free. "I can't miss my ride home, or I'll be stranded."

Apparently, he didn't care, and continued right on walking while ignoring her protests and struggles. When she saw the station with the reserved sign up ahead, the ropes much farther back than usual for a station, she realized it was one of the

extensive areas toward the back set up to allow indoor whip play.

His fingers tightened. “Stop struggling. I’m not in the mood for games.”

“Neither am I,” she bit out, her voice rising, all pretense of politeness evaporated. “I have asked nicely, but you won’t listen. I have said no repeatedly, but you must be deaf.” She yanked hard on her hand, which hurt, pinching her skin. “For the last time, I don’t want to go anywhere with you.”

He stopped, oblivious to the surrounding people, in particular, the two women who skidded to a halt behind him and came close to slamming into his back. With a hard tug on her arm, he knocked her off-balance, and she fell against him.

His fingers dug into her arms while he pulled her up on her toes and snarled down at her. “I’ll enjoy whipping your back raw in repayment for your defiance, slut. Now, move your ass, and while you do, keep your mouth shut until I’m ready to shove my cock in it.”

“Red,” she called loud enough that despite the ambient noise he couldn’t miss hearing. The man blinked in surprise, acting as if he’d never heard the word before, which considering his swinish behavior Esme found hard to believe.

Suddenly, comprehension dawned. Still holding her in an unbreakable grip, she watched as his handsome features transformed into a scowl and fury flashed in his cold, blue eyes. When his fingers tightened painfully, she repeated the club safeword, crying “Red!” in a shout, this time at the top of her lungs.

The dom’s lips flattened into a hard, thin line and his nostrils flared. Everyone and everything around them came to a halt. With witnesses watching, he dropped his hands at the same instant a dungeon monitor arrived.

“What’s the problem here?” he asked her, not even looking at the enraged dom.

“I’m not interested,” Esme explained as she rubbed her wrist, the tender flesh he’d abused likely bruised. “But he



wasn't listening.”

“There is no problem, Finnegan,” the nasty dom replied, ignoring her comment and addressing the DM instead, though his angry gaze remained fixed on her. “It would seem I mistook her signals and the appallingly negligent lack of a ribbon.”

The monitor's eyes dropped to her bare throat. Esme flushed.

Stupid, stupid.

Her hands flew to her corset, but she remembered she'd taken it out. Looking down, she spotted it on the floor where she must have dropped it when the jerk grabbed her.

Before she could squat to retrieve it, her rescuer bent and did it for her.

After seeing the other submissive's response, she intended to put it back on, but she'd gotten distracted. Her lack of a ribbon should not have opened her up to a nonconsensual whipping by this asshole, however.

“Pink, I should have guessed,” the asshole muttered under his breath. “After this unpleasantness”—his nostrils flared, and he grimaced as though she smelled bad—“I find I am no longer interested. In better light, I see I made an error in judgment. There are many more beautiful submissives here tonight who will eagerly fall to their knees and beg to be under my lash.”

Esme couldn't imagine who would be so incredibly foolish, but didn't utter a word in response to his insult. Her only reaction was to move closer to the man with the bright-orange DM badge on his sleeve. Her rescuer was big and looked strong enough to snap a man twice the size of this insensitive, boorish dom in half, and he was far from little.

“Then I suggest you go find one, Carlos,” the big man stated smoothly, though there was underlying steel in his tone. “And I'll remind you to keep your rude comments to yourself. Because a submissive doesn't choose to scene with you is no reason to be nasty. Verbal abuse, unless negotiated in a scene

is against house rules, something we have warned you about on more than one occasion.”

Having his prior infractions aired before her and the other members still gathered to watch the drama, so incensed the dom his face turned blood red. Esme was afraid his ears might pop off the side of his head.

Unfortunately, they didn't, and he gave the DM no reason to snap him like a twig—also to her disappointment. Instead, he cast her a scathing look before stalking away.

With him gone, a wave of relief swept through her, but the incident left her shaking. She swayed, feeling weak at the knees, and jumped when her rescuer put a supportive hand on her back.

“Easy, lass. It's over.”

Responding to his deep, soothing voice and authoritative presence, she inched closer, leaning into him to steady herself.

“Thank you.”

“Carlos is an ass,” he stated succinctly. “I'll keep an eye on him the rest of the night. He'll find someone else, but they won't be who he wanted, and the scene won't go well. We'll have more trouble out of him tonight, of that I'm certain.”

“I can't stop shaking.”

“It's a delayed stress reaction. Breathe deep.” The DM's hand shifted to her chin, lifting her face for his inspection. “Do you need to sit down, little sub?”

For the first time, she truly looked at him. At five foot eight, she hadn't ever considered herself little, but compared to him, she seemed petite. Aside from being several inches over six feet, he was broad-shouldered, muscular, but not bulging, like he was familiar with the gym though not obsessed with it. His thick, dark hair gleamed with strands of auburn and had a slight wave to it. It touched his collar in the back as if he'd been busy and was several weeks past due for a trim. She was tempted to brush it back off his forehead or finger comb where it curled around his ears.

He was strikingly handsome, but what struck her most were his green eyes, just a shade darker than her own, not quite a jade, and different from emerald. Unique, but oddly familiar, though she would have remembered this man had she ever met him before. Her body heated as a tingle of awareness raced through her, something that hadn't happened in a very long time.

Feeling suddenly vulnerable, she averted her eyes, and in a self-conscious gesture, nervously tucked her hair behind her ear.

He arrested her movement by taking her hand in his then with his head bent near, he examined her wrist already discoloring from harsh, unyielding fingers. "I'd like to wring the bastard's neck," he growled fiercely.

For the first time, she noticed an accent, the bending tones becoming more pronounced with his anger. She couldn't quite place it, but Carlos had called him Finnegan. Irish, was her guess.

"I'll be all right, but I'm glad you arrived when you did. He was persistent and when he didn't get his way became furious."

"Carlos has an overinflated opinion of his charm. Your refusal hurt his pride."

Esme sniffed. "Surely he's heard it before."

"He's new here, and that is a novelty all its own. He's a successful businessman who likes to boast about his wealth and connections by name-dropping whenever he can. His self-proclaimed importance tricks people into tolerating more than they should, but word will get around pretty quick."

"He didn't intimidate you."

He looked up, a glint of amusement brightening his beautiful eyes. While a grin played around his very kissable-looking lips, his thumb continued to stroke her abraded skin.

"His money doesn't impress me, and true power comes from within, not from how much your money will buy. Besides, I wouldn't be doing my job as protector of fair-

skinned submissives who bruise under harsh treatment if I let him get to me.” He brought her wrist to his lips and brushed the ring of marks forming in the shape of Carlos’ fingers with a gentle kiss. “He’ll remember you, pretty subbie, so you’ll need to keep your distance.”

Her face heated at his touch and the compliment, although she felt the latter was a bit overdone. The dom hadn’t lied with his cruel remark. There were supermodel-beautiful subs swarming the place.

“I appreciate your kind words.”

His green eyes flashed again, darkening with an emotion she couldn’t read, impatience, annoyance, anger perhaps, but his voice had the same smooth, deep quality when he replied, “It wasn’t kind, lass, but truthful. What Carlos said was bullshit.”

“My thanks for your truthful words, then, sir. And I’ll heed your warning and avoid him in the future. As for tonight, I’ve had enough and think I’ll head home.”

“Don’t let that horse’s ass run you off. There are plenty of other doms eager to play tonight.” He held up her pink ribbon. “We use these for a reason, however.”

With a practiced hand, he tied the ribbon around her throat where it belonged. His fingers brushing her skin sent a jolt of electricity coursing through her.

“Keep this on,” he ordered, when he was done. “Carlos usually sticks to masochists and subs with a taste for humiliation, who invariably wear red. Pink may have made him think twice before he approached.”

She would accept some responsibility for what happened, but not all. Carlos would have assumed she knew the rule for the games played in the dungeon, including the ribbon system. He hadn’t bothered to ask why she didn’t have one, or he could have simply asked for her color. He didn’t care, nor had he bothered to negotiate a thing, including a safeword. Esme had run into dominants like him before. They believed rules existed for everyone else except them.

“You don’t play much, do you?”

She glanced up. How had he guessed?

“I haven’t found someone to suit me yet, sir. To be honest, and I’m not only just basing this on tonight, but your club may be a little too much for me.”

“If you find the right dominant to guide you, it won’t be. I could introduce you to someone.” Aiming his gaze over her head, he searched the crowd. “Jerry is here, somewhere.”

She felt a pang in her chest that he thought nothing of passing her off to someone else, as though the possibility of him being her guide hadn’t entered his mind.

“No, please,” she rushed to say while placing her hand on his forearm. “That isn’t necessary. My sponsor is out of town. He intends to make introductions when he returns.”

“Who might that be?”

“Ryan Paxton.”

He nodded. “I heard he might be away for a while, which leaves you on your own. Something I don’t recommend on nights like tonight.” Gently, he traced the satin strip at her throat. Another surge of excitement rushed through her at his touch. “Why do I get the feeling you’re a little lost and lean more to white than pink?”

“Probably because it’s been a while since I’ve had a dom, and I’ve never been to any place like this,” she admitted, having no idea why she was telling a complete stranger things she ordinarily wouldn’t tell a close friend.

They’d just met, but she could feel the pull of his dominance, which was the opposite of the repellant vibe she got immediately from Carlos.

“Decadence is a lot to take in at first, but when the hardcore extremists come to play, it can be scary, especially for little innocents alone.” He paused, his perusal of her face sharp and assessing. “Did Paxton explain when you’re unattached your ribbon is like a collar, there to state your status clearly to everyone?”

“He did.” Her cheeks flushed as she anticipated what was coming next.

“Since you don’t have a dom looking after you, I will step in for a brief lesson. Though Carlos is an undeniable ass, you have experience, no matter how limited and should have known better than to take it off.”

“I won’t remove it again.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, and as a guarantee I promise the flat of my hand on your lovely ass if you so much as think about it. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” she agreed quickly, also nodding, not daring to disagree with the big man who was kind, concerned, insightful, and utterly dominant. She wasn’t so rusty she would test him.

“As far as being too much, you’ll never find another club or a better community than what we have here at Decadence.”

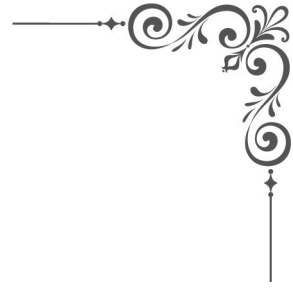
Looking down at her, his eyes searching her face, she felt the invisible web of attraction building between them, or so she thought. His next words obliterated the fine threads of hope, unfortunately.

“Should you change your mind and decide you don’t want to wait until Pax gets back, find me and I’ll recommend a dom who is patient and will help you get back up to speed, yeah?”

Before she could blurt out, “why not you?” he squeezed her shoulder and walked away. Esme stared after him, his height, and those appealing glints of red in his dark-brown hair, making it easy to keep sight of him as he strode through the crowd. When she lost him some moments later, and she stood where he’d left her, the nagging feeling she’d missed out on something awesome made her frown. Despite the threat to her posterior, she could tell, without question, like Andrew and Pax, Master Finnegan was one of the good ones.

As she strained to find him in the mass of players, she noticed another man near a whipping post, staring at her with interest. How had she become a whip magnet suddenly?

Having gotten herself into enough trouble, she whirled and, avoiding eye contact with anyone else, made her way quickly toward the doors.





## Chapter 5

CHORES CONSUMED HER day on Saturday. After cleaning the house and running a bazillion errands, including grocery shopping, her least favorite task of all, Esme kicked off her shoes and collapsed on her living room couch. One at a time, she propped her aching feet on a stack of throw pillows and lay back on several more, in need of a nap, several glasses of wine, and a quiet night in.

Who was she fooling? With Pax gone and her having sworn off the club until he returned and could run interference with scary-intense, cruel doms like Carlos and yummy-intense, near-perfect doms like Master Finnegan, every night would be a quiet night in.

As she lay there, thinking of mesmerizing green eyes, the stillness of the empty house became deafening. Her grunt broke the silence when Phineas, all twenty pounds of him, landed in the middle of her stomach. Unconcerned with her pain, he walked forward and sat on her chest, meowing loudly.

“Hungry, Phin?”

He stared at her and blinked.

She returned his look then sat slowly upright as the answer to what had been bugging her since last night became clear.

He meowed in outrage at being rudely pushed off his perch, but Esme scooped him up, a hand beneath each front leg, hefting him until they were face-to-face.

“No wonder they looked familiar,” she whispered. Master Finnegan’s eyes were the same shade of green as her cat’s. “I wonder if his friends call him Finn for short, too.”

The big, intimidating master probably wouldn’t appreciate having the same nickname as her feisty, finicky, overweight cat. But Esme found it hilarious. Hugging him to her chest, she flopped back and laughed, imagining introducing the two. Twin sets of green eyes would size each other up, both likely unimpressed with the other, especially the fuzzy-faced feline.

Phin had eventually warmed to Andrew, after two years of narrow-eyed glares and warning tail twitches whenever he got close, even in passing. Then, when he didn't come home, Phin seemed to grieve as much as she did.

When her amusement faded, her surly fella seemed to recognize why and nuzzled his head against her cheek, purring loudly.

"Yeah, I miss him, too, buddy. And Pax." Ryan was the only male Phin liked, but it hadn't come easy for him, either.

"Possessive much?" she muttered as she scratched his favorite spot behind his ear. He shut his eyes and leaned into the petting, much the way a sub did when her dom stroked her. The thought turned her mind back to the club, and the other Finn.

If she went tonight, there was no guarantee he'd be there, especially since she'd never seen him before last night. Besides, he'd shown no interest in her other than doing his duty. Maybe he had a submissive already. The good ones usually did.

Phin meowed at her distraction.

"This will be the first Saturday I haven't gone since joining," she told him.

She glanced at the clock. Four p.m. She was usually getting ready about this time. The lonely hours until work on Monday morning stretched out before her.

"At least I have you, Phinny," she whispered, hugging him close and burying her face in his neck. He wiggled and squirmed until he got free, appreciating affection only on his terms. Then he stood on his hind legs with his front paws on her chest and meowed in her face, demanding his supper.

"Okay, okay," she muttered as she put him down. "Your obedient slave hears and obeys."

With all her running around today, his three-ounce pouch of wet food for the day was late in coming. The rest of the time, he got dry food, so he looked forward to his midday treat and became vocal with his displeasure if it was delayed. Out in

the kitchen, she got his bowl and ripped open the smelly and very unappetizing packet of chicken with gravy while he wound around her ankles, meowing impatiently.

A creature of habit, you could set a clock by Phin's schedule. He'd inhale his supper, use his kitty facilities, groom himself for twelve and a half minutes—curious one evening, and bored, she'd timed him—then he'd find a quiet corner to take his four-hour evening nap, leaving her without even him for company.

As an introvert, making friends didn't come easy for her, so she had no one to call for dinner, or to pop over for an evening of wine and chick flicks. She'd never been the type to have a girl posse. It had hit home after her husband passed how alone she really was. Andrew had been the outgoing one. Their friends were his friends.

Now, in a new city, she didn't even have acquaintances. She wouldn't make any, either, by moping around her house on weekends or by skipping the lounge and bar at the club, which was the only social interaction she had, other than work. Not that making friends was the point of going.

As Phin ate his stinky supper, she realized she needed to do something other than sit on the sidelines, or she would become the neighborhood crazy cat lady. Then, before she knew it, life would have passed her by.

As Pax had told her so often, it wasn't what Andrew would have wanted for her.

“What do you think, Phinny? Should I go?”

He didn't look up from his wet-food feasting.

“Not that you'll care since you'll be asleep, but I'll be home by eleven, just when your night begins.”

Her mind made up, she strode across her pocket-sized, eat-in kitchen and down the short hall to the stairs at the front of her rather small house, already planning what appropriately minuscule outfit she'd wear.



ESME'S PEN FROZE IN mid-stroke when Alicia, the receptionist, who hadn't said a word to her on any of her other visits, said something she could barely make out. She thought she heard, "Master Eric wants to see you," but that made little sense.

Maybe it was a snide comment uttered under her breath. She'd never known the girl to be overly friendly, and from what Esme had observed in a short time, she was pretty much a bitch, which in her position was surprising. One day, while changing in the women's locker room, a sub had come bursting in overwrought and in tears over something spiteful Alicia had said. Yeah, odds were on snide.

Looking up from the clipboard where she'd been signing in for the evening, the smirking grin on the other woman's face prompted a knot of dread to form in the pit of her stomach.

"Pardon me?"

"I think you heard what I said," she replied, not bothering to hide her smugness.

The knot twisted tighter.

She glanced at the door on the far side of the lobby. Painted in the same bland color as the walls, if not for the small sign, Authorized Personnel Only, she would have never noticed it was there. The only features in the room that told her she stood in the entryway of a BDSM club were the gothic double doors leading into the lounge and the registration clerk wearing a minuscule leather club dress with matching collar and cuffs on her wrists, the former reading Decadence Submissive, showing her employee status.

When Esme didn't respond in any other way, Alicia added impatiently, "He said as soon as you arrive."

"Did he say what he wanted to see me about?"

"Nope," she replied. "And he wouldn't. Master Eric is rather tight-lipped, but I can say from experience, he wasn't happy." The young woman slid the clipboard out from under her hand and pulled the pen from her grasp.

As she moved toward the door, crossing the shiny tile floor carefully in her spiked heels, she heard the girl mutter under her breath, “Esme my ass. A fake name if I ever heard one.”

She ignored her caustic remark because she wasn't entirely incorrect.

Placing a trembling hand on the doorknob, she didn't turn it right away, not until she took a deep, steadying breath. For the life of her, she had no clue what Master Eric wanted to speak to her about. There was the incident last night with Carlos, but she had done nothing wrong, except...

Her free hand flew to her throat. The pink bow she'd tied moments ago was still in place. Surely Master Finnegan wouldn't have told him she'd taken it off. He'd warned her, but maybe that wasn't enough.

Although she didn't take part in gossip, she couldn't miss the talk in the women's locker room. Master Eric was a former Navy SEAL officer, and since he had stern and commanding down pat, she didn't doubt it for a moment. She also believed the tales that one glance from his arctic-blue gaze could bring even the boldest sub to her knees, make him or her confess their sins, and beg for forgiveness. As the master dom and co-owner of the club, he had the authority to order a mischievous or badly-behaved sub, even one not his own, to ride the dreaded carousel where the entire club could witness her punishment. Or worse, end their membership with the stroke of his pen.

They said marriage had mellowed him somewhat. Esme hoped, for her sake, this was one tidbit of gossip that proved true.

What could he want to see her about? She specifically remembered mailing the check for her monthly membership fee only last week.

“I already texted him you were here,” the receptionist warned. “I wouldn't make him wait if I were you.”

Although she didn't want to, she took the catty woman's advice and entered the administration area. Like the lobby, you

couldn't tell you were in a bondage club by looking at it. Tastefully decorated in neutral tones, there wasn't a whip or a shackle in sight. Forcing herself to put one foot in front of the other, she made her way to the door at the end of the long hall, the only one with a light on.

She peeked in, finding him working at his desk. Did she knock, clear her throat? As if sensing her presence, because she didn't move, and she was certain she wasn't breathing, his head came up.

Ice-blue eyes locked on her. But other than that, he showed no reaction—good or bad—to indicate how this meeting would go. Waving his hand at the two chairs in front of his desk, he murmured, “Esmerelda, please, come in and have a seat.”

Although prefaced politely, it was a command, not a request.

Her eyes on her feet, which felt weighted down with lead, she moved silently across the expensive-looking area rug covering half of the gleaming hardwood floor and perched on the edge of one of the high-backed leather chairs. Done in dark cherry and burgundy accents, either Master Eric or his designer had excellent taste. Once settled, she stared at her hands, waiting for him to start.

“I don't bite.”

Her head snapped up.

“That's better,” he said smoothly. “I prefer not to speak to the top of your head.”

“Yes, sir.”

He considered her for a moment then glanced down at the file open in front of him. “Your 90-day introductory period ends next week.”

She blinked. “I hadn't realized there was an introductory period.”

“We understand membership is an investment, not only monetary but of time and personal privacy what with our

extensive pre-screening process and mandatory background checks. Our goal is a safe space with active participation from all our members, unlike a gym membership, which often goes unused after the first month or so. The intro period is the only time we allow month-to-month enrollment. Afterward, renewal is annual. We feel it's only fair potential members have the chance to see if Decadence will be a good fit for them and vice versa. Master Pax prepaid your first few months, I believe."

"Yes, sir, but I took care of the rest. I mailed the check in last week."

"A bit premature, perhaps."

Oh no, that didn't sound good.

"Have you been enjoying your time with us?"

"Oh yes. Decadence LA is the best club I've ever been to."

"I'm glad you think so. What specifically do you like about it?"

"Um, well, it's, uh..." She forced herself to stop stammering as she searched for the right word then blurted out, "Classy, sir."

"That is a common observation, although it's usually not the first thing that comes to mind. Usually, it's the diversity of the membership, the wide array of equipment, the attention to detail in the theme rooms upstairs, or the demonstrations on the main stage."

"All of that makes Decadence special," she agreed with an exuberant nod.

"But you've yet to avail yourself of it, other than as an observer." He crossed his brawny arms on top of the desk and leaned forward. Esme reacted by inching back in her seat. His brow arched, but he didn't comment on her retreat. "You haven't actively partaken of any amenities whether to have a drink at the bar, enjoying the live entertainment, or any of the special events, and you've yet to take part in a scene, either private or in the main room."

Startled he knew so much about her activities, she wasn't sure how to respond. So much for her efforts at staying off his radar. "I, uh, is, um, that required, sir?"

He sat back, both brows raised in surprise. "Considering this is a BDSM club and our primary function is to bring people in the lifestyle together and to provide a unique play experience for those who are, it's certainly expected."

"Oh."

"What do you get out of coming here, little one? You're a regular, at least twice a week."

"I'm not sure it's as frequent as that, sir."

"It is," he replied succinctly. "I pulled your attendance sheet. Would you like to review it?"

"No, sir. I'm sure your record keeping is accurate."

His chair creaked as he came to his feet and sauntered around the desk to stand in front of her. At well over six feet tall, looming over her was a more fitting description. Esme scooted back farther until her body molded against the high back, leaving no room for further retreat.

"Let me be clear about something. Evasiveness annoys me."

She swallowed, not sure how to respond to his inference.

"In the time you've been with us, which is nearly three months, you haven't found a dominant to suit you, but I'm uncertain how you can know when you reject all their offers. Until recently, when everyone simply stopped asking."

Again, she said nothing because his observation was dead-on accurate.

"Your sponsor is inactive." He twisted to pick up a sheet of paper from his desk. "Ryan Paxton sent me a last-minute email a few weeks ago. It seems his latest assignment will have him tied up for some time, months, perhaps longer."

Done with exhibit A, he dropped it on his desk then continued building his case against her. And she did not feel



good about the imminent verdict.

“How are you connected with an FBI agent?”

“He was a friend of my previous master.”

“I see,” he murmured. “His leaving poses a dilemma. An unsponsored, uncollared submissive in my dungeon is unusual. One who refuses to play and opts only to watch is unheard of.”

“You have no other voyeurs at the club, Master Eric?”

“Plenty. Hundreds. Most of our membership likes to watch and be watched. Those who don’t lean toward exhibitionism use the second-floor rooms, or they enjoy the lounge, mingling with others, looking for a connection, whether for the night or something permanent. Again, that isn’t what you seem to want. I’m beginning to feel like a thief taking Pax’s money and am unsure I want to take yours. Our dues aren’t cheap.”

“I don’t have a problem with the fees, sir.”

He stared at her for a moment. “Paralegals are better paid than I thought.”

“I can afford the membership, sir,” she said vaguely because her finances weren’t really his business. If she paid on time, why did he care? “As for feeling like a thief, please don’t. I don’t feel cheated and would like to continue.”

“Why?”

Silence fell over the room as she struggled to formulate an answer. How much did she disclose about her past? Outwardly, she got very little out of her membership, but it grounded her and being around others like her, even if she didn’t take part, filled some of the emptiness inside her if only for the few hours she was here.

Finally, she whispered, “I don’t know, sir.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you find an answer, and neither can any of our masters, if you won’t let us do our part. And, unfortunately, members have complained.”

That was a surprise, and it stung. “But...I don’t understand. I do my best not to bother anyone.”

“You mentioned our voyeurs. For each one who likes to watch, we have as many exhibitionists. But there’s an unwritten contract here. Everyone gets naked and vulnerable. Some may be slow to warm up, but eventually, everyone does, it evens the playing field. To have one out of hundreds who doesn’t, who stands on the outside looking in, lurking one of them called it, has been noticed and is making some uncomfortable.” He twisted and grabbed the folder once more. “The history you gave us on your application is vague. Perhaps you can fill in the blanks, which will help me decide how best you could fit in.”

He flipped through the pages as though looking for something specific.

“Your last master was how long ago?”

“Five years, sir.”

His blue eyes narrowed on her as he frowned. “That’s a long time for a submissive to be alone. Did something happen—perhaps something traumatic—to make you so wary about playing again?”

Echoes from the day filled her head—shouts, screams, her screams, and Andrew’s gasping whispers—and horrific, vivid images flashed before her eyes. Her pulse raced faster, and a tightness encompassed her chest. Recognizing the symptoms, she quickly slammed the door on the memories rushing forth.

Compartmentalization, her therapist called it, a finely honed defense mechanism she’d learned to keep the trauma of her past from becoming overwhelming again. During the day, she could hold the memories at bay by firmly locking them away. Most of the time, it worked. Eric’s questions had caused a tiny crack to open.

“Where did you go?”

His voice, softer than she’d ever heard it, still made her jump. Caught in the middle of a flashback, she became flustered, struggling to recall what they’d been discussing. When she couldn’t, she asked, “I, uh...excuse me, what was

your question?” Then tried hard not to cringe at her stammering.

“I asked about past trauma. That’s why you’re reluctant to play, isn’t it?”

She shook her head. “If you mean abuse, no, sir. My last master—my husband—was very good to me, but he died unexpectedly. He was only thirty-two, and it took time for me to grieve his passing.” It wasn’t a lie. All of that happened; she just left out important details. Now she had to hope he wouldn’t get out his shovel to dig deeper.

“I’m sorry for your loss. I can see it is still very difficult to discuss.” He leaned forward and caught her chin, bringing her face up to his. “I don’t mean to be cruel when I say this, but after five years, perhaps you have more work to do.”

“He was special,” she whispered. “I loved him very much.” Also, not a lie.

“You had professional counseling?”

She nodded. “My therapist and Pax both recommended I get back out there and start living again.”

“When was that?”

She averted her gaze. Damn dominants had the innate ability to know when a submissive was hiding something. They probed and prodded, burrowed and dug, threatened, and yes, sometimes punished, until the truth, no matter how ugly or painful, came rushing out. Once uncovered, they wanted to fix things, work on deep-seated issues, drawing feelings and emotions out of a sub to help her grow. The good ones were tricky that way.

But Esme didn’t want a stranger digging into her past, ripping open old wounds, and stirring up emotions better left buried where they couldn’t hurt her anymore.

“If you keep stalling after each question, we’ll be here all night.” Said gently, but with firmness, it reminded her how he felt about evasion.

“That was two years ago.”

“Do you still see her?”

Esme shook her head. “I saw her in Baltimore.”

“You’re stuck, little subbie, and hanging out here by yourself, watching others play will not get you unstuck.”

He held out his hand. It took a moment for her to realize he had a business card between his fingers.

She took it and flipped it over. Embossed in bold black print was the name Valerie Thornton, LCSW. The address listed was in Long Beach.

Her gaze rose to his in question.

“Valerie is my wife and my submissive. She’s also a lifestyle-friendly therapist and you can trust her to keep everything confidential. If not her, she can recommend someone else because after this long, you’re fooling yourself if you think you’re not stuck.” He closed her file, twisted, and dropped it back on the desk. “This brings me to the tough decision about your continued membership here at the club.”

“You’re kicking me out?”

He grimaced. “Not so drastic as that. Perhaps delay your full membership until you’re ready. When Pax gets back—”

“But, sir, there’s no telling how long that could be.” Tears, something she hadn’t experienced for a long time, pricked her eyes. “Please. I don’t want to leave. I’ve got nowhere else to go. The public clubs are awful.”

“I agree, and don’t recommend them, but I must consider all my members in my decision.” He folded his arms over his broad chest, one hand stroking his chin as he studied her at length. “I’m willing to give you another chance,” he said at last.

“Oh, thank you.”

He held up his hand. “I have conditions, however. While I can’t insist you find a therapist, I encourage you to call Val at least. She won’t mind my revealing you have something in common. She lost her first husband, too.”

Esme wiped the tears from her cheeks. “I’ve been thinking about starting counseling again, but didn’t know with who, or where.”

“Here.”

She looked up and took the tissue he extended.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m not done.”

She didn’t think she’d get off that easily. Nodding, she looked up at him and waited to see what hoop she’d have to jump through to stay.

“Sometimes you have to attack a problem to get past it, but it can be difficult on your own, especially in the lifestyle. You need a good therapist and a good dominant. The first I don’t think I can ethically require, the second I can insist upon, however. My condition during your extended probation is you find a dom to accompany you in the dungeon, or I feel I must suspend your membership until your sponsor returns.”

“Tonight?” she squeaked.

“I’m not such a hard-ass as that, subbie. You’ve paid for the month. I’ll allow the week you have left to find someone. I can make recommendations. A few of our members have lost partners and will know what you’re going through.”

She wrinkled her nose. A sympathetic shoulder to cry on and someone to open her old wounds. No, thank you.

He read her reaction adroitly. “You’ll tell me if you change your mind.” He stood, signaling their meeting had ended.

She rose, too, though unsteadily.

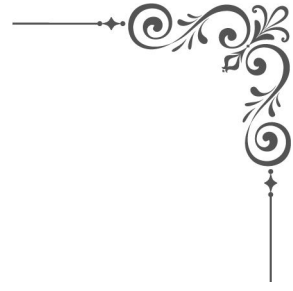
He took her arm and led her to the door. “I don’t think you should start tonight. Go home and think about what I’ve said.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That card, Esmerelda. Use it. Valerie may be my wife, but she’s excellent at what she does, and she’s been where you are now.”

She doubted anyone had been where she was—ever. But she answered politely, “Thank you, sir. I will.”

He escorted her down the hall and back to the lobby. With him watching, along with the curious eyes of the nosy, bitchy Alicia, she somehow held back her tears.



## Chapter 6

USING THE REAR ENTRANCE from the parking garage, Keiran took the back stairs from the second floor to the administrative suite. Eric had left a message. He wanted a word. How the savvy owner knew he intended to be here, he did not know. He was weird that way, even more so since marrying Valerie who also had a sixth sense or clairvoyance or intuitive nature of some sort.

He regretted telling Jerry he'd take his DM shift tonight. Rossi kept him so busy he could work 24/7 and never get caught up. The four new men starting next week wouldn't bring the deluge from their leaky dam down to a trickle. He needed a dozen more, maybe two.

He'd turned away three new cases this week alone. If he couldn't guarantee results, he wouldn't put the Rossi name on the line. What he wouldn't give for a good old embezzlement case or something cut and dry like a black ops extraction where the mission was simple—infiltrate the stronghold, secure the target, and get out.

Keiran thanked the good Lord he had control of the security business rather than the club. If he thought he had problems, he couldn't imagine the headaches and drama five hundred members could create when mixing sex, pain, and power exchange. Dupree could have it. He'd stick to working with a team of highly skilled professionals even when their prime objective was keeping filthy rich, often spoiled, celebrity clients safe. His men were no drama, caused minimal headaches, and at the end of the day, were happy to keep busy and collect their pay—which was considerable.

Once he hit the lower landing, he pushed the panic bar. The door swung back on its hinges with a bang—he cringed not having intended to tear up the place—then strode to Dupree's open office door.

Standing behind his desk with his arms crossed over his chest, his business partner was waiting for him. "Stealth doesn't appear to be your strong suit," he observed wryly.



“When it’s called for, I’m as sure-footed and quiet as a panther. Getting called on the carpet by the master dom didn’t appear to require my cat-like qualities. What’s up?”

“I need a favor.” He picked up a file folder and extended it over his desk.

Keiran took it but didn’t open it. Instead, he looked back at Eric, puzzled. “You need me to run background? Tristan usually handles that for potential members. If he’s backed up, Jerry or Victor are fully capable. Or we can kick it to Jonas and his team.”

As soon as he suggested it, he silently nixed the idea. The San Antonio boys had bailed them out too often as the branch got on its feet. He’d run the check himself before asking.

“It isn’t a potential but a trial membership, and her three months are almost up. She’s a beautiful young widow who needs an experienced dominant to help her get back in the game.”

Ordinarily, that would have gotten his attention, but his plate was full and spilling over onto the table. And he didn’t see what the problem was; many single doms came to mind who’d be willing to take on such an assignment. Not him, not right now, however.

He waited for his friend to get to the point.

“I’d like you to handle her personally,” Eric added.

As he suspected. “I don’t have time to take on a project. Let me suggest Jerry or Victor, again.”

“I considered them, but I thought you might work better for her.”

He dropped the file onto the desk. “Sorry, I barely have enough time to enjoy a scene with a submissive I don’t have to handle with care.”

“You handle them all with care. That’s why I’m asking.”

“Why me? We’ve got at least one hundred unattached doms on our roll.”

Eric grimaced, not overtly, just with a slight flattening of his mouth. If he didn't know the man so well, he'd have missed it. His hesitancy over disclosing the problem with the sub made him even more set to decline.

“Out with it, man. I've got three free hours and didn't plan on conducting an interrogation.”

“She's having trouble opening up. The doms she has rejected, nearly all the one hundred you mentioned, have nicknamed her Elsa.”

“Who?”

“You know, the Disney princess from *Frozen*?”

He blinked, frowning before he drawled, “You're kidding me, right? How the hell would I know anything about Disney princesses? A better question. How the hell do you?”

“Valerie has a seven-year-old niece, and I haven't been living under a rock for the past two years. Regardless of how I know, earning the nickname of an ice princess at a sex club is problematic, don't you agree?”

“What's her problem, specifically?”

“In her time here, she hasn't engaged once. Doms offer, she declines. Even the male subs have approached—nothing.”

“Maybe she's into women.”

“I thought of that, but Mistress Latrice put the moves on her last week.”

“And?”

“Her face turned as white as the satin sheets in the Virgin Bride's theme room and she practically ran from the dungeon.”

“What does she get out of coming here?”

“Good question, one I asked her point blank.”

“And?”

“She says she doesn't know. But I've watched her, and the need is there but something is holding her back. She

practically melted into the floor while observing an erotic spanking scene between Flynn and Cassie.”

“Those two put off enough heat to melt the polar ice caps.”

“Exactly. She swayed toward the ropes, drawn to their intense chemistry. Her face became flushed, hands clenched into fists at her sides. I waited to see which she’d do first, fall to the floor when her knees turned to jelly as she came just from watching them or bite a hole in her lip from trying to fight it.”

“She’s a voyeur, then?”

“Perhaps, but there’s something else going on with her; I just can’t put my finger on it.”

“What does it say on her application?”

His eyes rose to meet Keiran’s. “She conveniently left the D/s identifier blank.”

“And you let that fly?”

“I was on a mission for you at the time, and the board didn’t question Ryan Paxton’s sponsorship.”

“The FBI agent?”

Eric nodded.

Intrigued now, he asked, “What’s their connection?”

“She says he’s a friend of her former master, but there’s more to it. I feel it in my gut.”

“I thought you said you ran a background check.”

“I did, but it turned up nothing. Not even a speeding ticket. And Pax is unavailable. I suspect he’s on an undercover assignment. In any case, he’s not around for me to ask, nor will he be for some time.”

“I shared a few drafts with him a while back. He moved here from the east coast after his partner got shot. How it all went down he was vague about, but I got the feeling there was corruption at the heart of it. He mentioned an internal affairs investigation, and that he couldn’t stomach it anymore.”

His friend's brows drew down in a frown, and he nodded. "She disclosed she's a widow. One of the few personal details I got out of her."

All the pieces fell into place. "His partner was her husband. I'd bet on it. A grieving widow, her husband who is also her dom, killed in the line of duty. Looks like we've just found our problem."

"Our problem?" A grin split Eric's face despite the seriousness of the subject. "I knew you were the dom for the job."

"Oh no. Not this dom, or this job. I misspoke."

"Misspoke, my ass. You're intrigued. You're also in a rut, my friend. And you need a challenge to help get you out of it."

"Rossi is enough of a challenge, believe me."

"That's work, this would be play. You know the old saying about all work, don't you, Jack?"

He stared at the man, puzzled. "If that's a Yank saying, you'll recall where I'm from."

"All work and no play make Jack and Keiran dull boys."

His response was a scowl, not finding Dupree funny at all.

"Don't refuse until you see her. She's lovely, and sweetly submissive, though rusty after this long dry spell."

"How long?"

"Five years."

"Damn, that's an eternity for a submissive to be on her own. The poor lass is stuck."

"Precisely what I said. You'll take her on, then?" Seeing his hesitation, the devious matchmaking master dom pushed harder. "Who better than you, Saint Keiran, to help her find herself again?"

It was actually worse than that. Dubbed "Patient as a Saint Keiran" by the club submissives when one particularly

annoying smart-ass masochist—or SAM, for short—tried testing him during a scene.

He had a penchant for the single tail, but a whip in the hand of a short-tempered dom was a dangerous combination. Though her sharp tongue had tested his resolve, he'd hang up his whip for good before administering more pain than he was comfortable giving. Instead, he dragged out the scene, making her writhe with stinging licks of fire all over her body, withholding the cutting marks and welts she seemed to crave, keeping her on the edge of orgasm for over an hour. She was begging his pardon along with his permission to come, by the time he finally relented. During aftercare, she'd been dewy-eyed and appropriately submissive, but that SAM hadn't played her games with him since.

“I'm on the verge of canceling her membership, which I don't want to do.”

“Why would you?”

“It seems the youngsters don't mind being gawked at as long as they get to gawk in return.”

“You had complaints about her watching? What the fuck?” He shook his head. “LA. They sure grow 'em odd out here.”

“Complaint—as in one.”

“What?”

“I may have given her the impression there were more.”

“May have?”

Eric shrugged. “I do what I must. Especially when I see a submissive struggling. She needs a firm, highly skilled, not easily flustered dom—not a hothead. You're one of the few single masters I'd trust with her. I'm asking you to take her on as a favor to me.” He picked up the file and extended it to him again.

This time, he paid more attention, reading the label aloud. “Esme Spade. An unusual name. Is it short for something?”

“Esmerelda, according to her file, but mainly we discussed why she's a spectator in life rather than a participant. She's too

young for that; it's a waste. And five years is too long to grieve, no matter the tragedy. She needs to dive in again full tilt."

"After this much time, she likely needs professional grief counseling, as well as a dom."

"I was thinking along those same lines. I've enlisted Valerie's professional skills, so you'll have her expert help, though indirectly. Don't expect her to share. You could strap her to the St. Catherine's wheel and take your whip to her and she still wouldn't talk. You'd be a dead man by my hands for trying, though."

Keiran chuckled softly. Eric was as protective as he was enamored with his petite subbie wife. "No worries in that corner, my man. And I haven't said yes. I'll give it some thought, but no promises."

"I sense she's ready to move forward, but isn't sure how. When you see the way she lights up, especially while watching a scene between a committed pair, you'll understand what I mean. And when you see her auburn hair, creamy white skin, Irish green eyes, and curves, you'll think you've been transported back to Belfast."

"Spoken like a Sassenach racist," he muttered. "We're not all stereotypical Mickey Rooney's you know."

When the master dom's eyes rose to his dark-brown hair, which Keiran knew shone red under the lights broadcasting his heritage, he muttered, "Cheeky Viking bastard."

With Nordic eyes and patrician features, some of Eric's antecedents undoubtedly hailed from the Northern Isles, so the label wasn't off base. He laughed, unfazed. "I'll set up a session."

"I have not agreed, man."

"You will."

"We'll see, but no matter how it pans out, you owe me."

"How do you figure? If anything, we're even." His glare became as heated as his ice-blue eyes were cold. "Recall, if

you will, that I delayed my honeymoon for two days because you needed me on Diva Duty.”

He grinned. The diva in question was a fiercely passionate, highly temperamental, multi-Grammy award-winning pop star who could give Mariah Carey a run for her money on the prima donna scale. No one had wanted the assignment of guarding her when she had a psychotic stalker after her. Eric had drawn the short straw and brought it up every time they talked about who owed who more.

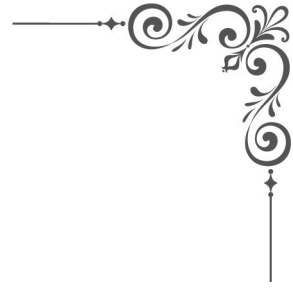
“Worst assignment I’ve ever had,” he grumbled on cue. “She wanted me to carry shoes while a psychopath was gunning for her. Shoes!”

“I’d forgotten about that,” Keiran chuckled.

“That was two years ago and still, if I hear her on the radio, I have flashbacks,” he growled, unamused. “You do this. I might forget her.”

“That’s high incentive, but as I said, I’ll think about it.” He glanced at the clock and grimaced. “I need to go relieve Jerry. He’ll whine if I’m late. I don’t mind tears from a submissive when I’m the cause—intentionally, of course—but I can’t bear to see a two-hundred-fifty-pound grown-ass man, and supposed dominant, cry.”

Eric’s laughter followed him down the hall.





## Chapter 7

KEIRAN STOOD BY THE stairs at the front of the cavernous playroom. It was busy for a Wednesday night, not shoulder to shoulder like on the weekends, but all the stations were full, with members waiting their turn by the spanking benches and crosses, the most popular of all the equipment.

Closed on Sundays, and covered up with work all week, this was the first chance he'd had to put any thought into the assignment Eric had proposed to him. He'd asked up front when he arrived if she was here, but no one in the dungeon could point her out. Red hair, green eyes, and curves could describe several of the women present tonight. Most were collared or engaged with a dom in a scene. Another, dressed in crimson leather from the top of her head to her thigh-high spiked boots, fit the bill. But her bold choice of dress, her manner, and the crop dangling from her waist proclaimed her a mistress. He'd easily crossed her off his list of potential Esmes.

He breathed deeply and exhaled heavily, the pull of exhaustion weighing on him.

Though the troubled widow piqued his interest, Keiran would have just as soon headed home to bed. It was a damn shame when a thirty-five-year-old man, purportedly in his prime, would rather get some shut-eye than play at a bondage club. But he doubted he'd have enough energy after he concluded his DM duties to restrain a sub to a cross. A bed might be more his speed tonight, or a bondage table where he could lie back and make her do all the work.

A lackluster scene hardly sounded fair to his partner, however, and was a far cry from his preference for making a sub dance at the end of his whip as he turned her bottom hot and pink. That was definitely out since it took strength, and considerable attention, both of which were waning in him as it approached midnight.

What had possessed him to agree to relieve Jerry at ten p.m. for DM duty after pulling a fourteen-hour day? It had to

be the guilt trip Dupree had laid on him for not doing his part. His men were taking their turns, so he should, too. Although, had any of them called him on it, other than Dupree, he'd have told them to fuck off. But Eric, like him, was spread paper thin and juggling multiple projects. Something had to give soon.

"I'm surprised to see you tonight. You were up to your ass in paperwork when I left after six," the man, as if conjured, said from beside him.

Keiran only grunted. Then they both lapsed into silence, each scanning the floor, watching for signs of trouble.

"Have you met with Esme and made your decision?" Eric asked after a moment.

"Haven't had the chance yet," he replied, as his gaze locked on the auburn-haired submissive he'd had to rescue last week. She was winding her way through the crowd, as though on a mission. She barely glanced at the wax table where Jerry was creating an impressive piece of art on his bound submissive. Instead, she appeared intent on reaching the doors.

She'd already been on his radar since walking onto the floor tonight. He'd have to be blind to miss the creamy skin and all that fiery hair falling in soft waves nearly to her waist, or the curves tucked once again into a tightly laced leather corset—an outfit all wrong for her softness. He was happy to see she'd learned her lesson about wearing her ribbon, the pink bow centered over her lovely throat. She was exactly his type and her description matched the one Eric had given for Esme, but she'd been sitting in a booth negotiating a scene with a dom, something his target allegedly wasn't able to do, so he continued on with his search.

"Think someone will snatch her up before she escapes into the lounge?" Eric asked.

Keiran ignored him, not sure what he was yammering about.

"You can cut her off at the end of the circuit by the doors if you hurry."

He gave his business partner an annoyed sidelong glance.

“I’m supposed to be monitoring the stations, not angling a little action for myself. Besides, you wanted me to scope out your troubled widow, remember?”

“I do. The bigger question is, do you?”

Again, his comment made no sense, so he brought up an incident that happened earlier, one that couldn’t wait any longer. “Before you arrived, we had a minor problem on the floor. An asshole overly enthusiastic with a tawse, the same one I rescued the little redhead from last week.”

“Carlos?”

“None other. I thought you were going to suspend him, or make him repeat Dom 101 basic training?”

“That was my plan, but I haven’t seen him to do either. I left orders up front for him to be detained until we had our little chat, however. Damn,” Eric sighed and reached up to rub his eyes. “Who’s on the doors? Not Tristan. Nothing gets by him.”

“Alicia was the only one in the lobby when I arrived a little before ten.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “How bad was it?”

“Carlos has always been rough, but tonight he really stepped it up. By the time Thomas and I arrived to haul his ass out, the male sub he had up on the cross had bruises, and according to witnesses, that was after only three strokes. Carlos denies it, but the man’s a sadist. He’s got a cruelty about him. If he’d had a female up on that cross, they would have wound up in the ER. My take—he needs to go, permanently.”

“Agreed. Why didn’t you call me?”

“You and Val were busy upstairs, so we handled it.”

“My thanks, and Valerie’s. It’s the first chance we’ve had to use the Sultan’s Chamber in a while. I’ll inform Mr. Hernandez he is no longer welcome at Decadence LA first thing tomorrow. If I find out Alicia let him in, she won’t escape punishment, either.”

Lapsing into silence, they watched as the pretty redhead stopped by the picture frame and gaped at Mistress Emily, exacting some pretty intense CBT on her long-term submissive. Shifting uncomfortably at the notion of a metal cage clamping down on his boys, he didn't blame the little nymph for stopping and staring, but she appeared a little green, as though queasy.

“Did you decide not to take Esme on?”

He shot his friend a sidelong glance, his vaunted patience nearly exhausted. “I told you I haven't had time to meet the lass yet. I looked for her earlier, but no one seems to know who she is.”

Eric tossed his head back and howled with laughter.

“You've gone daft,” he muttered, his Irish slipping.

“After running this place for two years, you might be correct. What I found amusing is that the tempting little package you've been staring at for the past thirty minutes is Esme.”

At this revelation, he scanned the crowd near the doors until he found her again. She appeared flustered while talking to Tristan, another Rossi man.

“I've seen her approach no less than four Doms in the past hour. I thought you said she was sweetly submissive. She looks the part but seems rather aggressive, and she's hardly stuck if she's the one approaching to negotiate. Maybe she's a switch.”

“She's as dominant as you are submissive my friend. Do you remember me saying I was considering ending her membership?”

“I'm not muddled in the head, Dupree. Of course, I do. It was only just Saturday that we spoke.”

“Well, I may have left out the ultimatum I gave her.”

“What ultimatum?”

“Either she finds a dom by the end of her intro phase, which is this weekend, or she's suspended until Pax returns.”

“The hell you say.”

The man she was talking to shook his head, patted her shoulder, and left her standing at the bottom of the steps, looking utterly defeated.

“She’s burned so many bridges, you might be her only hope,” Eric noted.

As if she’d heard him, she looked up, green eyes glistening. From this distance, Keiran wasn’t sure, but it could have been from tears. Slowly, her gaze swept the length of the room and at the last minute, just before she turned, her eyes found Eric’s. They shifted briefly to him, before her face fell, her shoulders slumped, and she walked up the stairs and out of the dungeon.

“Set it up. Friday. In the little dungeon upstairs. Seven o’clock sharp.”

“Why the dungeon?”

“If she can face me there, she’s ready. Otherwise, it might be kinder to cut the lass loose so she can go on grieving.”

Eric stared back at him a moment, then his concern slowly eased to be replaced by a shit-eating grin. “I knew once you saw her you’d take her on.”

“After that look, like someone just ran over her puppy, how could I say no?” He stepped in front of his partner, meeting him eye to eye, dom to dom, and added, “You should be horsewhipped for putting the poor lass through the humiliation of repeated rejection and assigned her to me to begin with.”

“Sight unseen, you turned me down flat. How would the same request a week ago have made any difference? Besides, she needed a nudge. Being brave enough to approach doms when she could barely look them in the eye, let alone speak to them when she first got here, means she’s ready for you, if not your dungeon.”

“You’re still a bastard, Dupree.”

A feminine gasp from beside them announced Val's arrival.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Just a disagreement on management styles," Eric replied, while he slipped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side. "Saint Keiran uses kid gloves while I tend to take them off and get dirty." The amusement left his face when his eyes cut back to him. "The end will justify my means, my friend. See if it doesn't."

A cry of red echoed above the play. Instantly, Keiran started toward the station. Over his shoulder he warned, "I'll kick your ass later, Dupree."

"I'll let you if this doesn't turn out as I expect."

"Let you? My Irish ass." But he was halfway across the mammoth play space, his gaze on the station with the weeping submissive in chains, and her dom, frantically, but ineffectually trying to set her free.

He arrived, saw it was an equipment failure, not a cruel top causing the problem, and had the bolt cutters out of the emergency box before more help arrived. Thomas, one of several physicians in their membership, and David, a full-time Rossi man, were both on DM duty tonight and immediately responded. Mistress Eryn who chaired the membership committee and was the de facto head-domme-in-charge came to lend a hand, as did Gareth, one of the other club masters who was here simply to play. When Keiran cut through the malfunctioning quick-release shackle, the frazzled master scooped his weeping sub into his arms and carried her to a booth to comfort her. Eryn followed with water and a blanket from one of the aftercare stations set up around the big room.

"Step aside, please."

The club members, gathered to watch this latest drama, parted to let Eric through. He was alone, which meant his delay in arriving had been to secure Valerie somewhere safe.

"Can we have one night without a drama?" he asked in disgust as he took the defective shackle from him and

examined it. “This hasn’t been oiled as required. I’m calling a meeting first thing in the morning. Things have gotten lax and asses are going to be flayed.” Usually even-tempered, by the time he finished his voice was approaching a roar. “We have a responsibility to ensure everyone’s safety and we’re falling down on the job. Carlos got in when he shouldn’t have, and now this. What the fuck?”

David, who oversaw the schedules of the full-time staff, answered his question. “Alicia. She was on reception duty tonight, and she, along with Jaquelyn, were supposed to have done the preventative maintenance and oiled all the shackles, metal cuffs, and equipment hinges on Sunday.”

“That’s twice she’s failed to carry out an assignment,” Eric said in a deadly tone. “Unacceptable.”

“Her attitude has been increasingly bratty, which for Alicia is saying something,” Thomas noted. “She’s been without a dominant since Destry parted ways with her last spring.”

“She’s the type of sub who needs constant attention, and a firm hand on the reins. I’ll take care of this recent inattention, but we need to see about getting her someone permanent.”

Gareth Michaelson was one of the few club masters who wasn’t a Rossi man. A software designer who made his first million by the age of twenty-five, the computer genius didn’t fit the master mold. He looked like a linebacker, not the typical nerd. His good looks and adventurous nature made him popular among the subs, despite being a sadist. And they could always count on him to volunteer when one of the club’s submissives needed disciplinary action.

“She may be lax in her duties,” Eric stated, “but we can’t—I won’t—lay the blame for this solely at her feet. We had an issue with the St. Catherine’s wheel last night, and I don’t mean jammed cuffs. One of the foot manacles had lost a screw. If the conscientious dom hadn’t noticed it before he inverted his sub, we might have had a more serious incident. Now this.”

His hand around the back of his neck, he looked at his feet a moment before he announced his decision on how they

would move forward. “We’re operating six nights a week on a skeleton crew and that can’t continue. Tomorrow, we’re closing and I’m calling in a maintenance crew to perform a thorough inspection.” Eric nodded at Gareth. “You deal with Alicia tonight, but she’s back here in the morning at eight. Besides whatever corporal punishment you administer, I think a fitting lesson for her inattention lately is to polish every piece of wooden furniture while the men check every hinge, bolt, and screw. Are you available to supervise her?”

“Absolutely,” Gareth said, nodding and grinning. “With a cattle prod if necessary.”

That he planned on using one of the low-voltage implements to motivate the errant sub was obvious to Keiran, as well as David and Thomas who were both nodding in approval.

Eric went on, outlining his plan. “Afterward, I’ll meet with her in my office to decide her future as an employee.”

“Excellent idea, boss,” David said with a nod, while Thomas grinned. The doctor’s ire blew hot and quick then usually dissipated when the wrong was made right.

“In the meantime, we need to shut down the wheel, the chain station and any equipment with metal pulleys, chains, latches, or cuffs,” Keiran advised. “We can’t risk an injury.”

They all nodded and disbursed except for him and Eric.

“Friday at seven p.m.,” he repeated. “And I’m still gonna kick your ass. If I wasn’t so busy, I’d tell her myself, then do it now.”

Eric didn’t appear concerned; they had sparred often and were well matched. “Thank you,” he murmured, “for helping tonight and with Esme. Also, I’m approving those other eight positions you sent over this morning. Part of the issue here is we’re all overextended. I’m also hiring a permanent maintenance man and some staff doms. But that doesn’t mean I’ll stop harassing you to be here. I miss having your observation skills and quick reactions on the main floor.”

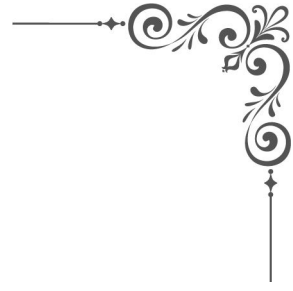


“You won’t hear me arguing about more staff. We’re operating well in the black, no sense killing ourselves trying to manage things alone.”

“Agreed.”

“I’m on until midnight. I’ll monitor things here. You can tell Esme there’ll be no more propositioning doms before our interview. In fact, send her home, not to return until our appointment and we’ve talked.”

“I’m on it,” Eric said, his lips twitching as though suppressing a grin, as he walked away.



## Chapter 8

FOLLOWING HER GET-WITH-the-program-or-get-out meeting with Master Eric, she'd gone home and done a lot of soul-searching. She returned the next night with a renewed determination to find a dom. When no one approached her, she took the initiative. Except they either remembered her rebuffing their earlier offers and returned the favor, or were involved with a sub, or several subs—Decadence LA had an inordinately high percentage of ménage and polyamorous members—or they were class A jerks, like Carlos, that she wanted no part of, no matter how desperate.

With only a few days remaining before she got booted out for good, she'd approached Master Eric when she arrived, and out of desperation, asked for his recommendations. The list contained six names, but it came with a caveat.

“These men won't be easy to please, Esme. You've earned a reputation and it will take a lot of ass-kissing and unwavering obedience to overcome it.”

“What kind of reputation?”

“Of being cold and unapproachable.”

She frowned. It wasn't unearned and pretty much how she wanted it, but now she'd have to overcome it.

For the next four hours, she sought every man on his list. Two weren't in attendance, two others she found but quickly took out of contention on two critical points, namely an evil-looking, short-tailed whip called a Dragon's Tongue and a flogger made of black leather with knots on the ends of each of the nine tails appropriately called a Black Cat.

According to the sub who pointed the two Doms out to her, they teetered on the edge of sadism but could dial it back for a sub who wasn't a full-fledged masochist. As Esme watched them wield their weapons of choice during the impact play demonstration they were holding, she flinched at every moan from their respective sub and winced as each welt appeared on their flesh. Both the volunteers, a man and a woman, were

weak-kneed and dreamy-eyed from pleasure when the doms helped them down from the side-by-side picture frames. Too intense for her, she nixed them before even talking to them.

The next one reminded her of a slick-tongued snake-oil salesman. She knew because when she approached, he was negotiating a scene with a wide-eyed submissive who must have been new to the scene or would have known better.

Master Tristan, the sixth and final dominant on her list, was a tall, lean, handsome-as-sin lady-killer with twinkling blue eyes, and shoulder-length sandy-blond hair, who looked a lot like Brad Pitt in his *Legend of the Fall* days. She'd had to wait until he finished his DM shift in the main playroom to speak with him.

He was one of the club masters, a title given to well-respected, experienced dominants, both male and female, who took on added responsibilities in the club and were leaders in their BDSM community. Most sat on either the membership committee or advisory council, some mentored new doms or taught classes, and most took their turn as dungeon monitors. The possibility that Master Tristan might say yes both thrilled and terrified Esme, but in the end, he declined like all the others.

“Sorry, princess,” he told her in a low, growly voice. “You’re lovely and the idea of playing with you is tempting, but I prefer a sub whose interest in me is more than a pathway to membership.”

Disheartened and on the verge of tears, Esme trudged toward the exit. Out of options, she resigned herself to losing her membership and never setting foot in the club again. Instead of leaving immediately, she made a detour and headed for the bar, hoping to numb the pain of her battered ego with a stiff drink.

By her calculations, the club owed her a backlog of drinks, at least two per night for the past twelve weeks. She planned to drink her fill and make up for her teetotaling ways before ordering an Uber ride home.

She slid onto a stool with shoulders slumped and her head hung low. Where did she go from here?

“It’s about time you graced my bar, little girl.”

The unexpected, big booming voice made Esme jump. She quickly regained her composure and looked up at the big, burly, barrel-chested man, shocked she hadn’t heard him approach.

“What gives?” the bartender asked as he leaned his elbows on the bar, his eyes scanning her up and down as if assessing her worthiness to be in the club. “You a teetotaler or something?”

“No, sir. I’ll have a vodka gimlet, no ice. And since I’m obviously not playing tonight, make it a double.”

“You got a way home?” he asked sharply.

“I’ll Uber.”

“Don’t trust ’em. Heard all sorts of wild tales.”

“That’s how I got here, sir.”

“Hmph.” He turned and reached up to the top shelf and pulled down a bottle of Grey Goose.

“The cheap stuff is fine,” she told him. “I’m not picky.”

He jerked and made an affronted face like she’d spit on him. “Now I know you haven’t been to my bar. Look around you, subbie. Decadence doesn’t cut corners, and I don’t do cheap drinks.”

“I’m sure she meant nothing by it, Master Samson,” a woman taking the stool beside her told the bartender.

He grunted again and slid her drink in front of her then moved away to serve a few other new arrivals.

“Don’t mind him. He’s been the bar manager since the place opened and prides himself on stocking only the best. Most of his customers expect it, too.”

The pretty blonde offered her hand, her lively blue eyes gleaming with interest. “I’m Val.”

“Master Eric’s Val?”

“That would be me,” she said with a smile. “My reputation precedes me it seems. All good, I hope.”

“Your husband gave me your business card.”

Her smooth brows slammed together in a frown. “I know. He told me you might call.”

She hadn’t, and both of them knew it.

Esme looked away and sucked back half her drink then shuddered. Maybe a double wasn’t a good idea.

“Despite his high-handed ways, Eric means well, Esmerelda. He takes an interest in everyone here at the club, but he seemed especially concerned about you. Losing a spouse can be devastating; I know that firsthand. That’s all he shared, however. Anymore is for you to say.”

“It’s Esme.”

“Pardon?”

“My name. Master Eric insists on using my full name. I’m not sure why.”

“He does that to me, too. No one except my mother ever called me Valerie before him. He said it’s beautiful and rolls off his tongue better.”

She blinked, surprised the bossy master dom had a romantic bone in his body. “Valerie is a beautiful name. My mother insisted on using the unabbreviated form with me, too. I thought Esmerelda sounded like an evil stepsister, or a witch, so I shortened it, which in the third grade made it easier to spell, too.”

Val smiled. “I think it’s a lovely name, and unique. You said your mother insisted, past tense.”

“She has passed, and so has my father.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and sounded like she meant it, rather than the usual awkward response when people didn’t know what else to say. “You’re young to have suffered so much loss.”

“I was twenty-three. Fresh out of college. Andrew died two years later.”

Esme tossed back the rest of her drink and promptly closed the mental compartment that had inched open. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get my phone from my locker and call an Uber.”

“So, you’re giving up?” She turned to find Master Eric behind her.

“I don’t think I have a choice, sir. I have exhausted your list, and my efforts were a miserable failure. Doms don’t like to hear the word no, and have long memories when they do, it seems.”

“Truer words, my friend,” Val muttered under her breath.

Master Eric’s hand curled around the back of his wife’s neck. “No one asked your opinion, little one. Not all doms are thin-skinned, as you well know. Some hear no and take it as a challenge to warm a naughty submissive’s behind.”

Esme sucked in her breath at the very dominant remark, but Val didn’t look quelled by his not-so-veiled threat. “I’m sorry, master. I’ll be good and sit here quietly.”

There was a mischievous glint in her vivid blue eyes. She adopted a suitably submissive expression before she angled her face up to her husband, however.

An arched brow revealed his skepticism. “I suppose there is a first time for everything.”

“Ouch,” she replied, putting her hand to her chest as though wounded.

Master Eric ran his knuckles along her jaw, handling her gently despite their exchange. Val, who obviously took no real offense, turned her face into his touch.

Feeling like she was intruding on an intimate moment, Esme turned on her stool and raised her glass for another sip.

“Are you serious about moving forward?”

Glancing up, she saw both of them gazing at her reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror behind the bar.

“Yes, sir, I really don’t want to leave.”

“I meant with a dom, little subbie.”

“I’ve given it a lot of thought. You were right about me being stuck. I’m like my old car in college. It was a four-speed, but I could never get it to go above third gear. I’d give it gas, and the engine would rev, trying hard to get up to speed, but with the flaw in the transmission it never quite got there. I had to drive in the slow lane, watching as everyone else passed me by.”

“That’s a very fitting analogy of being stalled in the grief process, Esme.” The amusement had faded from Val’s expression, replaced by kindness and understanding. “That you recognize it in yourself means you’re ready to get unstuck, perhaps with a nudge in the right direction.”

With a long, drawn-out sigh, she nodded. “I think I’m in serious need of a nudge.”

Eric’s pleasure was evident in the gleam of his perfect white teeth. Esme couldn’t help but stare because his smile changed his face from sternly handsome to breathtaking.

Val reached out and patted her hand. “I know how you feel, sister. He’s the best of both worlds. Dominant enough to stop your heart with a look then melt it with a grin. I was a goner the moment I saw him.”

Eric chuckled though only briefly because he leaned down and planted a smoldering kiss on his subbie wife’s lips. When he raised his mouth a scant half inch, he whispered, “Hold that thought, love, until I take care of our lost girl here, then I’ll see to melting more than your heart.”

“Yes, sir,” she breathed, no longer appearing either mischievous or amused but hungry, as though ready to jump his bones right there at the bar.

What was it about this place? The hotness factor of the couples was off the charts.



“As for you, Esmerelda. I thought you might need my help and have arranged a suitable dominant for you. Be in the dungeon promptly at seven on Friday.” He reached in his pocket and extended a phone to his wife, which, from the glittery aqua case, Esme assumed wasn’t his. “Valerie will schedule your first counseling appointment, preferably her first available.”

“Eric! You can’t force her to see me.”

“I think she just agreed.” His ice-blue eyes turned Esme’s way when he asked, “Isn’t that so?”

With the opportunity to stay in her grasp, she took it. And Val, a widow herself had to know some of what she was going through. Considering her devastatingly handsome husband, she’d done well for herself this second time around. And despite their teasing banter, perhaps not all of it tongue-in-cheek, both looked happy, and very much in love.

Nodding at her soon-to-be therapist, she gave her a tentative smile. “I suppose I just did.”

The little blonde glared at her scary dom and snatched up the phone. “This is coercion, and can in no way be construed as ethical, but I’ll discuss it with you in the privacy of my office away from pushy doms.” Her fingers flew across the screen. “I assume you work, so late afternoon? How does next Thursday at four o’clock sound to you?”

“I’m a paralegal, but my schedule is flexible when needed. My boss doesn’t mind as long as I get done what I need to do.”

Master Eric retrieved and pocketed the phone. “Excellent. Now that we have that all settled, you’ll have to excuse us. I have a misbehaving submissive to punish.”

“Me?” Val exclaimed. “What did I do?”

“Glaring at me in my own club, playing me with that innocent look in those big blue eyes—as if you could—and not two seconds ago, you called me Eric and pushy.” He shook his head as he stepped behind her and hooked her white cuffs together low at her back. “You’d think after nearly two years together, you would have learned such behavior earns you a

stinging red bottom.” He slid his big hand up her back, his fingers threading into her loose curls. “Or perhaps this is your way of getting me to pay more attention to you. Let’s find an available bench or cross and see to it, in either case.”

Val put up no resistance when he lifted her from her stool and set her on her feet.

He eyed the empty gimlet glass in front of Esme. “You’re not driving.”

This wasn’t a question.

“She Ubers,” Samson grumbled as he sidled up and leaned his forearms on the bar once again.

“Which I’m going to call right now,” Esme assured him.

“Since you have an arrangement...” Eric conceded. “We’ll see you Friday, but not before.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I’ll see you next week,” Val clarified. “I’m listed in the Long Beach directory under Valerie Thornton. Call if you need directions.”

“Thornton,” Master Eric echoed with a grunt of irritation. “When can we expect a licensure change to come through? Our first anniversary was last month.”

With her hands restrained, she leaned her body into his and looked up sweetly. “You know how it is with government red tape, master. I have submitted all the paperwork. I’m afraid we’ll just have to be patient.”

“You have me mistaken with Keiran, evidently.” The inside joke, which made Val smile, went clear over Esme’s head. “A year to process a name change is unacceptable. Who do I know in Sacramento?”

“The governor?” Val suggested helpfully.

A grin once again transformed her dom’s face. Esme noticed several female heads turn, as they noticed as well.

“So I do,” Eric exclaimed, sounding quite pleased.

“What? I was kidding. How do you know the governor?”

“Baby...” he drawled tellingly.

“Really? He’s a member?” She started looking around the bar with wide eyes.

Eric laughed, caught her chin in his hand, and dipped his head to claim another searing kiss. It required bending at the waist to accomplish this feat since he loomed at least a foot over his petite wife, but the gentle caress earned him a beatific smile in return.

“He’ll hear from me first thing in the morning,” the powerful master dom declared then moved them toward the massive double doors of the dungeon.

What a delightful couple. Val could easily be a friend, which meant being her therapist was out, and Master Eric wasn’t nearly as scary as everyone thought, or as he wanted them to believe.

“Do you need me to call your ride, little one?” the gruff bartender asked. She eyed him with interest. He also had two sides it seemed; a hard outer shell, but a softer, protective inside.

“No, thank you, sir. I’ll run and grab my phone from my locker and take care of it.”

A half hour later, while staring out the window on her way home, she felt the whirl of emotions she always did after leaving the club—envy, melancholy, loneliness.

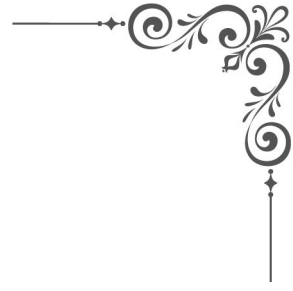
It was past time for her to move on. She knew that. But her ever-present anxiety crept in. What if one shot at happiness was all fate had in store for her? Even if she were lucky enough to find someone she wanted to take a second chance with didn’t guarantee a happily ever after, like Val had with Eric.

Andrew’s sudden death had proven that.

Fairy tales didn’t exist, at least not for her, or her parents who were T-boned by a drunk driver coming home from

dinner out. Thinking they did only gave her false hope and set her up for more heartache.

She'd do a scene or two with the dominant selected for her, to keep in good standing with the master dom and the other club members, but she wouldn't get her hopes up. It would be best to focus on the physical, get her needs met at long last, but leave the shields around her heart in place. If they melted, and she felt the pain of such devastating loss again, she didn't think she'd survive.



## Chapter 9

THE UPCOMING SCENE with a mystery dominant had taken over Esme's thoughts, leaving her unable to focus on anything else. This made for long, stressful days at work, but they were better than the interminable nights filled with disturbing dreams. Each was different, some bizarre and amusing, others terrifying, and one was downright nauseating. None involved Prince Charming who swooped in to sweep her off her feet, but most featured a somewhat obscure celebrity.

Like the small, quirky, balding man who tried rather ineptly to give her a spanking. Esme couldn't keep from giggling at his awkward attempt to strip her and pull her over his lap and ended up offending him. When her eyes popped open, she realized the dom was Woody Allen, and she'd fallen asleep with the TV on, *To Rome with Love*, droning in the background.

They'd gone downhill from there.

Like when Newman from *Seinfeld* reruns made her serve him drinks in the Decadence lounge while wearing four-inch spiked heels and his USPS uniform—the one with Bermuda shorts. Not a sexy look at all. Or how the chef from *Hell's Kitchen* tied her to a post, spanked her with a spatula while lecturing her about serving chicken raw. And, finally, when Michael Keaton, who made her wear a skin-tight, black rubber suit, tied her hands over her head to a rope suspended from the mile-high Decadence playroom ceiling, and got in her face and repeated, "I'm Batman. I'm Batman."

She didn't find out where it went after that, thank goodness, because Phineas jumped on her chest and meowed loudly in kitty-speak that it was breakfast time. She'd hugged him close from sheer relief until he squirmed out of her hold, even more perturbed over the further delay of his morning meal.

And that was only Wednesday night's dreams.

On Thursday, she took a four-year-old Xanax, hoping it would have enough potency left to help her sleep, but she'd had the scariest dreams of all.

First, Carlos had accosted her again in the dungeon, but this time, the Irish DM hadn't been there to help. While he laughed maniacally, he tied her to his cross as promised and unfurled a twelve-foot bullwhip. She'd cried for help, as he'd cracked it ominously.

Her screams had scared Phin out of a dead sleep, frightening him so much, he'd used her as a springboard to leap off the bed, leaving painful burning scratches on her arm.

Never again, she swore. No more old medicine.

After showering and changing into a dry nightgown, and changing the damp linens, she had calmed enough to go back to sleep.

Then she'd be damned if she didn't dream again.

Entering the dungeon blindfolded, a man sternly ordered her to kneel. As soon as she fell to her knees, a cock brushed her lips then thrust inside. Unrestrained—thank goodness—she struggled, but he kept on thrusting. He didn't prevent her from tearing off the black cloth covering her eyes. Gazing up at the man, past his giant round belly, she noticed he was gnawing on a turkey leg, and atop his head was a golden crown. This time, instead of screaming, she awoke coughing and gagging in disgust. A wave of relief washed over her when she realized it wasn't real, but she couldn't help being appalled that her unconscious brain had created such a foul dom, although she'd borrowed King Henry the VIII from a movie she'd seen in a college history class.

After that, she gave up on sleeping. Not about to be accosted once again by the rotund, the inept, or the scary, she got up, splashed water on her face, and went down to the kitchen. Then she made an extra-large pot of coffee, all of which she drank before she went to work.

As she drove to the office, jittery from caffeine and exhausted, she tried not to dwell on the long day, and the even

longer night, ahead of her. Looking ahead to Thursday at four o'clock, she felt sorry for Val, who had her work cut out for her when she started digging around inside her warped brain.



“STUPID, STUPID, STUPID,” she muttered under her breath, the sound echoing of the tile floor and high ceiling of the little dungeon. The only light came from the sconces that flickered like real torches. The gray walls resembled genuine stone, and the shackles bolted into them looked ancient and rusted. As she stood there, taking in the scene, she could almost feel the weight of the dark ages pressing down on her. She had seen this torture chamber several times before, while indulging in her voyeuristic gawking, but didn't think it had made such an impression. It shed light on one of her bizarre dreams, at least.

Stocked with much of the same equipment found on the main floor—an A-frame bench with kneelers, a padded table, a St. Andrew's cross mounted to the far wall, and chains hanging from the ceiling. None of it bothered Esme. She'd used most of it at least once, although not in a good while.

What upset her was not having the forethought to bring a change of clothes to work with her that morning. It hadn't occurred to her that her recently MIA boss would come flying in an hour before she planned to leave, in a lather about something he didn't share. He'd barked orders at all of them and insisted she revise a brief she finished a week ago that had sat on his desk untouched the entire time, waiting for his approval.

His crisis mode micromanagement had shot a hole in her plan to leave at four o'clock, run home, shower, change, do full hair and makeup then arrive at the club fifteen minutes early. From there, she'd planned to stride calmly up to the room where she'd meet her dom for the evening.

Instead, she'd run out of the office at a quarter past six then battled standstill and bumper-to-bumper traffic during rush hour, taking forty-two of the forty-five minutes remaining until her appointment to drive seven miles. This left three minutes to park, run inside, check-in, traverse the always-



crowded lounge and main floor, and get upstairs to her assigned room.

This meant she wasn't calm and collected as she'd hoped, but out of breath, frazzled, feeling a bit sticky—ugh!—and wearing the same dove-gray pencil skirt, waist-length matching jacket, and black-and-white pinstriped blouse she'd left the house in twelve hours earlier. Her hair was in her usual professional twist at the back of her neck.

As she stood in the center of the room, a sense of impending doom overwhelming her, she tried valiantly to collect herself while brushing back and tucking in wayward strands with trembling fingers. She hadn't even had time to refresh her makeup.

"I'm screwed," she groaned aloud. "Might as well go now, because when Master Eric hears about this, he'll think I was blowing smoke about being serious and will tell me not to darken the door of Decadence ever again."

When hinges, in desperate need of oil, creaked behind her, Esme snapped her mouth shut with a loud click of her teeth. She tensed further—if that were humanly possible—and called herself a fool again, for waiting with her back to the door.

Curiosity burned inside her, but she forced herself to keep still, not even looking up. She clasped her hands behind her head—they were up there fooling with her hair anyway—in a last-second attempt at a submissive presentation, hoping to please him with that at least.

Her chest rose and fell, not from practically running from the parking lot, which seemed like a mile, at least, but from nervousness. She used to pride herself on how motionless she could be, her master barely noticing her breathing, or seeing her blink, or detecting if a tremor passed through her. That was a long time ago, too long, and she was terribly out of practice. When all of it happened at once, like it did now, he'd have to be blind not to notice.

Standing in the middle of the room, eyes down, shoulders back, hands clasped so tight they pinched, Esme shivered as

the AC kicked on. Or at least that's what she tried to convince herself.

Would this stranger be as observant as the dungeon master? Surely not; they were more experienced and skilled than those in the membership, usually. Master Eric said to trust him, but he wasn't here. She had to face the unknown entity on her own.

Did he know how rusty she was?

Silly question. His fellow dominant would have clued him in on her troubles. Would he be patient or punish her if she hesitated, questioned, or heaven forbid, broke down and cried like a baby? The last, what she felt could happen at any moment.

She'd take a thousand anxious Woodys, a hundred Newmans, or a host of angry Chef Ramseys, anyone from her dreams, right about now. They, at least, were the devils she knew. But not her nightmares. Carlos and royal forced blow jobs were hard limits she would not cross.

The creak of a floorboard cut into her rambling, insane thoughts and made her shiver again.

"Cold?" a low voice asked.

She should have expected it. She knew he had entered, but she jumped. So not like her. Could she do this? Did she even want to?

To begin again with a complete stranger, one she had never seen or spoken to, seemed crazy. But Master Eric hadn't given her much choice. It was him or leave.

Her forced reply came out in a rasp just above a whisper. "Yes, sir. A little."

Heels thudded against the floor as he drew closer.

Her heart beat faster, thrumming loudly in her ears, close to deafening. Surely, he could hear it, too, and would know the extent of her nervous excitement. Hoping to calm herself and control her racing pulse, she inhaled, doing so slowly, not wanting to alert him to her anxiety. A futile effort, most likely.

An experienced dominant would know. But she gave it a shot, narrowing her focus on breathing in through her nose and out through pursed lips.

But on the first slow inhale, she caught a hint of his scent—part soap, a trace of woody cologne, but mostly clean and distinctively masculine. Instead of keeping her unease secret, her exhale came out as a ragged sigh so loud in the stark, almost-empty room, it echoed.

There was no way he could have missed it.

The footsteps halted, and she felt his presence behind her, standing near without touching, but giving off incredible heat. He shifted, moving closer, enough for his shirt to brush her back and for her to see his black wingtips bracketing either side of her bare feet. She longed for her three-inch black pumps, the only remotely sexy part of her work attire, but she'd had to check them at the door.

She desperately wanted to look up and peek in one of the wall-mounted mirrors around the room, but she kept her eyes lowered.

A finger ran up her arm, lightly trailing over the silk of her sleeve. “I remember black leather from the other night, and far less than you’re wearing now. I’m guessing this isn’t your usual club attire, is it, lass?”

She jerked in surprise, and her head almost came up to see if her ears deceived her. But it was unnecessary. Low and beautifully melodic, Master Finnegan’s lightly accented voice was unforgettable, as was the way he called her lass.

After his offer to help her find someone more suitable, never hinting at an interest of his own, it never occurred to her he would be her dom for the night. A wave of warmth washed over her, mostly from relief that none of the awful scenarios she’d dreamed had come true, but also because as a DM, she could trust him to follow the club rules.

Still, regretful of the impression her conservative suit must be giving him, she stammered out her excuse. “I was delayed, sir. Something came up at work at the last minute.” Trite and

overly vague, it sounded made-up. “My boss,” she rushed to explain, “was in a panic about something he insisted couldn’t wait until Monday.” Esme realized she was nervously twisting her hands and forced herself to stop. “I’m sorry. I didn’t have time to change and make myself presentable.”

He didn’t answer, but moved again, this time around her, likely taking her in from every angle.

She’d assumed arriving late to a session with a new dom was far worse than being inappropriately dressed—maybe she’d guessed wrong. She should have taken down her hair, but without a brush, it would have been a mess. Her best attempt at alluring had been opening an extra button on her blouse.

“Hmm,” was his only response. When he paused in front of her, she could sense his slow perusal but didn’t look up, afraid to see his disapproval. What would happen if he ended the session? Today was day eighty-seven of her trial membership. Her time was almost up.

She opened her mouth, but wasn’t sure what to say. Offer more lame excuses or plead with him not to walk away. At a loss over what to do next, she caught her bottom lip between her teeth to keep it from quivering.

He surprised her by murmuring, “Easy, lass. I think we can work with this.”

His hand lightly grazed her hip as he came full circle and stood behind her once again.

“I like the skirt. It’s snug enough to hug your curves and though the length is professional, it shows enough of your long legs. The slit in the back hints at the treasures still hidden underneath. Sometimes, less can be more enticing than blatant, in your face, sexuality. This jacket needs to go, however.” He took care of the offending garment in a blink, by tugging it down her arms and tossing it aside.

Back in front of her, he put a hand beneath her chin and tipped her face up to his. Amusement glittered in his green

eyes, and she blinked, still trying to process that it was Master Finn standing in front of her.

The beginnings of a smile tilted the corners of his mouth upward. “We meet again. It’s Esme, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Surprised?”

“More like stunned.”

His brows drew together in question. “Why? You don’t think we’ll work well together?”

“I got the impression you weren’t interested when you offered to find me another dom.”

“Lack of interest wasn’t the problem; my jam-packed schedule and having little time to devote to a new submissive was.”

“Has that changed, sir?”

“Let’s say I moved things around when Master Eric called and said he had a challenge for me. He made it sound like the idea suddenly came to him, but I know the man. He has a devious streak, though well meaning, and I believe he’s been plotting this for a while.”

“He has? But why?”

“Since he’s claimed and collared a sub of his own and found happiness, he wants the same for everyone else, and has turned into our resident matchmaker.”

She’d felt that way once. Nothing would do except for her single friends to find the same happiness she had with Andrew.

His thumb swept out and slid across her bottom lip. “A memory?”

Startled, she stared up at him for a moment. “How did you know?”

“You have an expressive face, lass. Your husband was a good man?”

“The best, sir.”

“He loved you?”

“Very much so.”

“Would he have wanted you to live your life sad and alone?”

She hesitated, though the answer came to her swiftly. A slight rasp of emotion entered her tone when she replied, “Never.”

“Then honor his memory by living it to the fullest, little one.”

“I’m trying, but it isn’t easy, Master Finn.”

Angling his head to the side, it was his turn to appear startled.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“My friends back in Ireland call me Finn, but most people here use my first name.”

Carlos had called him Finnegan the first night, which she shortened. Thinking this was his first name, her brow wrinkled in confusion.

“Keiran is what my *mathair* chose to call me. Finnegan is my surname,” he explained.

She flushed, feeling stupid.

“No harm done,” he murmured as his thumb brushed her heated cheek. “It reminds me of home, so I don’t mind at all.”

“I heard your name mentioned and wondered, but I never saw you here until this past weekend. Are you the mysterious Master K, too?”

“That’s me. I haven’t been around as much as I’d like. Something kept coming up at work. Mostly too much work.”

“I can relate, sir.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, gliding his hands down her arms to grip her hands. “Eric tells me you’re stuck.”

“I’m afraid he’s right.”

“It’s good you realize it. Eric also told me he gave you an ultimatum, lovely one; put up or get out.”

“Maybe not so abruptly, but that’s how I took it. He gave me until this weekend to find a dom. I tried, but when I had no takers, I had to turn to him for help.”

“I’m afraid for all their bluster, doms have incredibly fragile egos. Being told no isn’t something they like to hear.”

“I discovered that after the tenth rejection. But in all fairness, I didn’t know full participation was required when I joined. Pax never said.”

“That’s because it’s never been an issue before now.”

“Leave it to me to be a trendsetter,” she said dryly. “For all his firmness, Master Eric seemed more concerned than anything. Does he always take such an interest in his clients?”

“Do you mean, does he stick his nose into everyone’s business? Pretty much.”

A laugh threatened to bubble up, but she contained it, letting only a smile slip.

“We’re as much a community as we are a club, and a leader always emerges. Eric’s a good one, even if he is a mother hen.”

The image of the big intimidating dungeon master clucking as he tended his chicks was so absurd the laugh broke free.

“Now there’s a lovely sound.”

She flushed at the compliment.

His finger traced over her cheek and along her jaw. “And your blushes are equally lovely, but before we get too far off topic, you have a choice to make.”

“I do?”

“You always have a choice, Esme. Remember that, no matter how intimidating the dominant. I’ve agreed to take you on, but only if you agree. If you prefer, I’ll help you find someone else.”

“But no one wanted me.”

“Due respect to Eric, I don’t think it was fair to send you out on your own to negotiate, and he heard from me about it. If you’d like to proceed and do the choosing, I’ll act in Paxton’s stead and make the introductions, easing the way and smoothing any feathers you may have ruffled.”

“But Master Eric said I only had until the end of the month, which is this weekend.”

“I know what he said, lass, but contrary to what everyone thinks, his word isn’t law. We have other owners. Because his judgment is usually sound, we go along with his decisions for the most part. Here, he’s wrong, and since I have joint ownership, as well as charge of you for the time being, I have a say.”

“You’re one of the owners?”

“Yes, and I’m willing to go to bat for you with Eric, the membership, and the board if need be. But you have to decide how it will be. Stick with me or continue your search. Time beyond this weekend, I’ll allow, but it can’t be forever. You’ve been coasting while trying to get your bearings. Three months isn’t all that long considering your situation and the fact your sponsor left you so abruptly, but it’s time to stop living vicariously through others, and do something about it.”

She bit her lip. Here she was, geared up for a scene, and it had turned, well...weird.

“This isn’t what I expected when I came here tonight.”

His smile conveyed his understanding. “No doubt. But how we proceed needs to be decided.”

“You’re one of the good ones,” she blurted out.

One brow arched in question. “You sound surprised. Eric might maneuver to get what he wants, but he wouldn’t set you up with an asshole.”

“In my experience, doms come in three varieties. Jerks like Carlos who care only about themselves, players who are only looking for fun without commitment—not that there’s



anything wrong with that since there are subs who want that, too—and the good doms.”

“And your definition of a good dom would be what?”

“Someone who listens, not only to the sub’s kinks but to their dreams, fears, and passions. He understands a D/s relationship even with a power exchange is a partnership and has the sub’s best interests at heart. He knows when to push but also when to stop. Most of all, a good dom is someone who wants to know his sub on a level that goes deeper than libidos and genitalia.”

“Your husband was all those things, little Esme?”

“He wasn’t perfect, but he strived to be, for me.”

“Which makes him a tough act to follow. You realize that, yes?”

“I do, but I’m not looking for perfect. Although, I’d prefer not to be with a jerk or a player.”

“Understood. We have a lot of good doms here, trust me.”

“I’ve met a few, but most, like Master Eric, were claimed already. I think Master Tristan might be one, too. He turned me down, preferring someone who wanted him rather than the perks being with him offered.”

His chuckle was warm and wonderful, further easing her tension. “You’ve got them both pegged, but considering Eric is the dominant in the relationship, he’d probably disagree with the claimed part, but we’ll keep that between us.”

She nodded, realizing how that sounded. “Thank you.”

He grinned, something she noticed he did easily. “You’re very observant.”

“Observe is all I’ve done these past twelve weeks.”

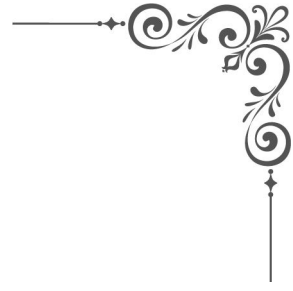
“Something I had hoped to change tonight.” Cupping her chin, he held her gaze as he asked quietly, “To do so, I’ll need your answer.”

She paused, rewinding the conversation in her head to find the question.

“Do you choose me or continue your search?” he asked patiently.

So far, everything she had seen and heard in their two brief encounters matched her taste in a prospective dom. How could she refuse?

Boldy, she met his gaze and made her choice. “I’ll stick with you, sir.”



## Chapter 10

EVEN THOUGH IT WAS out of necessity, choosing him was a giant leap forward for Esme.

Heat suffused her face at the way she had answered quickly, without hesitation—her eagerness more than apparent. When she glanced up to gauge Master Finn’s reaction, his smile reached his brilliant eyes and communicated his approval sufficiently. He also verbalized it.

“I am pleased, lass, and eager to get started, which brings us back to where we were before we got sidetracked with all this seriousness.”

She tilted her head again, unsure what he meant.

“We were discussing your clubwear and how good your ass looks in this skirt.”

With his delightfully sexy accent, *your* was *yer* and *ass* came out as *arse*; she could listen to him all day. On edge, as she was, she managed to contain a giddy laugh, but not the smile curving her lips.

“Did I say something amusing?” His soft burr, pitched lower than before, sent a shiver down her spine.

“Oh, no, sir.”

“Then it must be me you’re laughing at.”

“No, sir!”

“Good, because I assure you, I am not here for your entertainment. It’s the other way around.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry, but I’m nervous, and your accent, sir. It’s distracting.”

He moved in closer, his chest brushing against her breasts as he dipped his head to hers. “You don’t like it? Most American girls do.”

“Oh, well, yes...” she breathed, shivering as his wonderful, masculine scent filled her senses. “You can

consider me among them, sir.”

“Hmm...” he hummed in amusement.

The hand on her face moved down to her collar, his fingertips tracing along the deep V at the front of her blouse. Her shivers intensified, and her nipples, already peaked from the coolness of the room, stood up harder and almost painfully tight.

“I’m glad I meet with your approval, lass. I can assure you, I like what I see, but I want to see more. Your hair is a lovely color, but the twist doesn’t work for me. I prefer long and loose, which gives me something to sink my fingers into, or to wind around my wrist should I take the notion.” His hands dropped to her hips, and he took a half step back. “Take it down.”

She didn’t hesitate, searching for the pins in the loose bun. She’d used eight that morning. A couple fell from her nervous fingers, bouncing with a ping on the hardwood floor before she located all of them.

Master Finn brushed her hands aside, using his steady, long fingers to fluff the thick, wavy mass that tumbled over her shoulders and down her back. Next, he pulled it forward in two skeins to stream down over her breasts.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

Feeling shy at his praise, she looked down, watching as he picked up a springy curl and rubbed it between his tanned fingers. The back of his hand brushed the hard peak, which tightened in reaction.

“Relax, lass.” The deep cadence of his voice made it almost impossible not to. “Nothing will happen here if you don’t want it to.”

It wasn’t a comforting thought because she wanted this man to do everything, her body needing him to, so badly. Swaying slightly, she leaned toward him, his pull on her magnetic.

“You’re called Esme, an unusual name.”

“It’s my middle name, actually. My mother lost a bet with my father.”

There was a pause. “I don’t follow.”

“He won and got to choose my name.” She shrugged. “It’s rather a long story; my parents were rather nutty.”

“A feeling most children share, but best left for another time, perhaps,” he suggested as she felt a button release on her blouse.

She breathed out, glad for the change of subject. Thoughts of her parents, always bittersweet, didn’t belong here, in a sex club of all places, where a practical stranger had less than wholesome intentions in mind for her.

“What was that?”

“Sir?” she asked, her eyes coming up to meet his.

“You had a disturbing thought.”

“Oh no. It was nothing.”

“Nothing doesn’t make you frown. I’d like to know what it was.”

“I, uh...” With the good came the bad: observant, demanding, intent on getting inside a sub’s head.

“If you’re to be mine, whether for an hour, the evening, or beyond this first session, you will be mine in all ways. Mind and body, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, responding to the firm authority in his demand.

“Then tell me what disturbed you.”

“Our conversation seems to circle back to, well, rather inappropriate things, like my folks, when soon—”

“I’ll be using their daughter’s body,” Master Finn finished for her, having no trouble putting it into words, “in whatever depraved way I see fit, baring her, fucking her, taking a crop to her ass if she doesn’t please me? Perhaps it is inappropriate,

but considering we're in a torture chamber, not much about our situation is what you'd call proper. Is it?"

"I guess not, sir," she replied, a rasp present from her mouth and throat having gone suddenly dry.

"Which is half the fun."

He tugged on the curl he still held, then his hand fell away, and he walked across the room. A few moments later, she heard the creak of leather.

"Come here, Esme."

Turning, she scanned the shadows until she found him. It took a moment despite the flickering sconces because his black T-shirt and pants blended with the dark high-backed chair where he reclined. He crooked a finger, summoning her like a medieval lord ready for a tankard of ale and a lot more from his serving wench.

She padded in bare feet across the tile floor. When she drew near, he shifted, spreading his black boots wide apart. She didn't misconstrue his silent command and stepped between them. Her gaze inched up his leather-encased long legs and thickly muscled thighs, and she couldn't miss the outline of his cock behind the button fly and how the impressive length angled down his inner thigh. Immediately, a flood of wetness rushed to her pussy, and she could think of nothing except him stripping her bare and filling her, wherever and however he wanted.

Finn's heels softly scraped the floor as his legs closed around hers. His hands, which were resting on his thighs, barely had to move for his thumbs to dip beneath her skirt hem. They did nothing more than glide over her skin, leisurely stroking as though he had all the time in the world.

"Brush back your hair and open your blouse. I'd like to see the nipples that have tempted me since the moment I walked in here."

With trembling fingers, she undid the fabric-covered buttons and separated the two halves, revealing her white lace

bra. Not a ratty old one, thankfully, of which she had several. In this one area, luck had been on her side.

“Very nice,” he murmured, the rolling R suddenly more pronounced. “And a front hook. How convenient. Open it. I’m eager to see if the tips match the pinkness of your lips.”

Already tight, her nipples constricted more at his command and were aching for his touch by the time she unlocked the plastic clasp and peeled the cups away. Still keeping her eyes angled downward, she felt the heat of his gaze on her rose-tipped C-cup-sized breasts.

“Rosy all over, I’m pleased, Esme. Remove both the blouse and bra.”

She obeyed, letting the silky material and slightly scratchy lace slide down her arms and fall to the floor behind her.

His fingers curled behind her thighs. Then his hands slid up to her backside, where he palmed both cheeks, before moving them up to her waist taking her skirt with them.

“Turn around.” When she obediently complied, Finn released the button on her skirt and lowered the zipper with a distinctive wisp. “Now, step out.”

Easier said than done. Even with the zipper undone, the skirt was snug. It took some shimmying to lower it over her behind, something she felt was disproportionate to her frame. Not J Lo big and nothing near a Kim Kardashian bubble butt. It was full, round, and always had been, no matter how much she dieted, or how many spin or Pilates classes she attended.

*Please, let him be an ass man.*

Once past her hips, the skirt dropped to her ankles. When she tried to kick it aside, however, it got tangled. She bent forward to pull it free, but when she started to rise, he demanded gruffly, “Stay just like that.”

So, there she stood, her big booty in his face, while his fingers explored. They skimmed up the backs of her thighs and over both cheeks in a whisper-soft caress that made her squirm.



“Be still,” he ordered while continuing the sensual massage, his thumbs slipping between her thighs to stroke the narrow strip of fabric, which by now had to be soaked.

The hum must be a habit, she decided, when it rumbled again from his chest.

Balancing with her eyes closed, when he stroked over her clit, she jerked, and the air left her lungs in a whoosh. She was about to tell him she couldn't take any more without coming apart, but the words evaporated on her tongue when his fingers curled into the waistband of her thong.

“As alluring as lace is on your flawless skin, this, too, must go.”

Lungs frozen, body vibrating with need, and still bent forward, she willed herself not to come as he tugged the lace and satin over her hips. After so long, with nothing other than a self-induced orgasm, this was inhumane torture. It intensified a moment later when his lips, open and warm, touched her skin.

She sucked in a breath to keep from passing out, which was a good possibility with her practically standing on her head, and a sexy, commanding man licking her bottom.

“Sir, please.”

“You're trembling.”

“I'm getting dizzy.”

“Mmm,” he murmured, sucking on her skin a moment. “We can't have that.” He steadied her with his hands on her hips. “Step out of the panties then turn and face me.”

If he wasn't holding onto her, she would have toppled over, when one at a time, she lifted her feet. With the skirt and thong in a bunch on the floor, she caught them with her pointed toes and kicked them away. When her feet were clear of the tangle of clothing, she turned in a half circle back to him.

“Take a breath.”

She closed her eyes and did as she told him.

“Again.”

After blowing out, she inhaled once more and opened her eyes. She didn't meet his gaze, focusing on his chin instead, feeling it was safer as she tried to calm her sex-starved body.

“Better?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Having you faint would put a damper on our evening, don't you think?”

She nodded.

“Breathing is essential, then, lass.”

His voice, the accent, the way he kept constantly touching her, like now as his thumbs slowly swept over her hipbones, and the fact she was naked while he remained fully clothed, made her feel vulnerable, aroused, and submissive all at once.

Again, she nodded, afraid if she spoke, she'd make all sorts of rude demands, like take me...use me...fuck me.

“Look at me, Esme.”

Her gaze rose to meet green eyes framed with silky black lashes set in a beautiful masculine face. Straight nose, high cheekbones, full sensual, kissable lips. As he regarded her, his lips twitched slightly.

“I'm at an advantage. I knew who I was meeting tonight. You've barely looked at me since I came in. I trust, since you haven't run screaming from the room, you don't find me completely hideous.”

She suppressed an eye roll, although it wasn't easy.

“Hardly, sir. You must know how handsome you are.”

“I'm relieved you think so, but maybe you could prove it by looking me in the eye rather than down at your hands, over my shoulder, or at my chin?”

“I'll try, sir.”

“That's a good lass.”

With her eyes on his, she saw when they dipped to her breasts then moved lower, and she watched as he took the backs of his fingers and lightly ruffled the triangle of red-gold curls at the top of her thighs which she kept neatly trimmed.

“I like this bit of fluff. Spread for me.”

She hesitated ever so slightly, drawing his gaze, and earning her a warning arch of one dark brow.

“Disobedience will get you a rosy-red ass, my girl.”

Instantly, she parted her legs. “I’m sorry—sir.”

Her voice broke, the result of his fingers sliding between her thighs and over the smooth lips of her pussy. She had shaved close that morning, taking meticulous care to prepare for tonight.

“Soft in front, like silk in between, very nice. Bend to me.”

“Um...” If she did so, her breasts would dangle in his face.

“Now,” he drawled, his low intonation making it sound like a growl.

She complied immediately after that, and as predicted, her breasts hung before him like ripe fruit. As a penalty for her hesitancy, his lips surrounded one nipple, and he sucked it into his mouth. She felt the edge of his teeth and let out a quavering cry, part groan, part ragged breath, and toward the end, a high-pitched whimper. Her arousal wet her thighs as she arched her back, offering him more. Not that he needed an invitation. By her consent, she was his for the evening.

He released the taut peak with an audible pop. Not leaving her wanting for long, his open mouth traversed the valley between her breasts and latched onto the other tip with equal ferocity.

Before she knew it, her fingers entangled in his thick, wavy hair. Esme’s eyes flew open when he encircled her wrists and pulled her hands free. She stared into his amused gaze; shocked she’d had the daring to touch him without permission, especially their first time together.

“I expected you’d be out of practice, not that you’d have forgotten your manners entirely.”

“Oh, sir...please, forgive...my, uh, forwardness.”

He framed her face with his hands. “I tease, Esme. I’m not as strict a master as that. If you’re not allowed to touch, speak, or if I want your eyes lowered, I’ll tell you. Or I’ll bind, gag, and blindfold you to ensure that you don’t.”

A gasp escaped as the fire of her arousal flared hotter.

Keiran smiled and brushed a tender kiss on her lips. “While we’re getting to know one another, I like your spontaneous reactions. I want to see the desire in your eyes, hear the sounds from your lovely mouth, and to feel your hands on me. And Esme, I’d never punish before explaining my rules. Is that clear?”

She nodded, forcing out a ragged, “Yes, sir,” when both his brows rose once again.

“How long has it been since you’ve had a spanking?”

She shouldn’t have been surprised by his directness, most dominants were, but he had the uncanny ability to home in on the problem after talking to her twice, tonight included.

“Here’s a perfect time to give you a rule. Truthful answers and honest emotion—I’ll accept nothing less. How long, Esme?”

“Four years,” she replied promptly, but the rest wasn’t as easy. “I tried the public clubs, but they didn’t... It wasn’t...” Talking about her need to anyone, let alone while naked to a veritable stranger was too damn hard. Embarrassed, she dropped her gaze.

“You didn’t find what you needed,” he supplied with an experienced dominant’s insight.

“No.” The single word was barely a whisper, but it echoed in the stark room.

“And how long since you’ve cried, Esme? Not crocodile tears, but really let loose and had a good, hard cry to release the emotions you’re holding deep inside?”

“Forever, it seems.”

“Your husband wasn’t able to give you that?”

“No,” she whispered. “It’s been since my parents died. After Andrew, I was numb.”

“Darlin’,” he whispered in a tone that conveyed a deep understanding.

Before she could blink or think, she was facedown over his hard thigh. He hauled her in close to his body. One hand curved around the back of her neck, keeping her upper body down, while his free leg settled over both of hers. Held securely, she didn’t teeter and doubted if she could buck or kick, and she didn’t need to reach for the floor to steady herself. Instead, she wrapped her hands around his leg, and curled her fingers into supple leather, and hung on for what she knew was coming next.

His open hand came down hard on her bare bottom.

“My rules are few, lovely Esme, but nonnegotiable. Complete obedience while we are in the club. I dislike hesitancy so you can plan on a bottom warming if you delay. You will come often, but only when I say. Punishments will be appropriate for misbehavior and never more than you can bear. And I will not limit them to your naughty behind. We’ll use the club safewords, red and yellow, which I expect you to use when needed, but are not to be taken lightly or abused.”

While he listed his rules, he steadily smacked the full curves of her bottom. These weren’t trifling, teasing swats, but crisp, heavy-handed spanks meant to prove to her who was in charge. It had been years since she’d felt anything like it. She’d forgotten how much she craved a dominant’s control, and how the pain of correction mixed with the intense pleasure of submission, and the euphoria that she knew would follow.

“Most of all, Esme, I insist on honesty and will give you the same. Anything less and we’ll have a problem. No stiff upper lips and suffering in silence; that’s for the Brits. We Irish live in the moment, and that’s what I’ll help you do. You’ve spent a lot of time trapped by the tragedy in your past, and

sure as certain, your husband, who, as you say loved you very much, wouldn't have wanted that. It's time to look forward and live all the moments of your future to the fullest."

He hadn't let up, and her bottom was on fire, but that wasn't what broke her.

Exhausted from trying to deny what she needed for so long, a strident cry erupted from her throat and echoed off the bare floor. It didn't deter him or slow him a fraction—what a disappointment if it had. Because finally the damn burst and the deluge of tears she'd held back for so long surged forth.

She lost count of how many he gave her. Not that she'd really kept track since he'd started. He covered every inch of both cheeks and the uppermost aspect of her thighs with his extra-large paddle-like hand. When he stopped, she lay as limp as a noodle over his thigh, breathing hard between her sobs. While the stinging tenderness in her backside captured most of her attention, she couldn't ignore the ache in her pussy, especially with him stroking the skin he'd just set on fire.

After several minutes of these soothing caresses, when her hitching sobs had nearly subsided, he lifted her, perched her tenderized butt on his lap, and enfolded her in his arms. Then he simply held her.

Even more than the spanking which had brought forth a Vesuvius-like eruption of tears, this tapped into what her submissive nature needed more than anything and had missed so desperately, strong arms surrounding her, an understanding shoulder to lean on, and intimacy—not the sexual kind.

This prompted another wave of tears.

"Hush now," Master Finn murmured, as he cupped her chin, his thumb sweeping over her wet cheeks once more. "Or did I stop too soon?"

"No, sir! My butt is on fire."

"That isn't what I meant, Esme, and you know it. How do you really feel?"

"Like a weight has been lifted from my chest. Thank you, Master Finn."

“You’re very welcome, lovely girl. I’ve been a dominant for a while and have learned the healing effects of a good cry. Some submissives can’t get there without a little help.”

She shifted, hissing when her hot flesh stuck to his leather pants. “I think your help was more than a little, sir.”

He gently rolled her body toward him, his large hand moving in slow and rhythmic strokes over her backside, thighs, and up her spine in long sweeps. With her head nestled beneath his chin, she let out a deep sigh of contentment. It was a moment she’d dream of having again for so long, and one of pure bliss.

Amused, he chuckled. “It has been a while for you because I went easy. I’d consider that not much more than a warmup.”

She sniffed, but not from tears this time. “Easy for you, maybe.”

“I’m not a sadist, but it’s a rare dominant who doesn’t enjoy smacking a sweet subbie ass, and yours is one of the sweetest ever. If it’s for play and we both take pleasure from it, even better. But when the intent is to bring about a response from a lass who’s learned to suppress her emotions and to lock away the pain from a trauma in her past, it’s a tool that serves a purpose. I see using it as part of my job as a dom, but not one that’s ever easy.”

Esme stiffened, afraid she’d offended him, and more than that, appalled she was so transparent.

He nudged up her chin and wiped the new round of tears from her cheeks.

“I think you’ve had enough for tonight. Let’s get you dressed and headed on home.”

“What? That’s it?”

“You were expecting I shackle you to the wall and beat you, perhaps?”

She glanced around the dungeon and the half dozen pieces of equipment they hadn’t used, not to mention the wall covered in implements. “Yes.”

“Sorry, darlin’. While I am that kind of dominant when the occasion calls for it, it doesn’t, tonight. And not our first time out of the gate. We’ll get to know each other first.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

His eyes snapped to hers, fire blazing in their mossy depths.

“There’s an Irish expression you should learn, and right quickly when dealing with me. Beware the anger of a patient man. If you see it, you know things are serious!”

She swallowed hard. “I apologize for getting snippy, but don’t you want to, um...” How did she put this tactfully? “I’m naked,” she blurted out.

“Since I’ve been holding you for almost two hours what with the spanking, the bouts of weeping, and the cuddling, I’m well aware.”

“No way!”

This time, when his eyes snapped to her, they gleamed with amusement. Still, he angled his head and stared at her, patiently waiting.

“No way, sir,” she amended. “How is it possible we’ve been up here so long?”

“Five years is a long time to bottle things up and go without cuddling.” When her face flooded with color, he grinned. “I can see I’m not wrong. Unfortunately, others have the room reserved after us. I’m surprised they’re not beating on the door.”

His arms tightened around her, then she found herself on her feet. He moved around the room as she watched in a daze, truly shocked about how this evening had turned out. Returning, he handed over her discarded clothes just as a knock sounded at the door.

“Hurry and dress.”

Not needing to, because he hadn’t so much as popped a button, he went to the door while Esme did as she was told. While listening to his deep voice intertwine with another, she



managed her bra and panties, thankful for the thong as she pulled it over her still-stinging ass cheeks. Her snug linen skirt wasn't nearly as pleasant. She was buttoning her blouse when he came back to her.

“There she is, a little flushed, a tad mussed”—he fingered combed her hair, tucking several wayward strands behind her ear—“but none the worse for wear. I'm not free again until Tuesday. Meet me in the lounge at seven and we'll further our acquaintance.”

Finn dipped his head as though he would kiss her but paused a short distance away. She blinked up at him dazedly.

“You're free on Tuesday, I assume?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent.” He bent the rest of the way and claimed her lips in a kiss that involved lots of tongue while his hands slid down to her backside, molding over her still-warm cheeks.

When he let her up for air, she blinked up at him and whispered dazedly, “I've never met a master who completely bypasses his libido for cuddles and kisses.”

He laughed. “I'm not immune. Or have you missed the erection digging into your belly?” Fortunately, he didn't make her answer that. “You didn't need sex tonight; you needed the good dom who knew when to push, when to stop, and had your best interest at heart. I pride myself on being my own man. I'm into the trappings of BDSM as anyone else in the lifestyle, but in handling a submissive, I'll do it my way, not by protocol. And while I've had my fair share of scenes and one-night stands with subs who have been looking for that, you, sweet Esme, are not that kind of submissive.”

“You barely know me. How can you know what kind of sub I am?”

“As I mentioned, I've been at this awhile and have developed good instincts. I've had the chance to observe you on two occasions and have read your file, which contained very little other than a limit list, although that filled in a few of

the blanks. You'll tell me the rest over drinks in the lounge on Tuesday."

Vaguely, she nodded. Other than snuggle time with Phinny, her evenings were always free.

His eyes glinted suddenly. "I can read faces fairly well, and yours is telling me you're stubborn. Didn't you say you haven't cried since college? Yet after meeting me twice, you poured out five years of suppressed grief with a few swats of my hand. Something else we'll explore as we move forward." His fingers flexed on her still-tingling and tender behind as he went on. "Already I've learned you like moderate pain—despite your protests over a few mild swats—as well as being physically controlled by a man, whether being subdued by his strength, which I did here tonight, or with restraints. You marked strict bondage with cuffs, rope, and leather binders as something you enjoy, and blindfolds, but not gags because you can't catch your breath. I will help you overcome that issue. Paddles, leather straps, and a good cropping were all in the 'yes, sir, please may I have another' column, but you ruled out intense implements such as a knotted cat, canes, and whips as hard limits. Which is a pity since I have an affinity for a well-crafted black snake, shot loaded, tightly braided, and perfectly balanced in my hand."

Esme shivered at the thought of a whip wielded by this powerful man.

His arms tightened around her. "You're trembling. Is it from a past experience? A scene gone bad, perhaps?" His eyes trailed down her body. "I saw no scars."

"No, sir, I've never... It's just too intense and scary."

"A little fear is good, Esme, the potential of a whip should be respected. But with the right master, who possesses both skill and finesse, who knows how to make the leather dance across your body, whether in a soft caress from the tips, or with the snake's fiery bite, you'll realize your reluctance was more the fear of the unknown. Once you get a taste, sweet lass, trust me, you'll crave it."

A skilled master—his words reverberated in her head. Finn had spanked her to tears, bringing about the cathartic release she desperately needed. At the same time, rousing her body to a quivering, aching ball of desire. She was powerless to resist his drugging kisses, melting in his arms as if she had no limits. Her mouth opened on a softly indrawn breath as a hunger to experience the sensations he spoke of consumed her.

Was she insane for considering it?

Heaven above, after what he'd done to her so far, things she wouldn't have thought possible a week ago, she believed he could do just about anything.

His hand rose to her cheek, his touch whisper soft. "Fear not, *a stór*. We'll work up to it."

She saw the unwavering determination in his eyes as he made his bold prediction, and her tongue slipped out to lick her suddenly dry lips.

"We enjoy many of the same things, which is why Master Eric arranged this little introductory session."

Nudging her chin up, he kissed her once more. To her regret, only a soft brushing of lips. Then he took her hand and pulled her along to the door.

"Unfortunately, we'll have to continue getting to know one another better next time. Tristan has the room after us and I don't doubt he'll try to eject us bodily if we don't give it up soon."

The couple waiting had made good use of their time. The tall dom had her pressed against the wall, hands clamped in one fist above her head, while he devoured her mouth.

Master Finn's, "It's all yours," only received a grunt in response while they carried on.

He led her down the rear steps and navigated the always-packed Friday night dungeon.

"You drove tonight, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir," she said, breathless from trying to keep up with his long legs and much longer stride.

“We’ll skip a nightcap, then.”

At the gothic doors leading into the lounge, he retrieved her shoes from the attendant. The no-shoes-for-sub rule in play areas seemed bizarre at first, but as she slipped on her work pumps, she didn’t mind so much now. Hours spent in club-appropriate four- and five-inch fuck-me shoes was its own brand of torture. At the short hall to the women’s locker room, he arched a brow in silent question, but she shook her head, pulling her keys from her jacket pocket.

Before she knew it, they were outside, the unusual coolness of the late summer evening welcome after the heat of the crowded club.

“I’ll walk you to your car. And before you argue, I’ll warn you, I may like to turn a naughty sub’s bottom rosy red, bind her in lewd and creative ways, and while I enjoy sticking slippery vibrating things into a variety of orifices, my *mathair* raised a gentleman. I stand when a lady enters the room, open doors and allow her to enter first, and when I’m out with a woman, I always see her safely to her door, even if it’s a car door, at the end of the night.”

This prompted a laugh. “That sounds counterintuitive, but I get it.”

“That’s because you’re warped like me, sweet Esme.”

“Considering we’re standing outside a kink club packed shoulder to shoulder with 500 other warped people, I have to ask, aren’t we all, sir?”

“Touché,” he said with a grin and offered his arm. “Lead on.”

At her car, he took her keys from her hand and opened her door, but before she slid in, he took her in his arms, plastered his front to hers, and kissed her thoroughly. His hands roved intimately, one cupping a breast, while the other palmed an ass cheek and pulled her hips against his. It was impossible to miss the proof of his desire pressed long and hard against her lower belly.

Despite him sending her away, she knew he wanted her.

The vivid image of him bending her over the hood of her car and fucking her hard right there in the parking lot popped into her head. A plea for him to take what he wanted was on the tip of her tongue, but before either happened, he ended the kiss and eased away.

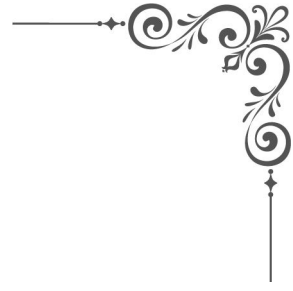
“Goodnight, lass.”

He waited while she buckled up, taking a few fumbling tries with trembling fingers. Before he closed the door, he leaned in. “Next time, no black leather. Something clingy in pink,” he suggested. “Lace would be a nice touch. But no panties in the club, lass. Master’s orders.”

When she stared back at him and nodded dazedly at his orders, he grinned.

“Drive safe,” were his last words before he shut the door.

Esme navigated the deserted streets of West Hollywood then turned north toward home, the soft glow of streetlights casting long shadows across her path. While she drove, she puzzled over his unusual no-sex-at-a-sex-club approach. She replayed the evening in her head; the memory causing a smile to curve her lips. Feeling a mix of confusion, excitement, and hope, she shook her head and tried to tamp down the last one. It was too early to think of anything beyond their next session. But oh, how she wished for the superpower to make time move faster and make it Tuesday already.



# Chapter 11

EVEN THOUGH SHE'D SPENT most of the weekend napping a lot, she didn't feel the least bit rested. She placed the blame solely at Master Finn's feet for leaving her well spanked, thoroughly kissed, but humming with a burning, unfulfilled need. She'd gone home, dumped dry food in Phin's bowl then went to the garage and dug through several storage boxes to find her vibrator. Batteries were the next search since the little pink bullet had sat mostly unused ever since her disappointing forays to the public clubs a few years back. After that, she'd sublimated her need for sex with work, something which had been surprisingly easy.

Evidently, with some women, the libido was like a light switch. Once turned off, it stayed off until something jolted it back on.

In Esme's case, the jolt was a tall, dark-haired dom with compelling green eyes and a sexy Irish accent. After her long stretch of dormancy, it was like blasting into sexual overdrive. And following her session Friday night, breaking her dry spell with Finn was all she could think of. She'd pretty much worn out her little pocket-buddy vibe by the time Monday morning rolled around.

While seated at her desk, she couldn't detect any lingering effects from the spanking. No tenderness or heat, not even the tiniest ache, although other adjacent parts didn't fare so well. That it resulted from self-induced pleasure was disappointing. Good thing her batteries were nearly dead, and she had two days for her clit to recover until she saw him again.

Pushing all thoughts of sex, the club, and Master Finn to the back of her mind, she booted up her computer. When she slid out her keyboard, the fluorescent-green sticky note in the center made her frown.

*Morales brief past due. Get it done.*

"Idiot," Esme uttered under her breath.

She'd laid the file on her boss' desk along with three others before he'd come into the office and turned it upside down Friday afternoon. But what did she expect when, at least once a week, he couldn't find the glasses perched on top of his head or the cell phone in his hand? He reminded her of the absent-minded professor.

Esme let out a sigh, tired, even though the day had barely started. It shouldn't be this way. She'd had such high hopes for this job.

Shortly after moving to LA, she'd received a job offer from Shoemaker, Reinhart, and Associates. She'd been thrilled to find something so quickly, especially working for an experienced litigator with over thirty years in private practice. Rather than an overbearing, arrogant stereotype, Robert Shoemaker, the senior partner, was a friendly, fatherly type who loved to teach. But shortly after she joined the firm, he retired because of health issues.

This left her reporting to Gerald Reinhart.

In his mid-forties, Gerald was still a fit, good-looking man. He knew it, too, and used it to his advantage with the ladies, which had led him down the path to divorce, twice. His ex-wives, according to him, had taken him to the cleaners. Esme felt this was appropriate payback for a cheating spouse, but she kept her opinion to herself.

Gerald didn't bother her, and in the time she'd worked at the firm, she'd never heard of any monkey business going on with any of the staff. He was all business at the office.

But things had changed in recent months. Gerald had gone from a rational, business-minded, motivated boss to a high-strung, often ill-tempered, unpredictable mess. And his behavior had become increasingly more erratic in the past few weeks. He was jumpy, arriving later and later each day, if he came in at all. When he deigned to make an appearance, he'd hibernate in his office, insisting no one disturb him for hours on end. A few times, after hiding out half the day, he'd rushed out in an even more agitated state, not speaking a word to anyone.



Whatever was going on with him was taking a physical toll. He wasn't getting any younger, and his face appeared flushed every time she saw him lately, as though his blood pressure was up. She'd asked about it, but he'd attributed it to a family tree full of ruddy-faced German ancestors. But the gray at his temples was showing, past due for an appointment at his salon which he never missed, and no matter how finely tailored, his suits couldn't conceal his growing paunch which meant he'd curtailed his gym visits, another thing he rarely missed until lately.

In the mornings, she'd find a pile of work dumped on her desk. According to the state of California, she had to be supervised by a licensed attorney with a fancy diploma hanging on the wall. This left Bradley, a junior associate who had passed the bar only six months earlier, to sign off on all her work.

As an ABA certified paralegal for eight years, with her experience in litigation, domestic relations, and tort law, she knew a heck of a lot more than him. It didn't matter she did the bulk of the research, pored through case law in the same software program attorneys used, interviewed clients, collected and organized evidence, prepared the documents for trial, and coordinated everything on a case for a fraction of the pay. In two seconds, he scrawled his JD on the dotted line and got all the credit.

Still, it was interesting work, and she enjoyed it. Until Mr. Reinhart went off the rails a few months back. And before he started issuing deadlines for work already completed.

But sitting around grumbling wouldn't get the work done or pay her bills. The latter didn't amount to much. She had paid off her car, and she didn't have a house payment. Andrew's two-million-dollar life insurance had left her enough to pay cash for it, even in LA County, and she still had a nest egg left over. It wouldn't last forever if she didn't manage it carefully, especially with the cost of living through the roof in Southern California and, if Master Eric let her stay, the hefty club membership fees.

Monday turned out to be a productive day. She worried Tuesday would blow up at the last minute like Friday when Mr. Reinhart made a late appearance. He ran in a little after three o'clock, red faced and perspiring, and without a word to anyone, went straight to his office and slammed the door. Not a minute later, Bradley showed up in her doorway with a worried look on his face. Before they could commiserate over the shitstorm brewing, Gerald slammed back out and strode through the front door.

"This is getting old fast," Brad grumbled.

"I know. Any idea what's up with him?"

"Me? You've been here longer. I was hoping you did."

She shook her head. "All I can say is it gets worse by the week, and please don't take this the wrong way—" She stopped short, sure what she was going to say would absolutely be taken the wrong way.

"The clients are getting worse, too," he finished for her. "That's what you were going to say, right? I've noticed that, too."

"I've never seen so many drug cases, and pro bono work. I'm surprised he can make payroll. What about you?"

"The same." Brad had a wife, a baby on the way, and a brand-new mortgage on a pretty expensive townhouse which he'd purchased after starting with the firm, and he looked scared to death. "Between you and me, Esme, should I update my resume?"

"I can't answer that for you except to say I plan to."

Hurricane Gerald passing through quickly allowed Esme to leave at four o'clock as planned with plenty of time to get ready for the evening. She arrived at the club thirty minutes early and found a quiet table. The only reason this was possible was because they had live entertainment and most of the early crowd had congregated around the small stage and the alternative rock band playing.

From her vantage point, she had a good view of everything happening around her. She'd skipped this experience before

now and found that the music was excellent, the atmosphere upbeat, the dancing seductive, and like the rest of the club, everything lush and top quality.

Except for being more upscale, there wasn't much difference in the lounge than any other club she'd been in. Her gaze strayed to the next booth and over the brunette who sat there alone. Her eyes were closed, and she had both arms stretched over her head. Esme glanced upward, noting the cuffs around her wrists then followed the chain connecting them to the high ceiling above. Okay, maybe the differences were a little more striking.

She looked around, thinking it odd someone had left her restrained and unattended. She didn't appear in distress. In fact, looking at her more closely, she noticed the pink in her cheeks, that her crimson tinted lips were parted, and her chest rose and fell faster than it should have. The reason became apparent when a hand with fingers splayed wide appeared from below and slid up her belly. It was masculine, the thick wrist and muscled forearm making it obvious. But Esme couldn't see the man attached to it.

Fascinated, she couldn't look away, not when it veered off its straight path and cupped the underside of her breast. With his thumb and forefinger working in concert, he plucked, rolled then pinched the already hard nipple. The woman leaned into his touch and her head fell forward. The loud music couldn't drown out the groan of abject pleasure or the name she cried, "Andrew!"

Esme stiffened, shock knifing through her when a head covered in closely cropped sandy-blond hair appeared from under the table. Her focus shifted back to the hand, and the gold band on the third finger, and up to his tattooed biceps. It couldn't be her Andrew; he'd died in her arms.

When the man turned his head to take his sub's other nipple into his mouth, Esme saw his profile. Sharper more angular features and a thick scruff of beard broke the shock that gripped her. Glancing back at the tattoo on his arm, she realized it was all wrong, too. Not the eagle, globe, and anchor she'd traced with her fingers so often, but a falcon.

Suddenly, being here felt wrong. What was she doing? Hadn't she decided the club, and the charmingly seductive Master Finn was more than she was ready for?

As if her thoughts had the power to make him materialize, he slid into the empty side of the booth. His gaze swept over her, and his approving grin sent her pulse racing. She'd met his condition of clingy with the simple sheath. It was also sexy, and feminine, which she could tell pleased him. Made of a spandex blend with a feminine lace overlay, it had a deep center cutout which showed the entire inner curves of her breasts. It was short, although with the table in the way, he couldn't see the amount of leg it exposed. Without panties, she had to sit carefully or risk providing a floor show that rivaled the band.

"Pale pink looks lovely on you, lass. Much better than done-to-death black leather." His smile faded when he got a good look at her face. "What's wrong?"

"I can't stay."

He looked at her closely then around the bar. "What spooked you?"

His search paused on the couple at the next table, now much further along. The dom sat on the bench seat with her on top of him, the chains still affixed to her cuffs clanked rhythmically over her head as she rode him.

Keiran turned back. "That's tame compared to what you've seen inside."

"I... It's not—" She stopped to collect herself before she started babbling. "I would have sent word, but I had no way of contacting you." She paused again, swallowing hard before she blurted out, "I don't want this."

He didn't react, not visibly, other than to tilt his head to the side a bit as he considered her. "This, as in drinks before playing?" he asked at length. "Talking and getting to know a little about the man you'll be playing with? Or this, meaning me? Perhaps you can be more specific."

Great, now she'd ticked him off.

“I never intended to... I don't want—” She shook her head and repeated, “I can't stay.”

“Take a breath, relax, and tell me what's going through your head, Esme.”

She searched for something other than the truth that he stirred more in her than she was prepared for, and it scared the crap out of her. She latched onto an undeniable difference.

“You like whips. That's too extreme for me, and we, um... don't have much in common. So...I thought, well...it's probably best...if we end things now...before they get started.”

Though she hemmed and hawed terribly, she finally spat out her lame justification, one riddled with bald-faced lies, because after the other night, each of her fantasies had starred a bare-chested, muscular, utterly gorgeous, and enthralling Keiran Finnegan with of all things, a braided, shot-loaded black snake in his hands.

Daring to look up and see how he took it, she flushed furiously beneath the intensity of his narrow-eyed, wholly skeptical stare. Damn insightful dom could see right through her. She needed to go before he started digging, and her resistance crumbled. But as she slid sideways on the padded booth seat, a large, black boot blocked her way.

“If any of that is true, lass, which I strongly doubt, why are you here, dressed to please, in a clingy pink dress exactly as I requested?”

Though he stated his observations calmly, the determined glint in his eyes told her he was ready to present his case, disputing her claims, like a defense attorney during cross examination.

“The lace is lovely, another suggestion of mine.” When he continued, it was in the low, seductive burr she found irresistible. “If I were a betting man, I'd put down serious money that when you wiggled into that fuck-me dress, you weren't thinking I was too extreme or that we had little in common. I'm also willing to bet you left off your panties—as I

ordered, like an obedient submissive, eager to please her dom.” He leaned forward, glimmering green eyes locked on hers, and asked, “Were you a good girl for me, Esme? Shall I slip my hand beneath the hem and see if I’m right?”

Torn between fear that he would and dread that he wouldn’t, she said nothing, and averted her gaze, but it collided with the couple at the next booth who were wrapped around each other, breathing hard, having reached the big finish. She couldn’t look at them or shake the seductive cry of her husband’s name echoing through her head. Her eyes darted back to Master Finn’s face.

“If you changed your mind, you could have called and left your regrets with someone on staff, instead of coming out having followed my orders to the letter.”

“That would have been incredibly rude.”

“Perhaps, but if I’m truly not the man for you, the risk of me punishing your rudeness by taking you over my knee and spanking your lovely ass until you’re dripping wet for me again is nil.”

She sucked in a breath. Except to spank, he’d barely touched her Friday night, but he’d known the effect he’d had on her all the same.

“The choice is always up to you, Esme.” Pausing, he searched her face, the intensity of his gaze making her squirm. Unable to hold it, her chin dipped down, and she stared at her hands, something safer to her peace of mind. “I might not like your choice, or believe it, but I’ll respect it. And it seems you leave me no choice, lass, other than to bow out gracefully.”

“Thank you, sir,” she whispered.

“But that doesn’t eliminate your problem or Master Eric’s ultimatum. Since you’re here, looking beautiful, those efforts should be rewarded, not wasted. Let’s find you another dom who might suit you better.”

No. She didn’t want that at all.

“That’s really not necessary,” she replied in a rush. “I’ve taken enough of your time. I can find someone on my own.”

“After three unsuccessful months, we both know that’s not true.” He turned and scanned the room. “When reviewing your file, I noticed suspension marked as something you’d be interested in trying. I see someone who excels at that.” He held up his hand.

“Oh, but...I...” Her protest died when she saw the man he flagged down was Master Tristan, the Brad Pitt look-alike, from Eric’s list. He’d rejected her once already, so it was a safe bet he’d do so again. She let out a relieved sigh.

She could sense Master Finn watching her, and feel the irritation coming off him in waves, but kept her gaze averted.

Good. With him annoyed, and most likely angry, after the other master turned her down flat, she could go home.

“Finn,” the other dom said in greeting. “You’re becoming a regular. About damn time.”

Hearing her unintended nickname for him was actually a thing, she decided after tonight, she’d have to rename her cat.

“Esme has decided my style is too extreme for her tastes.”

Her eyes flew up, and she vehemently shook her head. “Oh no! I didn’t mean to imply that at all.”

“Hush, subbie,” he ordered. “I’m negotiating on your behalf.”

“Who gave you permission to do that?”

“I did.” This came from Master Eric who stood at the end of their table, Val tucked under his arm and close to his side. “Perhaps I wasn’t clear. When I said I’d arrange a dom for you, I didn’t mean for a one-and-done scene. You’re on extended probation; under Master Keiran’s direct supervision. Your probation officer, shall we say?”

“How long is this extended period for?” she snapped.

“Watch your tone, lass,” Master Finn advised. “Your probation lasts until your dom decides, which according to the master dom is still me.”

She couldn't keep the scowl from her face—she was being manipulated and didn't like it one bit.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Val shaking her head in warning, but too late. Finn didn't let much get past him.

“While running around unsupervised, it appears you've forgotten your manners. Snapping and glaring at dominants, for example. I'll spare you the whip and the more extreme implements, since that isn't what you want,” he deliberately used her words against her, “but being with me won't exempt you from punishments. As for scenes, I'll have to arrange those with doms who might better suit your tastes. Master Tristan.” He held her eyes but addressed the tall dom still waiting and taking in their little drama. “Esme has expressed a desire for suspension; she also likes strict bondage, moderate pain, but no whips, canes, or gags. You'll take care of my girl and show her a good time, yes?”

“Absolutely.” He took hold of her wrist and pulled her to her feet, a huge grin on his handsome face. “This should be fun, Red. Let's go.”

He had her halfway to the dungeon before she found her voice. “Wait, I thought you didn't want to be used as a pathway to membership.”

“You never mentioned your interests. Shibari is my passion, and I'm a rigger always in search of a sub I can tie up in knots.”

“No, please, I don't want to.”

“What was that?” he asked, not stopping. “The band is loud tonight.”

“Red,” she shouted. He immediately came to a halt, and she said more softly, “I'm sorry, sir, but I don't want to play.”

“Is it, you don't want to play, Esme? Or you're afraid to?”

“Excellent question, my friend.” Keiran's burr sounded close to her ear. She turned to him, like the first night with Carlos, seeking his strength and protection, instinctively knowing despite their disagreement he'd give it



unconditionally. When he immediately wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, she melted against him.

“I’ll take it from here, Tris. Thanks.”

“Anytime,” was his amused reply, but he didn’t take the hint and leave, apparently enjoying the show she was putting on more than the one on the stage.

Whatever. Things had turned out too easily in Finn’s favor. Her head fell back, and she voiced her suspicion. “You set me up.”

“No, lass, you’re easy to read.”

“But how could you know I’d refuse him?”

“I didn’t, but when you started panicking, you fell back on old habits—refusing all offers, even mine. Tristan is a friend, so is Eric, and both are very astute. They simply followed my lead.”

“And I played right into your hand,” she said stiffly, trying to pull away, but the arm at her waist held her securely.

“Other than me, you haven’t scened with anyone. It was safe to assume you wouldn’t go from shy observer to naked suspension in the blink of an eye. This proves you’re a long way from being off probation.”

“Because I wouldn’t let a stranger string me up by my feet?”

“No, because you think after one spanking and a good cry, you’re unstuck. I’m good, *a stór*, but I’m not a magician.”

Not missing his grin, she snorted at his arrogance and then, because his perceptive gaze saw too much for her comfort, looked out at the still very crowded dance floor.

“Another reason I was sure you wouldn’t go with Tris...” He caught her chin in his hand, giving her no choice but to face him. “You want me. You’re denying it and think you can brush me aside like the others, but despite all the conflicting emotions swirling around in your brain, when you felt threatened, you turned to me, which means you trust me on some level.”

Tristan leaned in. “Saint Keiran is patient and wise, little one. Trust him to guide you through whatever is holding you back. But if you want to experience the thrill of being strung up by your feet by a stranger, I’m your dom.”

Master Finn narrowed his eyes at the other dom who was enjoying this a bit too much, and said dismissively, “I’ll let you know if it comes to that, but don’t turn blue holding your breath.”

Without saying more, Master Tristan left, though he did so chuckling.

Eric, who had stuck around to see it all play out, looked excessively pleased with himself. Val stood beside him, her expression full of sympathy as she offered an encouraging smile.

“What happened to it being my choice?” she muttered. “This hardly seems fair.”

“Who said a submissive’s lot was fair?” Eric looked down at Val and asked, “What about you, baby? Do you get fair from your dom?”

“Rarely, but I always get what I need, like it or not.”

A grin lit his face. “A perfect answer,” he murmured while kissing the glossy hair on top of her head. “Keiran, since it appears you’ve got this situation well under control, we’re off to the dungeon to play.”

“Have a good night,” Master Finn said.

Eric chuckled. “We’re at Decadence and I have a beautiful submissive on my arm. That is a given, my friend.”

When his friends walked away, he extended his arm to their table. “You, sweet lass, look like you could use a drink.” Catching her hand, he led the way and took a seat. When she didn’t immediately follow, he patted the space next to him.

She eyed it skeptically, unsure how all of this had backfired but certain this master was too smart for her own good. She opted for the safe seat across from him.

He grinned, enjoying their exchange a helluva lot more than she was.

She couldn't deny what he'd said. She wanted him and felt a rush of desire simply from looking at him. And why did he have to smell so damn good? It made it hard to think.

She tried not to inhale, but ol' Hawkeye Finnegan was sure to notice.

"Relax and breathe, Esme," he said on cue. "And don't look so sad. We already know we're good together, or did you forget Friday night?"

"I'm not interested in a relationship," she blurted out. "I've been there before, and we both know how that ended."

"First, you didn't breathe. Second, a spanking, a kiss, and drinks hardly comprise a relationship. And third, I'm not collaring you or putting a ring on your finger. We're simply talking."

"What if I don't want to scene with anyone else?"

"Then you'll scene with me."

"Which brings us back to square one," she muttered.

Leaning forward, his forearms on the table, eyes narrowing on her, he asked, "Do you know why Tristan called me a saint?"

"I haven't the foggiest," she replied tersely, really pushing it.

"Because I'm known for my patience, but it has limits. And you, little lass, are bumping up against them hard, right now." He leaned back and patted the padded seat beside him. "Come sit beside me."

"Is that an order, sir?"

"If it has to be to get your ass over here, yes."

She didn't like the deepening of his tone and figured she'd better heed the warning. Grudgingly, she slid out of her side of the booth and onto his. But she hugged the edge, keeping as much space between them as possible.

Exhaling slowly, he slipped his arm around her waist and hauled her against him so she pressed against his side from knee to hip to shoulder. “That’s better,” he murmured. “Now, we’re going to sit here and get to know one another better, have a few drinks, perhaps dance—”

“I don’t dance.”

He covered the hand closest to his and interlaced their fingers. “Open communication between a dom and sub is crucial, Esme. Did you have that before?”

“Yes.”

“I expect no less.” Raising her hand to his mouth, he surprised her with not only his lips on her knuckles but the teasing, warm wetness of his tongue. “Now, tell me again you don’t dance.”

She pressed her lips together in frustration then muttered, “How do you know so much? That wasn’t in my file.”

“I’ve watched you move, darlin’. You have a dancer’s elegance and grace.” He nibbled his way across the back of her hand then flipped it over and brushed his mouth over the pulse point on the inner aspect of her wrist. “Try again. This time with the truth.”

“I took ballet as a child until I was fourteen. I had dreams of becoming a professional dancer.”

“Why did you stop?”

“It’s hard on the body. I had torn ligaments in the same knee twice in one year, and then there was the obvious.”

Still teasing her skin with kisses, he looked up in question.

“Puberty.”

His gaze slid downward, boldly appraising her. “You don’t have the typical ballerina body, but that pleases me. I like softness against me rather than hard edges and sharp points.”

He was in luck; soft is what he’d get with her. Getting the impression, he would frown on negative self-talk, she didn’t say that, however.

“Did I mention you look lovely tonight? You did clingy well; that dress hugs your curves to perfection, and all those pretty blushes have brought a glow to your complexion.” He paused and inhaled. “Instead of flowers, which make me sneeze, your scent reminds me of the beach. And I’ll refrain from commenting on all the wicked ideas those shoes have given me.”

The five-inch stilettos she’d chosen to wear were of the fuck-me variety; she couldn’t argue the point, so she deliberately ignored his shoe reference.

“It’s my lotion,” she muttered, shaken by his compliments and the irresistible pull he had on her. She tugged at their joined hands. He didn’t let go but lowered them to the table where he lightly stroked the back with his thumb.

“Are you ready to tell me what sent you into a panic earlier?”

“The couple at the next booth.”

“You’ve been in the dungeon many times and seen a lot more than that. Why did it bother you tonight?”

“She called him Andrew, my husband’s name. It...”

“Triggered something inside you. I’m guessing guilt.”

It took an effort to look up at him. She found what she expected; him watching her closely. “You’re very perceptive.”

“I haven’t been through it, but I imagine it’s normal for the surviving partner to feel that way when they move on.”

“That’s what I’m told, but knowing it’s normal doesn’t make it easier. I’m sorry I freaked out on you. I’m not usually so rude.”

“Ordinarily, you’d have ended up bare-assed over my knee, but you’re working through something. You’ll get there, Esme, but I can’t promise you’ll get the same restraint from me the next time.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered as her backside blossomed with a tingling heat, immediately recalling both the pleasure and the pain to be had while facedown over Master Finn’s lap.

Conversation between them halted as the band started another set with a cover of the Goo Goo Dolls' "Use Me." They were good, but the lyrics hit too close to home—so many songs seemed to be for her—and she nervously tried to talk over them.

"It's funny you mentioned the beach. I didn't have club wear that wasn't leather. I ended up blowing my clothes budget on shoes and something clingy. It left me skimping on a fragrance. It's actually called Beach, from Bath & Body Works."

"On you, it's priceless." He took her hand and brought it to his lips again, the smile playing around his lips telling her he knew what she was doing—misdirection—and badly. "It puts me in the mood for a piña colada. Do you like them?"

"Yes, especially frozen with chunks of fresh pineapple."

"Let's see if our surly bartender can blend us up one, shall we?"

"You drink frozen fruity drinks, sir?" Her gaze swept over him from head to toe, not seeing an ounce of excess fat. Sugar couldn't be the main staple of his diet, not to keep as fit as he was. "You don't seem the type."

"I drink whatever suits me, which is usually Teeling's Irish Whiskey, but you've got my tongue greedy for a taste of coconut."

The blush he'd mentioned spread in a wave of heat from her cheeks down to her throat. When his eyes dipped to the low neckline of her dress, she guessed to the upper swells of her breasts as well.

Equally charming and seductive, Keiran Finnegan was dangerous to her peace of mind and so dreamy it made her ache. His dark wavy hair needed a trim, but she liked the way it curled around his ears and on his collar. Remembering its silky-soft texture, she had to fight the urge to run her fingers through the shiny strands.

Aside from his gorgeous face, his body was divine. He'd seen her in the altogether, but she'd yet to have a peek. She

didn't know if his chest had a smattering of hair, a thick pelt, or was satiny smooth. And she hadn't seen him from behind, but she imagined the view of him in his snug black pants was as tantalizing from the back as the front. The same went for his upper body, which rippled and bunched beneath his tight T-shirt when he moved, though it just wasn't the same as seeing him bare. But maybe it was for the best, since she was already having a hard time concentrating with him fully dressed.

A waitress appeared as though summoned, though she hadn't seen him give any signal.

"Did you want something from the bar, Master K?"

"One piña colada, Arlene, with two straws. And a shot of Teeling, no ice."

"Yes, sir."

When she hurried away, Esme studied the utterly charming dom, who in her mind would always be Master Finn. "I thought you wanted to taste coconut."

Raising her hand to his lips again, he inhaled then kissed her fingers just below her knuckles, his tongue slipping out to lick ever so lightly. "Mmm...just the taste I was craving."

Distracted with his persistent touching and uncomfortable with the topic, she tried to steer him onto a different path.

"Keiran is an unusual name."

"Not where I'm from, although not as common as Sean or Michael."

"I could tell from your accent you're not from LA."

"It's the curse of being a southern gentleman, your drawl always gives you away."

"You're joking, aren't you, sir?"

"Nope, I was born in Columbus, Georgia." He chuckled, seeing her frown. "But I tease you, lass. I'm a hybrid with dual citizenship. My mother is a southern gal, but she fell in love with an Army Ranger one summer and along I came nine

months later. She moved to Belfast while I was an infant, which is where I grew up.”

“But I thought one of your parents would have to be Irish to have citizenship in both countries.”

“This is true. I meant the Sciathán Fiannóglach an Airm, which literally translated is the Army Ranger Wing. It’s Ireland’s version of Special Forces. As a young officer, my father was one of the first to train with the U.S. Army Rangers at Ft. Benning, Georgia. He met a girl, fell in love, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

She had to speak up to be heard over the band as they started another set. “What a romantic story.”

“Aye, except to hear them tell the tale, it’s steamy.” He forced a smile, but it looked more like an uncomfortable grimace. “They add details a son doesn’t want to hear about his parents.”

Esme actually laughed, captivated by him and this easy give-and-take. “I bet.”

“With family here and there, I’ve been back and forth all my life. I attended USC then followed in my father’s footsteps and served my country. I was in the ARW for most of my ten-year stint. When I got out, I took a job in security in San Antonio, and when the opportunity arose, returned to Southern California. I now call LA my home.”

“And your parents?”

“Still here and there, though mostly there. I try to get home at least once a year.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Ireland. I hear it’s lovely.”

“It is, but perfect weather year-round, no snow, and the Pacific Ocean are nothing to sneeze at.”

“True. I bet you can’t swim in your ocean, either.”

“A swim near the pier in Santa Monica is like sinking into a nice warm tub by comparison.”



She shuddered. “I dip my toes in during August, that’s it. Which means, if I ever get the chance to see your home country, I’ll remain a confirmed landlubber.”

“With your coloring, you’d fit in well there, and Esme sounds Irish. It’s beautiful.” In his low, rumbling burr, he made it sound beautiful. “We were distracted with other things the other night. Now we have time. You said your mother lost a bet over your name. How so?”

She almost groaned. He had to ask. It was a long story and one she never escaped.

His head tilted to the side as he studied her. “I understand when things are new with a dom, there is a testing period. I’m fairly laid-back, but this tendency to stall you have could get you in trouble. When I ask a question, I expect a response. How bad can your name be?”

“Bad...”

“Let me decide.”

“Esmerelda Spade.”

He stared at her for a moment. “You’re right. Esme is a helluva lot better.”

A short laugh escaped her. “Don’t hold back, sir. Tell me how you really feel.”

He grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, lass, but I have to ask. What on God’s green earth was your *mathair* thinkin’?”

“That’s just it—green. My mother said as soon as she saw my eyes it came to her.”

“Esmerelda means emerald in Spanish.” His puzzled gaze swept over her features. “Are you Latina?”

“No. Spade is German, and my mother’s grandparents, with a few greats thrown in, immigrated from somewhere in Northern Europe. Which makes me a mutt without a smidgeon of Hispanic heritage.”

“I see.”

She noticed his lip twitch. “She’s wacky, but loveable. Wait until you hear the rest.”

“There’s more?” he asked in mock horror.

“Yes, Esmerelda is my middle name.”

His hand flew to his chest. “Please, darlin’, say your first name isn’t Gertrude or Hortense.”

“Very funny, *señor*,” she drawled then let loose a little giggle. “But you’re close.”

The humor slowly faded from his face, replaced with sympathy. “I was kidding, lass.”

“I’m not. My dad was a nut, too. And a huge fan of detective mysteries. He thought nothing would do except to name his one and only daughter after his favorite detective in his favorite detective novel.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? I haven’t told you yet.”

“I can guess. It’s Sherlock, isn’t it?”

She blinked then burst into laughter. “That would be worse.”

“Miss Marple?”

“No.”

“Agatha Christie? No, that’s two names. How about Dana as in Scully?”

Falling forward until her forehead met his shoulder, she shook her head as she cracked up. Still, he kept guessing.

“I know...Nancy as in Drew!”

“Stop, sir, please, before I pee my pants.”

His face broke into a devastating grin. “I’m kinky. I freely admit it, but even I’m not into that.”

“What?” she shrieked, turning heads. Then, in a more regulated voice said, “No. Dear Lord, you’re as big of a goof as my parents. My dad named me Samantha. When I got old

enough, I chose to go by my middle name, because, well... You know.”

He stared at her, suddenly sober. “I don’t know. Samantha is a beautiful name, although Esme suits you better.”

“Thank you, and it’s why I use it. The trouble with Samantha is when it’s invariably shortened to Sam.” She looked at him wide-eyed, waiting for it to click. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of Sam Spade.”

He shrugged and shook his head.

“You’ve never read or seen *The Maltese Falcon*?”

“Nope. Sorry.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Well, that certainly makes the whole buildup and the story itself pointless. Huh.”

His hands curled around her shoulders, and he brought her in close, declaring in a low, nasally twang, “When you’re slapped, you’ll take it and like it.”

“You do know it!” she exclaimed.

When he smiled, her heart beat faster, but when he grinned, like now, warmth coiled in her belly and sent little tingles dancing in her girlie parts below.

“My ma wasn’t one for detective stories per se, but she adored Humphrey Bogart. It was impossible not to know him, or the unflinchingly determined private eye, Sam Spade, when I saw it a hundred times growing up.”

“You’re an awful tease, Master Finn. And, due respect, that has to be the worst Bogey impression I’ve ever heard.”

He shrugged, still grinning. “I’m not offended. But allow me to make my own observation. You, Samantha Esmerelda Spade, have got the sexiest laugh I’ve ever heard.” His arms slipped around her, both hands coming up to lie flat on her back, pressing them belly to belly, her breasts to his chest. “All kidding aside, I want you, Esme, and I mean to have you.” He bent and ran his lips along the curve of her neck. “I can’t wait to strip you bare and fuck you until you come screaming to the rafters. I want to see you in my ropes, tied in creative ways

that will leave you trembling and breathless for more. And trust me, Tristan isn't the only one who can rig a suspension. If not ropes, I'll use leather cuffs to bind you to a bed or on a cross, and when I have you helpless, posed with your delicious round ass aimed my way, I'll bring it slowly from creamy white to pink, to rosy red, and not only by my hand."

His mouth moved upward along her jaw to her mouth, where it hovered, his lips brushing hers with each delicious syllable when he continued.

"You'll take what I give you, love how I make you feel, and, I promise, you'll beg me for more. It's what dreams are made of"—she'd be damned if the man didn't throw in another Bogart quote—"and I can't wait to make yours come true."

A rush of fervent desire tightened her nipples. They ached where they rubbed against his chest, and wetness flooded the long-neglected place between her thighs. She gazed into his stunning eyes, unable to speak, barely able to think, except to remember her lie. She wanted this, and she wanted it with Finn.

"Too much?" he murmured, gliding his tongue along her lower lip. "If so, you'll get used to it. I believe in being direct."

He tilted his head ever so slightly and took her mouth in a kiss so smoldering hot and possessive, Esme could only define it as claiming.

"Are you ready to play, little lass?"

Over his shoulder, she could see the huge double doors that led into the heart of Decadence. It would be her first scene. She was bound to draw a crowd.

"Could we go upstairs instead?"

"No, baby. With the band here, more people showed than expected. All the rooms are reserved until midnight."

"I haven't played in public in a very long time."

Tenderly, one hand framed her face, his thumb brushing her cheek in a gentle sweep. “Has that been a problem for you before?”

“No, it’s just, I’ve developed a reputation for being distant, and, well...according to Master Eric, a gawker. Members complained. They will repay me in kind.”

“As beautiful as you are, people are bound to watch, but none would dare say a harsh word or they would be answerable to me. We’ll take it slow. Perhaps a scene at the chain station or on a bench.” He frowned, as if remembering something. “Benches fill up first, however.”

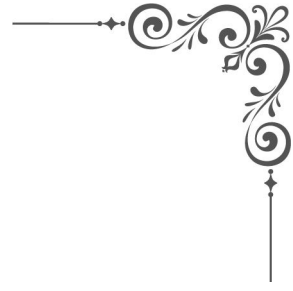
In chains, with hundreds of eyes watching her. She inhaled slowly.

“You can trust me to take care of you, Esme, but if you’re not there yet, we can wait for a room. It will be Saturday before I’m free again, however.”

Four days, she might die from sexual starvation, or worse, change her mind again.

“I don’t want to wait anymore, sir. And chains, well, as I witnessed earlier, seem pretty hot.”

“They can be, but with you and me, Esme, we’ll shoot for smoldering.”



## Chapter 12

WITH HIS HAND ON HER lower back, Keiran guided her to the double doors at the far end of the bar. When the pathway became narrow around the tables and by the teeming dance floor, he wrapped his fingers around her wrist and led the way. It kept them from being separated in the crowd and also let him gauge her reactions, like the way she trembled with excitement, and how her pulse fluttered rapidly. She was a mix of nervousness and anticipation, but not panic. He'd seen her on the verge of it earlier and almost lost her. If her fear and uncertainties returned, he wanted to be the first to know and help her keep the tendency she had to run in check.

She'd surrendered so much in their first session, but in the days following had time to rebuild her defenses. Three days was too long for them to be apart, but with work right now, he couldn't manage more often. Between filling in the gaps staffing their regular security contracts, the new celeb stalker case that had fallen into his lap, and providing personal protection for visiting dignitaries at the state capital, his next evening off was Saturday, four days from now.

He'd have to check in by phone and squeeze in another meeting with her outside the club, but he didn't know when and where.

Her mood shifts between trust and panic, sweet and sassy, pushy and compliant told him she was teetering between acceptance and withdrawing again. To him, it seemed more than a prolonged grief reaction, but other than good instincts from over a decade in the lifestyle, and a talent for reading submissives, he was no expert in psychology. Eric's recommendation of professional counseling was sound, and he hoped in time she'd trust him enough to open up about it.

Up the short flight of stairs, he steered her into the alcove outside the door.

"I'll need my bag, Deanna," he told the attendant, "and a bin for shoes."

“Yes, Master K,” the attendant replied.

“Isn’t there usually a chair?” Esme asked as the young woman stepped into the aisle of row upon row of cubbyholes.

Keiran glanced at her feet and understood why she might need one. Her heels were at least four inches, probably closer to five. He imagined her teetering on one foot while trying to take them off. A sprained ankle or her toppling over and sustaining a worse injury was unacceptable. How women walked around for hours balanced on their tiptoes and razor-thin heels he’d never know, although he was glad for it.

Any red-blooded man worthy of the testosterone coursing through his veins appreciated what a pair of high heels did for a woman’s ass, how it made their hips sway more when they walked, and gave them the need to hold on to their man’s arm, hand, or shoulder to steady themselves. Even better, how they looked up in the air or beside a woman’s ears while being fucked.

If that made him a sexist pig, so be it.

“Someone borrowed the chair while I had my back turned, I’m afraid,” Deanna explained. “I’m sorry, but I haven’t had time to go hunt another.”

“I supposed I could use the steps,” Esme muttered while looking in their direction.

“I don’t think so.” With his hands easily spanning her trim waist, he lifted her and planted her ass atop the counter. She responded with a surprised squeal and curled her fingers into his shoulders. “Besides,” he added. “This will be my pleasure.”

Everything about her he found delightful. Esme was spontaneous and not the least bit affected. He enjoyed the sexy little sounds she made in her throat, how her color heightened to a rosy blush, and the way she became flustered while around him. He’d have to keep her off guard so he could watch as she struggled to control her reactions, but try as she might, she couldn’t hide her body’s responses. Like how her breathing quickened at his touch, and the way it stuttered when



he lifted her leg by the ankle and rested her foot on his upraised thigh.

When the hem of her dress crept up, she pressed her legs together. Already off-balance, she had to choose between letting go of him and toppling over—which he'd never allow—or flashing her sweet spot. She opted to hang onto him.

Smart girl. Modesty was a pointless reaction when they were feet away from entering a BDSM playroom where he'd strip her, touch her, and do a host of other carnal things he had in mind.

Her bright green eyes rose to his, likely to see if he'd seen her unintentional upskirt moment. He couldn't contain the slow grin which confirmed it. The flash of pink and the hint of red-gold curls were burned into his retinas for eternity.

He didn't say a word, however, as he went to work on the ankle strap.

She watched his fingers move over the small buckle, and he heard her throaty gasp when they lightly brushed her skin. He didn't miss when her nipples hardened into peaks and silently thanked the dress designer who made wearing anything beneath it impossible.

He set the first shoe in the bin and reached for the other. Nudity was one of the many benefits of operating a private club, and at Decadence, bare skin was pervasive. He'd shamelessly enjoyed the flaunting of the female form that went on nightly, and like most everyone, had no problem revealing the sub he was with, or himself during a public scene.

With Esme, he was feeling unusually possessive. Their first scene hadn't ended how either of them had expected. This time, when he touched her, stripped her slowly, teased her body until it hummed with desire then drove inside her for the first time, he selfishly didn't want to share it with the world.

But after so long, she was ready, and it was up to him to make this return to public play good for her.

“My claim ticket.” Esme's call as the attendant moved off with the bin containing her shoes, pulled him back into the

moment.

“No need, lass. Deanna has an excellent memory.”

“With so many people here, how can she possibly remember whose belong to who?”

“I have this thing for shoes,” the blushing young woman said when she reappeared. “I never forget a color, or style, which makes this a perfect assignment for me. And I live for the designer one-offs to come in. Yours—ohmigod—stunning! There’s no way I could forget Louboutin or afford them.”

“Neither can I if they’re new,” Esme said with a smile. “I shouldn’t give my secret away, but I got those on consignment for one hundred dollars and according to the shop, they’d only been worn once.”

“That’s amazing. Where?”

Keiran didn’t know Louboutin from Adidas, but as the women discussed the prices of this “little gem of a store” and their generous return policy, he was seriously regretting the club’s rule of no shoes in the dungeon because he’d like to see her wearing nothing except the sexy-as-fuck high heels. Even better, feeling them digging into his backside while he took her.

Not having a shoe fetish, he was gaining a little insight into it.

With his erection pressing painfully against his zipper, he decided whoever coined the phrase, “fuck me shoes,” must have had a beautiful redhead with creamy skin wearing ridiculous-yet-sexy translucent-pink, opened-toed strappy sandals in mind.

He needed to get her off the counter, inside the dungeon, and the scene started before his rapidly rising libido changed him from the controlled, patient, experienced dom he strived to be into a grunting, chest-thumping brute who wanted nothing more than to throw her over his shoulder and carry her off for a night of endless, carnal rutting.

Going caveman was his first inclination whenever he was around Esmerelda Spade, but he didn’t want to scare her off.

Considering she'd been ready to flee only minutes before, if he swooped in and claimed her like a hungry predator, he could blow the slow buildup he'd put so much effort into. Except telling her everything he wanted to do to her tonight may have been pushing it. Instinct told him she needed finesse and a lot of romance before he commenced with the rutting.

“Deanna...” Keiran interrupted, intent on getting his sub inside fast. “You may grill Esme about her shoes another time.”

“Oh...” Her exuberance evaporated. “I’m so sorry. Master Eric warned me about gushing over the sub’s shoes. You won’t tell him, will you, sir?”

“I won’t, but you will.” Her expression went from dismay to despair, like he’d pulled out a gun and shot her puppy. “You’ll tell him the truth, should he ask,” he added.

Her eyes got bright, and she whispered, “Thank you, Master K. You’re the best.”

“That’s what you keep telling me,” he chuckled.

When he lifted her down, Esme also murmured her thanks. “You didn’t have to help me with my shoes, but without a chair, I likely would have fallen flat on my face. Thank you, sir.”

“As a dominant, it’s rare when I have to do anything. I get to do what I want, when I want, and with whom I choose 99.9 percent of the time.” Tipping her eyes up to his, he watched as heat suffused her lovely face. “Are you ready to play, Esme? Because that is something I definitely want to do.”

“Me, too, sir.”

Taking her hand once more, they entered the heart of Decadence. A half hour later, he pondered his dilemma. As he’d predicted, all the spanking benches in five different styles, which accounted for a third of the stations, were in use. Facing away from the continuous flow of spectators would have provided a degree of privacy in this very public venue. Unfortunately, with all of them taken and a long line of players waiting, it left mostly unacceptable options. The standing

pillory was open as were the kneeling stocks. Both would provide the strict bondage her file indicated she enjoyed but were too cold and impersonal for his taste.

The one vacant whipping post in the rear of the huge play space would have to wait awhile, at least until she felt comfortable enough with him to downgrade it from a hard limit.

This left an open chain station, but its location would leave her exposed from all sides and make their scene rather like a 360-degree theater in the round. He'd have to minimize the distractions of the crowd and had the perfect tool to do so in his bag.

He led her to the velvet rope, opened it, and let her precede him inside.

“Wait in the center,” he ordered. “I’ll need a moment to get ready.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered softly and moved the few feet to the middle of the ten-by-ten play space.

He set his bag on the table provided for implements, watching her from the corner of his eye the entire time. When her hands rose to her shoulders, and her thumbs slipped under the thin straps of her dress, he didn't miss when they trembled. This prompted him to leave his prep and calm his skittish submissive.

“No, Esme,” he chided in a low voice, capturing her hands in his. “I’ll tell you what I want when I want it. Your only job is to obey me. For now, you’re to stand here, eyes down, hands clasped in front of you, understand?”

She nodded, luminous eyes still up and locked on his. A burst of laughter behind him, entirely too raucous and intrusive for the scene area, drew her gaze to the side. If he found out who was so discourteous, they would revisit the rules in one of Thomas' classes. But his priority right now was Esme, and he didn't take his focus off her.

He squeezed her hands firmly, pleased when her eyes came back to him.

“Breathe,” he urged, putting his face next to hers so all she would see was him. “This is play, which is supposed to be fun, not torment.”

“I’m nervous, Master Finn.”

“I know you are, darlin’, but once we pass this first hurdle, you’ll be home free and ready to explore.”

“Do you think it will be that easy?”

“With me? It will be a piece of cake.” He winked at her and the tension around her mouth eased, becoming a hint of a smile. “Now, where are those eyes and hands supposed to be?”

Instantly, her long, gold-tipped black lashes swept down.

“There’s my good lass. Concentrate on me and my commands rather than everything else cluttering up your brain.”

She huffed a little laugh, but her lashes stayed fanned out beautifully against her creamy cheeks. “You have the knack for knowing a woman’s quirks, don’t you, sir?”

“A submissive woman, yes. All women, like the three in my family, not even close.”

He stroked a finger along her jaw then changed direction and glided his thumb over her full lower lip. He couldn’t resist leaning in and taking it between his teeth for a little nip, soothing it with his tongue then plunging inside for a taste as he kissed her.

She was a little wobbly and breathing hard when he ended it. He waited a moment, steadying her at the hips, until she inhaled deeply and no longer trembled.

“I’ll be back in a minute. When I say that I’m not blowing smoke, I mean under sixty seconds. Don’t move.”

“Yes, sir.”

He organized his bag with a purpose. To quickly get in, locate what he needed without digging and searching, and be back to his sub’s side as soon as possible. He gathered four cuffs, tucked as always into designated pockets, a soft suede

flogger secured in place by a Velcro strap, and tucked a few incidentals from the small compartments along the sides into his jeans pocket before returning to her in well under the minute he needed.

Standing behind her, with his lips near her ear, he whispered, “Keep those eyes closed,” then tied the black satin blindfold in place. “This will help you focus only on me.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He moved in front of her next. “Now your wrists, lass.”

Without hesitation, she held them out to him palms up, proving her late husband had trained her well. Keiran used rope or leather cuffs, never metal. They were more dramatic but too easily bruised delicate skin. The only marks or pain given in a session with him were intentional and within limits.

He wrapped the fur-lined cuff around one wrist, checked the fit, and secured it with a quick-release snap clip to the chain dangling from the ceiling. Before he cuffed and secured the other arm, he slipped the shoulder strap from her dress down her arm and off.

Although she seemed ready to strip herself bare, he didn't intend that for this first scene, except for one of her beautiful breasts. That much would give her a hint of vulnerability and the lack of control she could expect but also teach her that covered or gloriously naked was up to her dom to decide, not her.

Her ankles would come next, but only after he enjoyed himself a bit first.

Tilting her face up, he kissed her as he ran his hands up her sides, and all the way to her bound hands, checking for tightness or pinching once more then retracing his path, gliding over her shoulders and down to her back, all without breaking the seal of his mouth on hers.

As he caressed her body, his thumb caught on the loose strap. Her dress dipped lower on one side, but the gravity-defying fabric clung to her nipple. The upper swells were visible but the best part, the rosy tip remained covered, teasing

him and the audience who leaned in anxiously waiting for it to drop.

It would be interesting to see how many strokes of the flogger it took before the laws of physics prevailed.

“Turn,” he murmured.

Once she faced away from him, he ran his hands down her back, slowing when he reached the curve of her luscious bottom. When he crouched behind her, they continued down her long, satiny smooth legs to her ankles. He applied the two remaining cuffs, but rather than connecting them to the eyebolts embedded in the floor, he linked them together.

When he rose, he traced his fingers up the back of her legs. He hooked the hem of her dress, giving him and the onlookers a glimpse of white cheeks before he let it fall. Finally, he reached for his flogger.

Lightly, he flicked the tails over her backside. Through her dress, it made an unsatisfying dull sound. Wanting more, he bunched the material at her waist. Now the suede thwapped crisply against her skin.

As a hum rose from Esme’s closed lips, a murmur of approval rippled through the crowd. He repeated the strokes for a ten count then released his hold and moved around her. As the material slithered back down to cover her ass, the murmur turned to disappointment from the growing group of spectators.

Word was out the ice princess was in chains. The fools didn’t understand how hot Esme burned. They soon would.

Coming to a stop in front of her, he sent the tails across her thighs. With three subsequent blows, he introduced pinkness as he increased the intensity, moving higher each time. He skipped the obvious next step and applied the flogger to her hips, up her belly, and below the curves of her upraised breasts, watching as her body swayed, leaning into each stroke, not shying away.

Damn, she was exquisite, and her dress was remarkable because, through all of this, it stayed in place.

“Half turn.”

As she moved, she bit her lip, and he could tell she was holding back.

He caught her chin in his hand. “No, Esme,” he commanded. “I want to hear the sounds of both your pleasure and pain. Honest responses. Like the other night, you’ll give it all to me.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied, her voice ragged, along with her breathing.

He gave her a moment.

“No, please,” she cried. “Don’t stop. I can take more.”

“Good to know, but the decision isn’t yours. It ends when I decide unless you say the word. What’s your safeword, Esme?”

“Red, sir, but I don’t want to use it.”

“For both our sakes, I sure as hell hope not. You’re beautiful under the lash. But I hadn’t planned to stop, only to give you a moment to catch your breath.” He leaned in, brushing a kiss over her shoulder then licking up the side of her neck until his lips were close to her ear. “Guess what?”

“What, Master Finn?” she asked in a broken whisper.

“Your moment’s up.”

Sending his lash into motion again, he circled her rather than making her turn. The suede tails swiped over what little her dress covered, except her bottom. There, the exhibitionist in him couldn’t resist teasing her and the audience by lifting the fabric and applying the lash repeatedly. Soon her skin matched the pale-pink fabric, and it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began.

After about fifteen minutes of this sensual torture, he stopped, tucked the flogger handle into his back pocket, and slid an arm around her waist. He pulled up her dress again, this time in front, and slipped his hand between her thighs. She was slick with desire, allowing his fingers to slide easily through her folds even with her ankle restraints linked and her



thighs pressed together. He had no trouble locating her clit, which was standing up in front, as though begging for his touch.

His lovely submissive let him know he'd hit the spot by releasing a low throaty moan. He was happy to give her more, playing there for several moments while she leaned into him. Fingers wet with her juices, he delved deeper and felt the warm grip of her pussy when he slid two fingers up inside her. The chains overhead clanked as she arched forward, seeking more of his intimate touch.

A low moan rose from her throat as her head rolled to the side, falling heavy against her raised arms. Her muscles rippled around his fingers, signaling her impending climax.

“Not yet, baby.”

“Please, master, it's been so long.”

“Soon, Esme. When I say.”

She whimpered when he withdrew his hand but nodded, fucking gorgeous in her submission. He ached to have her, his dick wedged so hard against his fly, he expected the buttons to pop off at any moment. He tormented himself as much as he did his submissive, but she had to learn to trust him, as much as obey.

Circling her once again, he resumed with the flogger, applying the suede tails both in the front and in the back. With the next stroke on her belly, the stubborn dress finally moved, slipping down her breast, but the miracle fabric stopped at the edge of her areola.

A hum of frustration rippled through the crowd. He didn't blame them. He laid the threads lightly across her mound and she arched sharply forward, hips thrusting, but the damn dress didn't budge, clinging with a will of its own.

Angling his flogger upward with a circular sweep, he teased her breasts with just the ends. No way would it come out the victor with that maneuver.

He was wrong.

Enough was enough.

Keiran reversed his motion and brought the lash down with a slow drag down her chest. The eighteen-inch threads trailing over her quivering breast finally prevailed, exposing a tempting pink tip atop a ripe, milky mound.

“Master Finn,” she cried.

Having teased her sufficiently, he stepped forward, and he gave her, the onlookers, and himself most of all, what everyone wanted. His hand curved beneath her breast and lifted while his head bent and sucked the sweet berry into his mouth. Her impassioned cries filled the air as the flogger hit the floor.

Now free to use both hands to give her the release she needed, and had earned, his fingers plunged back inside her weeping center while his thumb worked her clit. Faster than he could count to three, she flew apart, crying out her release as her body shivered beneath his hands.

Fucking beautiful.



FUNCTIONING AT THE most basic of levels, Esme was aware of her surroundings, though just barely. After he uncuffed her and removed the blindfold, he wrapped her in a soft, lightweight blanket. Then, she sat when he told her to, waited without a word while he moved around the station and set things to rights, packing his bag, and slinging it over his shoulder. When he picked her up and cradled her in his arms, she lacked the capacity, and the energy, to hold on until he told her to.

“Hang onto my neck, lass. We’ll go to a quiet place while you recover.”

This surprised her. “We’re done?”

“For tonight, yes.”

Drowsy, her body drained and listless, she forced her head to roll on his shoulder until she could see his face. “What about you?”

“I’ll wait until five hundred others aren’t gaping at us.”

“Five hundred!” she gasped, alarm sparking a tinge of energy. “That’s the entire membership.”

“Well, perhaps not so many, but two-thirds of that at least. I’d rather the first time I’m inside you, while your sweet cunt grips me tight, and you call my name in that sexy-as-fuck throaty voice, be for my eyes only.”

She’d rather have it that way, too, although he could have had her tonight, with all those people watching, and she wouldn’t have complained.

“The second time,” he murmured, “I’m reserving the bench right up front.”

The thought of being strapped facedown on a spanking bench with Finn taking her from behind where everyone coming in the main doors could see sent a fresh wave of desire surging through her. Her face must have given her away because his arms tightened and he pressed a kiss to her temple. “Keep that thought until Saturday, lass.”

It seemed like an eternity. She tried to hide her disappointment by posing a question.

“For the third time, could we try out one of the theme rooms upstairs? I’ve never done more than peek through the windows. The Sultan’s Chamber... All of them, actually, are amazing and accurate down to the tiniest detail.”

“Which is why there is a waiting list for most of them. For the Sultan’s Chamber, it’s through Christmas.”

“That’s six months,” she said, instantly deflating.

“As an owner, I could pull rank and bump someone, but that doesn’t make for happy customers. What’s your second choice?”

Last week, she’d seen a couple, both with very satisfied smiles on their faces descending the stairs in back, the girl with several bits of straw stuck in her hair. Ever since, she’d been dying to take a peek inside the newest theme room

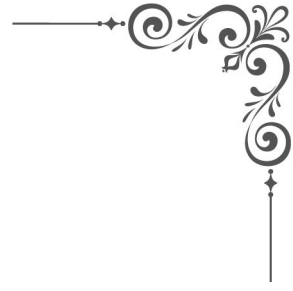
upstairs. “I’m a city girl and I’ve always wondered what it would be like to...”

“Say no more. I’ll reserve the hayloft if there’s an opening. Meet me in the lounge first and we’ll go up together. I’d rather you not be wandering the playroom unattended.” After her run-in with Carlos, she had no problem with that. Finn’s arms flexed, hugging her close. “Pack a bag, darlin’. We’re staying until the sun is high in the sky Sunday morning.”

“You mean for us to sleep in the loft?”

He chuckled. “That might be fun, but it could get itchy. I thought my apartment upstairs might be more comfortable. Because, while I might not finagle the Sultan’s Chamber on short notice”—meeting her gaze, his teasing wink sent a rush of warmth surging through her veins—“my bed is just as soft with identical satin sheets.”

“Mmm,” she hummed, sounding a lot like him as she burrowed deeper in his embrace. “I can hardly wait.”



## Chapter 13

DREAMY-EYED AND COUNTING the hours until they met again, it amazed Esme she got anything accomplished at work the next day. It wasn't easy when her mind kept replaying the scene, and Finn's utter mastery of her body. There was also the steamy good night in the parking lot, this time with him plastering her body against the car while kissing her senseless before tucking her inside. She'd been so flustered, he'd had to help her buckle in and hadn't closed the door until she had recovered enough to drive.

She laughed to herself because even now, hours later, she still hadn't bounced back fully.

If he'd asked, she'd have been perfectly happy spending the night in his apartment, but he hadn't. They both had to work the next day, and he seemed determined to take things slow. Proving he had self-control and priorities other than instant gratification made him even more appealing. She added these traits to a growing list of things she liked about her deliciously dominant Master Finn.

With little choice except to wait until Saturday, she tried to focus on organizing her case notes and preparing for the deposition scheduled for Friday morning. Although it was only Wednesday, it had been a hell of a week with Mr. Reinhart as erratic as what was shaping up to be his norm. If this kept up, she'd be looking for another job, even if it meant a cut in pay; the stress wasn't worth it.

As she reviewed the few notes he'd given her, about half a page of scribbles which weren't all that helpful, she noticed the corner of a Post-it note—the fluorescent green Gerald always used—sticking out from the middle of the dog-eared legal pad. It blended in with the yellow paper, so she must have missed it the first round.

She flipped to it then stared in confusion at her boss' barely legible scrawl. He'd scribbled two large dollar amounts, \$30,000 and \$50,000, listed next to two names she didn't

recognize, and next to each one, a twenty-one-digit alphanumeric reference number.

They could be clients. She didn't work on every case, and they'd had an influx of new ones lately. Bradley handled at least half, and Mr. Reinhart had a few he handled exclusively. If they were payments, they should have gone to Jasmine, their legal secretary/receptionist/billing clerk rolled into one, not scribbled on a sticky note.

She thought to chalk it up to strange behavior to go along with everything else, but something about this didn't sit right and added to her suspicion that something was going on with her boss. His odd business hours, including working evenings which he'd never done before, and the mystery surrounding his secret clients, another new twist, gave Esme the uncomfortable feeling he was doing something underhanded. And now she discovered what looked to be account numbers for either payments or deposits.

They weren't the eight-digit client account numbers used at the office or the nine-digit ABA routing numbers used for US banks. Curious, Esme opened a Google browser and typed one in. A listing popped up for an IBAN Validator. Having no clue what that was, she took the next step, transferred the number into the search box, and hit submit. Immediately, it brought up information on an international bank, with a physical address in Switzerland.

A sick feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. Having foreign accounts wasn't illegal, but their primary use, like hiding assets from the IRS, led to hefty fines and serious jail time. Why was Gerald funneling money into a Swiss bank? Had he set it up for these two mysterious clients? Or were these sums payment for his services?

Again, not illegal, but her boss wasn't an international lawyer. He was a criminal attorney licensed to practice in the U.S., specifically in California. If the source of the payment was for legitimate business, why would it originate overseas?

And, if above board and lawful, it was unlikely he'd have scribbled the information on a sticky note and tucked it inside

a legal pad. Further, he would have made Jasmine handle it rather than troubling himself.

She had way more questions than answers, and the whole thing stunk to high heaven.

A knock interrupted thoughts of tax evasion, the Feds raiding their offices and shutting them down, and worse. What kind of shady clients had Gerald gotten himself, and by extension, everyone in the practice, mixed up with?

“Miss Spade?”

When she glanced up, her lips parted in surprise at the sight of a courier standing in her office door, holding an enormous vase of exquisite blush roses. Coming to her feet, she smoothed the creases of her linen skirt with her suddenly damp palms.

“I’m Esme Spade,” she breathed.

“Then these are for you.”

Brimming with curiosity, she took a step forward. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gotten flowers. Abruptly, she stopped. The man would expect a tip, but when she bent to get her purse out of her bottom desk drawer, he set the vase on her desk.

“The gratuity has already been taken care of, miss,” the grinning young man explained, “generously, too. Enjoy them.”

When he left, he had to turn sideways to squeeze by Jasmine who peered into her office from the hall. The woman, who readily owned up to a severe case of nosiness, must have followed on the courier’s heels to get there so fast.

“Who are they from?” she asked eagerly.

“No clue,” she replied as she put her nose to a half-open bloom and inhaled. This wasn’t exactly true. She had a suspicion but was afraid to hope and end up disappointed.

“There’s a card. Read it and find out!” Jasmine demanded.

She pulled the small envelope from the cardholder. The handwritten note inside was in a bold, masculine script.



*I couldn't resist. The color reminded me of your sexy dress, and the way your beautiful skin blushes pink all over.*

Heat swept through her like a flash fire. Why she didn't spontaneously combust on the spot, she couldn't say. Aside from being devastatingly handsome, commanding in his dominance, and the best kisser ever—sorry Andrew, but it was true—Finn was also a romantic, though naughty, for sending such a racy note to her at work.

What if someone else had opened the card?

To hide her flushed cheeks and giddy grin, she bent to smell another barely open bud, which meant she would enjoy these beauties for days.

“Well?” Jasmine asked impatiently.

Esme remained silent. Telling her anything was like taking out a billboard on Wilshire Boulevard.

“There's more on the back,” she informed her huffily.

The warm feeling intensified when she turned the card over and read the rest in much smaller print.

*I've seen you in leather and lace. You looked lovely in both, but for a hayloft? Perhaps braids, a suede vest, and a short denim skirt might be better, and as last night, nothing underneath.*

*I might be a little past seven. Wait in the lounge and I'll come find you.*

He had signed it simply with a *K*.

“What's going on?”

Esme looked up, her good mood evaporating with Gerald's sudden appearance. She had seen no one practically all day. Now, when she wanted a moment alone, suddenly, it was Grand Central Station.

He sounded surly and looked more stressed than usual, which was saying something. His tie was askew, he hadn't shaved, and even though they kept the office cool, which

prompted her to wear long sleeves in the summer, he was sweating.

“Esme has an admirer. He’s a secret one, evidently, since she won’t tell me who he is.” Jasmine wasn’t very observant and hadn’t keyed in on their boss’ bad mood or she wouldn’t have gone on chattering, needlessly disclosing things she shouldn’t to someone who obviously didn’t care.

“Do I pay you to gossip, Miss Myers?” he snapped. “The answer to that is no. I’m paying you to type, specifically the contracts due on my desk by the end of the day. Are they finished?”

Jasmine’s head jerked, surprised and visibly hurt by the angry tone and sharp criticism. Gerald Reinhart could be impatient, but he was usually civil and rarely outright rude. There was an hour before they closed; technically she hadn’t missed her deadline yet.

Jas was a busybody and a notorious gossip, but she always got her work done. Esme sympathized with her at the unwarranted censure because when he’d left at midday, he told them he didn’t intend to return. Popping in and demanding work to be done earlier than expected wasn’t fair.

“I’ll have them ready in about thirty minutes, sir.”

“Get to it, then. I’m not paying overtime for silly chitchat.”

She glanced at Jasmine, head down, cheeks red with embarrassment, as she hurried out the door. Her boss’ foul mood left Esme with a dilemma. Did she mention the account numbers she’d found? Or let it slide out of self-preservation because he looked as irritable as he sounded.

What’s more, if her suspicions were correct, it was probably safer for her if he didn’t know she knew. But where did that leave her? Did she go to the police when she had no actual proof? Ask Brad, and put them both in danger? Or do nothing, burying her head in the sand and possibly risk becoming an accessory to a crime?

She liked none of her options.

“Since you’re mooning over roses,” he snapped, “I suppose the briefs I need for Thursday aren’t ready yet, either.”

“If you mean for the Morales case, it’s on your desk. I finished the Westbrook brief, too.” She turned and picked up the file she’d been reviewing before this latest series of interruptions. “I have it right here.”

She handed it to him, which took the wind out of his grouchy sails. Looking to do some ass chewing since the moment he arrived, he’d have to move on to an employee who wasn’t doing their job.



ON THURSDAY, WHILE she was preparing documents for yet another pro bono intent-to-distribute case, the phone rang. She tuned it out because the receptionist usually answered within three or four rings. When it kept going, she reached for it.

“Reinhart and Shoemaker, how may I help you?”

“You can break up a hellacious week by having lunch with me.”

“Mast... uh, Finn? This is a surprise.”

“Were you expecting another man to invite you to lunch? One I’m unaware of, perhaps?”

“No. Never. Well, sometimes Pax will call if he’s working in the area, but he’s still out of town.”

“Darlin’, I was teasing. Sort of.”

The rather brusque way he tacked on the “sort of” made a ribbon of happiness unfurl inside her.

“So, lunch? Are you free?”

“Yes, but my car is in the shop being serviced today.”

“No problem, I’ll pick you up at eleven thirty. We’ll go to Guerrilla Tacos on 7th street. I’m hooked on the place. Basically, if it can be put in a tortilla, they do. See you soon, *a stór*.”

After the disconnect, she stared at the phone. *Ah-store*. The way he rolled his r gave the foreign word a soft, sensual quality. A tingle shot down her spine and spread lower until it set up a little vibration between her thighs. He'd said it Tuesday, only she'd been too spaced out to remember her name, let alone ask what it meant. The fact he had gotten her to that state twice now was astonishing.

The number of times Andrew put her into subspace in their entire five-year relationship, she could count on one hand. Her husband was an excellent lover, but in terms of dominance, Finn had him beat hands down. From the start, he seemed to know what she needed and how hard he could push her. And the skill with which he controlled her body, drove it to the brink of ecstasy, and kept it there until he was ready to send her hurtling over the edge, was breathtaking.

And they'd only just begun to explore, which scared her as much as it excited her. If his expertise went beyond what she'd experienced when they got to the main event, he would surpass her husband in that arena as well.

Esme struggled with how that made her feel, as though she were betraying Andrew and the love they shared. Her rational mind knew she shouldn't think that way, but she couldn't help it. Countless times, Pax had told her he would have wanted her to move on, to find someone else, to love again. Finn had asked about that the first night as well.

She was twenty-five to Andrew's thirty-two. They'd never discussed what the other should do if the worst happened. Not even in practical terms of a will and finances, which would have made things easier. But they still reveled in the invincibility of youth, and tragedy hadn't been a blip on their radar, despite his job.

Pax, who knew him, and Eric and Finn who didn't, felt sure they knew his mind because as dominants they understood how much a true submissive needed a dom on levels beyond sex and discipline. Pax described a sub being alone like a ship without a rudder, churning hard to move through the water, but without direction and control and a firm hand guiding it through, getting nowhere.

She'd heard of doms who knew the end was coming, like with a terminal illness, selecting another to step in, if only temporarily. Not sexually, per se, but to help weather the storm, and keep the ship, which in her case was listing badly, from capsizing or running aground.

Ryan Paxton had fulfilled that role for her, thank goodness. Early on, while dealing with his own grief, he'd been there for her, helping her with day-to-day life, and taking bigger hurdles when they popped up in front of her, even when some turned out to be twenty-foot-high concrete barricades. Maybe now, since she'd found Finn, he could be relieved of his duties and go back to being her friend.

She glanced at the clock. In less than an hour, she'd see him again, two days earlier than expected, and outside the club. This was a giant step forward. Their budding relationship spilling over into real life had to mean he saw her as more than a play partner, or a sub in need of fixing.

But what if she was wrong?

No. Expecting the worst was too often a self-fulfilling prophecy for her. Despite their few encounters, she already felt a strong connection to Finn and knew he was something special. Tendrils of hope were creeping into her heart. And Lord knows, she hadn't experienced that emotion in what seemed like forever. She wouldn't jinx it with what-ifs, and her negative self-talk. Instead, she planned to move forward with optimism that what they had could turn into a lot more.



THE LOW CLEARING OF a throat drew her eyes to the doorway. In jeans and a light-gray button-up shirt, the long sleeves cuffed to his elbows, Finn looked better than ever, especially since the lighting was so much brighter here than at the club.

“Hey,” she said in greeting.

He smiled in return.

“Just let me close this document I'm working on.”

With a few clicks of her mouse, she saved the discovery list she was updating and closed the program. Purse in hand, she walked toward him, feeling as much as seeing when his gaze skidded down her body. Instead of a skirt, she was in linen trousers and a teal blouse. When she reached him, she had to look up, like while in the dungeon, because she was also in flats.

“All ready,” she announced.

He said nothing, hadn’t since he arrived, but tapped his lips with his index finger in a silent demand for a kiss.

She grinned, having no problem obeying, since they were inside her office and the one across from her was Mr. Reinhart’s and, as usual, he wasn’t here. Standing on tiptoe, her hands on his chest for balance, she reached for his lips. He helped by bending his head. After a brief kiss, not quite a peck but much softer, when she would have pulled away, his arm slid around her waist, holding her in place.

His tongue slipped into her mouth, tangled with hers briefly, then he raised his head and affirmed quietly, “Now, we’re ready to go.”

Taking her hand in his, he led, and she followed, out the door and to the right toward the lobby. A loud bang behind them had them both twisting around.

Gerald stood in the hall outside his office, head turned toward the rarely used exit door with the rickety stairs out back—which is why they were rarely used. Esme frowned as the automatic closure slowly drew the door shut.

“Mr. Reinhart?”

He turned when she called his name, a rather strained expression on his face. His gaze landed on her briefly then shifted to Finn. Then he stiffened, leaning away slightly as if on the verge of following whoever left by the back door, rickety stairs be damned.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

“You’re leaving?” Though he was speaking to her, his eyes remained locked on Finn.

“Yes, for lunch. Let me introduce, my, um—” Crap, what did she call him? My dominant? Master? Soon-to-be lover in the hayloft on Saturday night? Introducing him as her friend didn’t seem right, either.

“I’m Keiran, Esme’s boyfriend,” he supplied in her stead, taking a step toward her boss, his hand extended.

“Keiran Finnegan of Rossi Security,” Reinhart replied, taking his hand and pumping it once. “I know. I saw you on the news. Quite a feather in your cap, considering you’re a new agency.”

“Not our usual case, but yes, it has started our phone ringing, not that we needed it to.”

She listened to this back-and-forth as if from a distance, still marveling over Finn having referred to her as his girlfriend. It could have been tact, but he still gripped her hand, and she let the happy warmth that was becoming a familiar companion when he was around bubble up inside her.

“Perhaps I can send work your way.”

Gerald’s offer snapped Esme out of her pleasant haze. She glanced his way, puzzled why he’d think Finn would need drug dealers as clients.

Equally at a loss, he inquired, “Aren’t you a litigator?”

“Yes, in practice for twenty-two years here in LA.”

“Most of our clients are interested in home security. Anything else is domestic, which in Tinsel Town keeps us very busy. But thanks for the offer.”

“Ah...” was his vague reply.

“If you’ll excuse us,” he told Gerald, efficiently yet politely halting any further conversation. “I made reservations, so Esme won’t be late getting back.”

“I appreciate that, but take your time. Esme puts in long hours and deserves a little break.”

She tried to keep her jaw from hitting the floor or saying something rude considering he had recently put her on salary,

so he wouldn't have to pay her overtime. Fortunately for her continued future employment, he turned and disappeared into his office. Turning to Finn, needing to say something about the odd encounter and Gerald's sudden benevolence, she stopped, watching as he wiped his hands on his pants.

"Sweaty palms," he explained with a grimace. "Is he always that jumpy?"

"Lately? Yes. Can we go?"

He considered her for a moment, keen eyes narrowed and brows gathered in concern, but nodded, and led her out the front door. "Now, you seem jumpy. What gives?"

She took his hand and pulled him farther down the block out of view of the office windows. "I'm not sure, but the man you just met has been a holy terror for months, but in front of you was suddenly as sweet as pie."

"He isn't normally nice to you?" he asked in a hard voice.

"He isn't mean, but I give him no cause to be. But something isn't right. He's always been demanding, more so recently, but his irritability is off the charts, and he's never, ever, told me to take a long lunch. And...maybe I shouldn't say."

"You can trust me to keep a confidence, Esme."

"Well, it's not something I deal with every day, but it made me—suspicious. Like, maybe, my boss is doing something..." She stopped as a couple passed by, laughing. When they turned the corner, she looked the other way before moving closer to Finn and crooking her finger. When he dipped his head, she whispered, "Illegal."

"What makes you think he is?" he whispered back, turning toward her so his face was next to hers. His green eyes were up close and bright, a lighter color when outside than she'd noticed in the club.

"Esme," he prompted.

Realizing she was staring, she cleared her throat and murmured, "Right. I found a notation of payment amounts



totaling \$80,000 in Mr. Reinhart's legal pad.”

He nodded, his expression not nearly as concerned as she expected it to be. “I imagine legal fees can get pretty steep. Does that strike you as an unusually large amount?”

“It's not how much, but where they were from.” She looked around again, saw no one around, but leaned closer and curved her hand around her mouth when she replied, “A Swiss bank.”

Finn's head jerked back, his expression entirely changed, now deadly serious. “How do you know they're from a bank in Switzerland?”

“I Googled it. Is it normal for a U.S. attorney to get paid from foreign accounts?”

“Mmm...” This response, which she noticed he did often, usually meant he was mulling something over. “I don't deal with this kind of thing every day, but I can do some checking.”

“I thought about going to the police, but it could be nothing.” She bit her lip for a moment, then her eyes came to his and she said with more conviction, “It probably is nothing. See, that's why I didn't want to say anything. I've got no proof of any wrongdoing, just a boss who's acting...off.”

“Don't do or say anything until I get back to you.”

“What are you going to do?” He was in security, not banking or law enforcement. She told him more for an opinion and to get it off her chest.

“I've got friends in finance, darlin'.”

“You do?” Her voice raising an octave in surprise. She flushed, afraid she'd offended him.

Finn chuckled. “Yeah, I've got a diverse group of friends. But these finance guys will know the laws on international transfers.”

She breathed out and nodded. “Okay, like I said, it's probably nothing. And I wouldn't think anything of it, really, if Gerald wasn't acting so strange lately.” She laid her hand on his forearm, which was nicely muscular, and squeezed. “I

don't want to ruin what little time we have talking about Gerald Reinhart.”

“Me, either,” he said with a grin, and moved her down the street to a black SUV with a prime parking spot. On Wilshire. Midday! Which was a feat in itself.

He beeped the locks and opened the door for her. “Do you like hot and spicy?”

She looked at him, her gaze automatically running over his handsome face then dipping down his very impressive form. He really was a gorgeous man.

“I meant food, lass.”

Her eyes shot up to his, seeing the green orbs dancing with delight. “I know you did,” she replied in a rush. “You don't have to worry about me. I like everything. I'm super easy.”

He laughed, spontaneous and unreserved.

“I meant easy to please,” she explained only making things worse before she choked out, “when it comes to food.”

She slid in front of him and with one foot on the running board hauled herself in while muttering, “I'll just shut up now.”

His grin didn't lessen when he shut the door and was still as broad when he came around and got in on his side. After starting the engine, which came with a cool blast of air, he hooked his hand behind her neck and pulled her toward him. Her ribs dug into the console, but she didn't care, not when his mouth covered hers in a steamy, very thorough kiss. And unlike the brief one in her office, he didn't break away until her mind was muddled, the air had evaporated from her lungs, and her pulse pounded in her ears.

“You're delightful, *a stór*. Never hold back with me.”

“What does that mean? Ah-store. You said it the other night.”

“'Tis a Gaelic endearment that suits you. It means treasure, or the way I use it, my treasure.”

A warmth, triple what she'd been feeling before, invaded her chest. She blinked as his image wavered slightly. His next kiss wasn't much more than a light brush of his lips but was as stirring as the last, and just like that one, took her breath away.

"Buckle up," he ordered softly, not yet releasing her. "I'll get you fed and back to work on time so the boss man can't complain, no matter what he claimed earlier."

When he sat back, his hand gliding along her jaw before falling away, she nodded. Then, with trembling fingers, she fumbled with her seat belt, before it clicked into place.

He put the car in gear and pulled out, reclaiming her hand with a firm squeeze before he commented, "This isn't the best of neighborhoods. Do they have security in your building, cameras, or an alarm system at least?"

"There aren't any cameras and the alarm system is outdated. When I first started, Mr. Shoemaker was getting bids on an upgrade. When he retired, Gerald put an end to that. His two divorces in five years have been a financial hit, which might explain his surly behavior, though he shouldn't take it out on us. Or it could be from lack of sleep. The alarm has a hair trigger. It goes off several times a week, all false alarms. If it happens at night, the security company calls him. Lately, it's been off most mornings when I come in."

"I don't like the sound of this, Esme. If he's a jerk, and lax with his security and the safety of his employees, maybe you should think of looking elsewhere for work. Somewhere safer."

"I've considered it. In fact, me and the new attorney have been dusting off our resumes. Something is up with Gerald. He's changed drastically and not for the better, which doesn't make for an enjoyable work environment."

"I'll put out some feelers."

"Really? You'd do that?"

"Lass," he replied, reaching over to capture her hand and bring it to his thigh. "If it keeps the worry off your pretty face

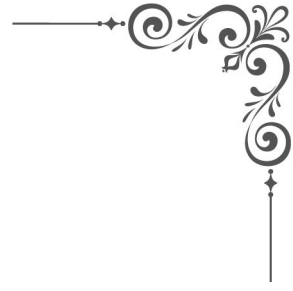
and keeps that gorgeous body out of harm's way, there isn't much I wouldn't do."

With Finn, it didn't sound like a line—she believed he meant every word. The shields around her heart melted further. If he kept this up, it would soon be laid bare, his for the taking. Something she swore would never happen again.

Lunch went by much too fast. The food was amazing. She had Fish Tacos of the Gods, which was tempura-battered local cod, chipotle cream, and their signature Pico de Gallo, while Finn ordered the short ribs with chilies and fresh cilantro. He was charming, attentive, and regaled her with stories of growing up in Ireland. True to his word, despite the crowded restaurant and the noontime traffic, he had her back to work on time.

Bonus—she got another kiss in parting before they left the car. And he held her hand again, something she liked a lot, as he walked her to the office door.

Mr. Reinhart was absent for the rest of the afternoon. It was the best workday she'd had in weeks, though not the most productive. Thoughts of a gorgeous Irish dom kept intruding, and they weren't exactly safe, or appropriate, for work. When she got lost in a fantasy featuring a worn leather saddle, piles of fragrant hay, lots of straps, and a whip-wielding Keiran Finnegan dressed in black leather pants, his chest bare, tan, and glistening with a fine sheen of sweat, she had to get up and splash water on her face—twice.



## Chapter 14

ESME ARRIVED AT WORK the following day, determined not to let thoughts of Finn derail her focus. In the morning, she made good progress on her should-have-been-done-two-days-ago list. After taking only thirty minutes for lunch, she was back at her desk digging into her should-have-been-done-yesterday pile when the intercom buzzed.

Her eyes shifted to her obsolete, four-line phone, a decade past due for replacement, her boss too cheap to pay for an upgrade. She reached out and hit the flashing red button.

“Yeah, Jas?”

“Call for you on line two, Esme. I didn’t get to talk to your hot new man yesterday, but on the phone, he sounds as yummy as he looks.”

A thrill of excitement raced through her and she couldn’t contain the grin spreading across her face. She knew it was silly and sappy because that’s exactly how she felt.

“I got it, Jas, thanks.” Grabbing the receiver, she punched the second flashing light. “Hey, Finn.”

“Esme. I want to see you tonight.”

No greeting, no preamble, only her name in his panty-drenching deep burr then he cut to the chase.

“I thought you had to work,” she replied, her voice suddenly huskier than before.

“I do. It’ll be late, but I don’t want to wait until tomorrow to see you again.”

Silly and sappy instantly morphed into melty and tingly. “Where? I’m up in Northridge.”

“I’ll be in town, working until close to ten. Meet me at my apartment.”

“You mean the one over the club?”

“Yes, but don’t use the front entrance. Park in the garage, upper level. Text me when you arrive and I’ll come out and get you.”

“Okay.”

“I mean, wait in your car with your doors locked. I don’t want you walking through the garage after dark alone. Got me?”

“I got you, Finn.”

“Good. And, baby, bring a change of clothes and whatever else you need. Once I get you in my bed, I’m not letting you go.” It wasn’t an invitation, and he didn’t wait for a response. “Gotta go, sweetness. See you tonight.”

After that, it was like a switch flipped in her brain, and she couldn’t focus on anything other than Keiran Finnegan for the rest of the afternoon.

Meeting him late gave her time to go home, change, pack a bag, and take care of the other male in her life. She got in some kitty snuggles and gave him a bonus pouch of wet food to make up for him having to spend the night alone.

As she drove up the ramp to the upper level of the garage, she checked the time—ten minutes before ten. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Finn propped against the wall by the door, waiting. With his arms crossed over his chest, one knee bent and his foot flat against the wall, hints of red in his dark gleaming hair in the overhead lights, he looked amazing. Compared to her giddy excitement ever since his call after lunch, he looked as cool and collected as if he’d merely stepped out to get some air.

Had she read more into this than he intended?

She gave herself a mental shake. “Stop overanalyzing every little thing, Esme. He called you, moved up the date, and is outside waiting ten minutes early.” That had to mean he was as eager to see her as she was to see him.

When she pulled into the first available space near the door and killed the engine, she glanced in the rearview, but the spot where he stood was empty.

Turning in her seat, Esme scanned the lot behind her, disappointment gripping her when she didn't see him. Had he gone inside?

A knock on her side glass made her jump. Twisting back around, she saw dark jeans and a kick-ass, hand-tooled belt. Suddenly, his gorgeous face filled her side window.

“Open up, baby.”

As soon as she popped the locks, he jerked the door open. The next thing she knew, she was in his arms, unsure how she'd gotten there. But it didn't matter, not when his hands sank into her hair and he angled her head back to claim her lips.

Having thought of him nonstop since his call, she opened eagerly for his demanding tongue. Like he'd done to her, she plunged her fingers into his thick, soft hair and kissed him back.

He growled into her mouth, clamped a hand on her ass, and lifted her against his body. Esme wanted to get closer, too, and jumped enough to wrap her legs around his hips. She immediately regretted her choice of shorts instead of a skirt, which he could have moved easily out of the way and plunged his hand into her panties. Wanting him desperately, she ground the seam of her shorts against the hard bulge behind his zipper.

Finn shifted them both, and she heard the car door slam. Next, they were moving, as he carried her effortlessly, without losing her mouth.

She whimpered in disappointment. In her mind, she had envisioned him being so wild for her, he laid her across the still-warm hood of her car, ripped her shorts and panties down, and fucked her right there.

“Cameras, *a stór*,” he murmured into her mouth, his frustration audible, as if he'd considered taking her like in her fantasy then thought better of it.

At the entrance, he had to break their kiss to punch in the code on the keypad. He did it one-handed, opened the door the



same way, then they were on the move again, down the cool, air-conditioned corridor to the third door on the right.

Once inside, he didn't give her the grand tour. Instead, he perched her butt on the arm of his couch, leaned back enough to pull her shirt up over her head then toppled her back on the cushions. With her hips higher than her head, he undid her shorts and shucked them down her legs, hooking her panties as he went.

Next, he pushed her thighs wide, and as she gasped in anticipation, he lowered his mouth to her pussy. Her hips bucked as he devoured her with fervor, his lips and tongue moving with practiced precision. Her moans echoed in the room, mingling with the sound of his wet, slurping kisses.

"I dreamed of eating your sweet cunt last night," he growled without lifting his lips from her heated flesh, "and all I could think about today was having another taste."

His words buzzed against her heated flesh, and the way his lips and tongue worked her clit was more intense than her best vibrator ever.

"Finn," she moaned her hands in his hair, pulling him tighter against her.

"Sweetest fucking cunt ever," he said while sucking the hard nub into his mouth and flicking it with his tongue from inside.

"Oh, my god...I can't wait."

"Don't, baby. Come for me now, so I can gobble up more of your honeyed sweetness."

As soon as he drove his tongue inside her, her entire body shook and convulsed, ripples of pleasure gripping her from the inside out as her back arched, her hips came off the armrest, and her thighs clamped around his head in an explosion of ecstasy.

Before the tremors left her body, he was on his feet, tearing off his clothes. Vaguely, she heard the crinkle of a foil wrapper as he saw to protection.

“My turn,” he growled as with cock in hand, an impressive sight she greedily consumed, he guided himself to her center.

With his path eased by the slickness his incredible mouth had created, he sank into her in one thrust, stretching and filling her as his nearly overwhelming presence set off more waves of pleasure inside her.

Finn groaned, moving as she clamped down around him. It wasn't enough evidently because leaning forward, he slipped his hands under her, and with easy strength lifted her from the couch. Her body weight drove her down farther on his cock. She gasped, his possession so incredibly deep as he switched their positions, with him seated on the couch and her on top, straddling his thighs.

She raised her hands to sweep her hair out of her face, and he claimed her breasts, one with his mouth, drawing her nipple inside to suck and nibble, and curving his hand beneath the other, his thumb and finger rolling and tugging at the peak. It felt so damn good, she couldn't focus on anything except the incredible pleasure he was giving her.

Esme's head fell back, one hand coming to the back of his head, holding him there, while the other covered his at her breast. Then, despite the shattering climax of only moments before, she arched into him, selfishly taking more.

Finn had other ideas, however, and released her nipple with a pop.

“It seems one of us is being mighty greedy.” He moved her hands behind her neck. “Keep those there.” With fingers curled around her hips to steady her, he scooted down the couch. “Since you've come once while I did the work, for my turn, I want to lie back and watch while you ride me.”

Esme had no problem with that. Except with her legs spread wide over his thickly muscled thighs, when she attempted to move, she realized with nothing to hold on to, it wasn't as easy as she thought.

Glancing down, she saw his gaze hungrily roving her body. “May I use my hands, sir?”

“Nope, with them behind your neck, your breasts sway with your movements.” He reached up and tweaked one pouty nipple. “And I have full access to play.”

She tried again, moving upward but only slightly.

He wrapped his fingers around her ankles and brought them forward until she was frog-sitting on his lap. “Try again.”

How he thought this would be easier, she wasn't sure. The best she could do was rock and grind against him, neither of which he seemed to mind. She didn't, either, because his hands never stopped moving, teasing her breasts, running up and down her sides and over her thighs, and he didn't neglect the parts in between. With her legs splayed wide, his thumb easily homed in on her clit. She lost what little rhythm she had as he created shivers of delight with his skilled touch.

After this went on for several wonderfully torturous moments, he stopped, but he was far from done. With his hands curled under her bottom, he helped her move, lifting her higher and letting gravity help her take the entire length of his hard shaft. He did it slowly, bringing her almost all the way off before he let her slide down then repeating again, and again. They inhaled together on the upstroke, sighing in Esme's case, and Finn groaned on the downstroke as her pussy enveloped him tightly.

“Keep going,” he ordered, his already low voice growing deeper with his increasing need.

“I could do this better and move faster if I could put my hands on your shoulders for balance.”

“Probably, and we'll get there, but right now, I want it slow because I'm enjoying the hell out of the show.”

Legs brazenly spread, breasts bouncing as she rode him, she flushed hotly. But it was his turn, and she wanted to give him as much as he'd given her.

When she moved up again, he held her poised with only the head of his cock in her pussy, his eyes fixed on where they joined and with excruciating slowness, inch by exquisite inch, he eased her back down.

“We fit together perfectly, like a custom-made lock and key.”

“Yes, sir,” she moaned. “You fill me so full there is no space left inside.”

His gaze rose to hers, his green eyes colliding with her own, then he repeated the motion, but on the return glide, he thrust upward with his hips, sinking deeper, and proving her wrong.

With a sharply indrawn breath, her muscles clamped around him, and she shuddered, unsure how much longer she could play his erotic game. Tired of the slow torture, or perhaps feeling merciful, he flipped her on her back onto the wide cushions. Without withdrawing, he settled between her thighs, hitching one of her legs up high on his hip. While propped on his elbows, gazing down at her, he thrust hard and deep, at fucking last.

His hands framed her face, his eyes shimmering with passion, and he ordered with a growl, “Move with me, *mo chuisle*.”

She didn't understand his words, but his intention was clear. Lifting her hips, they soon found a rhythm, Finn leading with her keeping pace. Her body responded, soaring higher until another peak was in reach. And through it all, he never looked away, never broke contact, or lost their connection, making it more intimate than simply having their bodies joined. And while she wanted to go that little bit higher, to come apart in his arms, even more so, she wanted to linger, reveling in the contentment and peace she found with him. In case, like in the past, it was stolen from her again.

“It's okay, Esme. Let go. I'll be here to catch you.”

She sucked in a breath, amazed how he always seemed to know what she was thinking. As if he could see inside her mind, or more so, her soul. It was frightening as much as it was comforting,

He bent his head, his lips barely touching hers, as he continued to drive inside her, pushing her toward her body's

surrender.

“I’ll always be here to catch you.”

His assurance, that extra little nudge was enough to send her over the top. As she cried out her release, the pleasure was pure and explosive.

Finn surrendered to it, too, thrusting into her hard once more then again, before planting deep, as his body tensed over her. His bliss-filled groan rolled up from his chest. When it ended, he took a deep breath and sealed his mouth over hers, sending new spirals of intense pleasure shooting through her.



INSTANTLY ALERT, KEIRAN rolled onto his back, listening to the strange noises in his usually silent apartment. His arm swept out to his side, finding the place beside him empty. He would have preferred to wake first and slowly rouse Esme with caresses before making love to her to start his day, but when his stomach rumbled from the smell of bacon frying, he threw back the covers and grabbed his jeans off the floor. He ducked into the bathroom to take care of first things first then followed the delicious aroma out to his kitchen.

What he found there made him grin, and since she hadn’t noticed him, he leaned in the doorway to watch. Dressed in one of his shirts, it hung nearly to her knees, and with her long hair on top of her head in a messy knot, her face washed clean of makeup, she looked like she could be in college rather than quickly approaching her thirties.

His eyes scanned down her body, admiring the hint of curves visible beneath her borrowed clothes especially the way the rounded hem hugged her bottom, and the sight of her long smooth legs, bare feet, and pink-tipped toes.

He couldn’t remember the last time a woman had stayed the night and never one so fucking adorable who hummed off-key—the song familiar, but he couldn’t quite make it out—while cooking him breakfast. She shoved up the too-long sleeves of his overlong shirt and with a potholder, removed the

skillet from the burner. When she turned his way and noticed him, she jumped, letting out a little shriek of surprise.

Afraid she might drop the hot pan and burn herself, he rushed forward. Grabbing another hot pad from where it hung, mostly unused, from a hook on the side of the fridge, he took the frying pan from her.

“Easy,” he murmured while he set it down. “It’s too early for a trip to the emergency room for burn treatment.”

With his arm around her, he curled her into his side. She dropped her head on his shoulder; the hair piled high on her head tickling his neck. After a moment, she took a deep breath and blew it out.

“Didn’t mean to startle you, lass.”

“I didn’t hear you come in.” Her head popped up, and she smiled at him tentatively. “I was just about to come wake you. You like eggs, don’t you? I figured you did since you had them on hand, and milk, bacon, and biscuit mix. Your kitchen is well-stocked, sir.”

He squeezed her, grinning. “I like all of that, baby. Not knowing when we’ll be here, the staff keeps us supplied with staples. I can get by enough not to starve, but from the smell, you’re a much better hand in the kitchen than I am.”

“I do all right,” she conceded, blushing prettily.

“I can’t wait to taste your idea of all right.” His lips touched hers briefly. Then, with another little squeeze, he released her and headed for his automatic brewer. “Do we have coffee?”

“You do, but I couldn’t figure out your coffee maker. I don’t drink it, so I left it for you, sir.”

“No coffee? Lass, how do you function?”

“I also start my day with a jolt of caffeine, but mine comes with a pop top in a can, and I pour it over ice.”

He quirked a brow. “Not soda.”

“Yep, high-test diet Mountain Dew.”

“That’s nothing but a glass full of chemicals. At least coffee has proven health benefits.”

“Like what?” she asked skeptically.

“It has antioxidants, for one, and studies have shown it may reduce the risk of some chronic diseases.”

She wrinkled her nose—looking adorable when she did so. “I’ll stick to blueberries that taste good. Thank you very much, sir.”

“I’m Keiran, Esme. Or Finn, which you seem to favor. You don’t have to call me sir when we’re not in the club or playing. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.” A hand flew to her mouth, her soft laughter a beautiful sound. “Oops, force of habit. But since you don’t mind, I’d like to stick with Finn. I’m rather partial to it.”

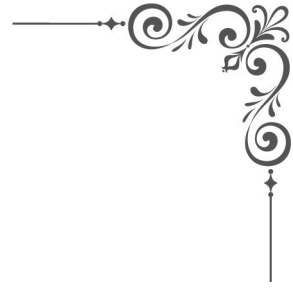
At the coffeepot, he glanced back at her. “Why is that?”

He caught the color flooding her cheeks before she crossed to the cupboard to get plates.

“It’s how I’ve thought of you since the first night—so it’s already set in my brain.”

Though he presumed from her blush there was more to it than that, he let it go, for now, eager to get some caffeine in his system and her food in his belly.

They chatted easily over breakfast, which ended much too soon. Keiran would have preferred taking her back to bed to spend the rest of the morning exploring her beautiful body, but he had a case, and she had to get home to see to her cat. Tonight wouldn’t be soon enough to have his fill of her again, but it would have to do.





## Chapter 15

SITTING WITH HER BACK to the bar, Esme shifted on her stool and tugged on the back of her denim skirt. It was short, and the effort wasted because it didn't go anywhere.

She had dug through at least six boxes in the garage to find it. Bought for a hoedown back in college, she wasn't exactly sure what possessed her to keep it and haul it cross-country. Now, despite the skirt fitting a lot snugger than it had when she was twenty, she was glad she did.

She didn't have a vest like Finn suggested, but found a cute pink-and-white gingham shirt in the back of her closet. Left unbuttoned with the tails knotted beneath her breasts, it exposed an eye-catching amount of her curves and white belly. The latter made her a little self-conscious; her stomach was flat but not even close to concave, and she lacked sculpted abs many of the other women had. But as she thought back to last night, and the way Finn had dragged his lips and tongue in a path from her throat, through the valley between her breasts, down past her navel, and all the way to her spread thighs, he hadn't minded her softness in the least.

Other than her short skirt and skimpy top, she wore nothing else, as instructed, except pink ribbons at the end of her twin braids, and on her feet, four-inch T-strap pumps. Her shoes weren't western, but they were a pale pink, almost nude, that matched her shirt. Besides, she didn't own cowboy boots. Regardless of the missing elements of her costume, she thought her sexy look would please Finn, and if nothing else, was a vast improvement over the business suit fiasco.

Esme swiveled on her barstool until she had a clear shot of the doors. When she'd arrived, the parking garage and rear lot were overflowing, and she expected the bar to be standing room only. She'd been right, but almost everyone was on the dance floor.

Her eyes kept darting from the crowd to the doors as she divided her time watching for Finn and trying to get a glimpse of the band who was playing a set of Evanescence covers and

doing it very well, the lead singer's voice indistinguishable from the real thing. One of her favorite bands, she'd listened to their version of "My Immortal" at least a thousand times after Andrew's death. It seemed to sum up her struggle with memories that wouldn't fade, and wounds that wouldn't heal, as if the songwriter had peered into her broken heart and lifted her thoughts from her brain.

It always made her cry until now. Rather, until Finn.

Turning on her stool, she blocked out the memories. They had no place here tonight, intruding on her new beginning.

He was all she'd been able to think of since they'd parted this morning. Something had dawned on her as she sat on her patio, looking over the valley, rewinding the night before in her head. She'd slept in Finn's bed, while snuggled up to his side, her cheek pillowed on his chest, his arm around her, for a continuous six-hour stretch, which never happened. She had dreamed, but for the first time in a long while, they weren't filled with horror and gore, or characters from TV with bizarre demands, or rotund disgusting kings from centuries past forcing her to do lewd, repulsive acts. Esme shuddered as she always did when Henry's greasy image popped into her head. To get him out of there, she shook it hard.

"So, what's your story?"

Esme whipped around to find Mistress Latrice with her red braided quilt sitting on the stool next to her, watching her with keen interest.

"My story?"

"You arrive with Ryan Paxton, a good dom, handsome, hot, masculine—if you go for that kind, and I know you do, which is my loss—but you don't play. I didn't think much of it at first. You were new, taking it all in, but weeks passed, and that's all you ever did. Then, like that," she snapped her fingers, "he's gone. I take a shot, along with half the other tops in the place. We're taking bets to see what you're into—men, women, both. I got nowhere, fast, so I knew you didn't swing my way. But weeks passed, and you didn't swing at all, only watched. Then, out of the blue"—she clapped her hands

together making Esme jump—“you’re hitting on every dom in the place. They say no, their egos bruised after you already turned them down flat. Damn fools.”

The domme reached out and caught her chin, her touch soft but unyielding, a lot like Master Finn’s, except she scared the holy crap out of her.

“Had you asked me, I wouldn’t have let pride stand between me and a taste of you.” She smiled, desire flashing in her sultry brown eyes, along with a dark, merciless promise, rather like the short whip coiled at her waist. Esme shivered in response.

Mistress Latrice noticed, let out a little chuckle, and released her, but not before she trailed her long red nails along her jaw. “If you change your mind after Master K is through with you, come find me.” She tapped her crimson-tipped fingers against her lips while she considered her thoughtfully. “That’s another piece of this puzzle that doesn’t fit. Keiran plays, but not with the same submissive, and never three times in a week. He’s never here enough for that until you came along. So, I ask again, what’s your story?”

“I don’t have a story,” she replied, lowering her eyes to avoid the intensity of the pint-sized domme’s penetrating gaze. If she were into women, Esme wouldn’t have been able to resist her draw, or the power of her dominance, and would have folded for her as quickly as she had Finn. “I’m just trying to figure out where I belong, mistress.”

“You like cock?”

Her mouth fell open. Latrice was as blunt as she was intimidating. “Yes, ma’am,” she stammered.

“There sure is plenty of that around here,” she muttered as her gaze swept the room. “Women who like women, not so much. I need to speak to Eric about adjusting the blend before I end up a voyeur like you.” Her eyes cut back to her and dipped down her front. “You look dressed for role-playing tonight. The hayloft?”

“Yes, mistress, as soon as Master Finn arrives.” She had to shout to be heard over the music and roar of the crowd as the band began their next song.

“Who?” she leaned in to ask.

“I mean, Master Keiran. I thought his name was Finn at first. It got stuck in my head. Then his friend called him that —” When the domme frowned at her, she realized she was babbling. “I’m, uh, meeting Master Keiran this evening.”

“You could do a lot worse. Though I don’t know him well, he’s got a fine reputation, both here and on the streets.”

“The streets?”

“And on the six o’clock news,” she added without answering her question. “Doesn’t help with anonymity at the club with cameras following members, especially owners, around. Though we have enough celebs, we should be used to it.”

“Wait. He’s got paparazzi following him? Like a movie star?”

She laughed, the sound lovely and soft, making the mistress seem much less scary—except for the quirt.

“He’d look good on the big screen, but no, I’m talking real news crews, little missy. If we had movie stars here, the paparazzi would camp outside our doors. We’ve got a few soap stars and B-listers, but mostly athletes, producers, and behind-the-scenes low-profile types. Master Eric is careful about that. I doubt he’s happy your man is in the headlines, but as the head of the fastest growing PI agency in town, it’s to be expected, I guess.” She eyed her for a moment. “Don’t you watch the news or read the Times?”

Esme shook her head, a knot of dread tightening in her belly.

Please, don’t let it be true. Just when she decided to give it a go again.

“He and his team, which make up about half the club’s masters, took down Martin Lopez, one of the leaders of

Hermanos de Venganza. They call themselves a drug cartel.” She snorted derisively. “But they’re just another thug gang running drugs, guns, and hos through the streets of LA. His arrest is a big deal—huge, really—especially since they’re rumored to have loose ties to the Mexican Mafia.”

“But...I thought Rossi did security systems or were bodyguards to the stars.”

“Yeah, that’s some of it, and security is in the Rossi title, but they hire law enforcement and ex-military. Why would that be, do you think? I heard in Texas, where it all started, they ran black ops missions off the books for the government, and they took down a major drug cartel operating in south Texas. You must have heard about that unless you’ve been living under a rock for the past five years.”

“Excuse me,” she whispered, feeling sick.

“You’ve gone pale,” the mistress said, standing when she did. She grabbed hold of Esme’s arm when she swayed on her feet. “Sit down,” she ordered, sounding every bit a domme now. “I can’t catch you if you go down.”

She wasn’t exaggerating. Esme would likely crush the petite mistress if she fainted on her.

Taking a gulp of air, she shook her head. “I’m fine, ma’am, really,” she said while tugging on her arm. “I remembered something urgent I must do. It’s a work thing and can’t wait.”

“If Master Keiran is expecting you, you’d better stay.”

She ignored the domme’s warning and twisted free. “I’ll call him, but I really have to go.” This last part she said while bolting for the door. There was no other word for the way she charged into the crowd, bumping into people who frowned at her with irritation. Without excusing herself, she rushed for the exit.

Esme had lied to the mistress. She wouldn’t call, she couldn’t.

First, she didn’t have his number. Second, she was afraid to.

Finn would be furious that she stood him up, but that wasn't it. He'd demand answers. And now that she knew he was a private detective, which explained a lot, combined with his dominant personality, he'd push until he got them.

She'd have to explain about Andrew, something she didn't do. Not in therapy, or even with Pax.

Esme had sequestered that awful night to a part of her brain she no longer accessed. An unhealthy coping skill, according to her shrink back home, but it's how she had survived the trauma. She also steered clear of law enforcement, especially detectives because they reminded her too much of her husband. With the same personality and inquisitive nature, these hero-types had the same stubborn determination to be on the right side of justice and stuck their necks out repeatedly to see it served. No wonder she responded to Finn as she did.

Detective Andrew Burton was a good man with a protective streak a mile long, a dedicated officer, and a decorated hero—posthumously awarded after being brutally shot. She thought he was one of a kind until she met Finn who'd been made from the same mold.

Why couldn't he be an accountant or a math teacher? Hell, she'd be happy if he drove a beer truck. Then he wouldn't be exposed to the dregs of society, putting his life at risk every day and dealing with criminals who'd shoot him as soon as look at him if it meant saving their asses. Or strung-out drug addicts who thought nothing of putting a bullet in his jugular if it meant they could get another fix.

A detective, even a private one, meant Finn took risks. And for damn sure, if he was in the news for taking out a drug boss, his PI job involved a lot more than celebrity security or following cheating spouses and taking pictures so they could make them bleed money in divorce court. That she could deal with. Instead, he put his life on the line, going after the worst of the worst. Crime bosses or gang leaders, in her mind there really wasn't much difference. Both sought retribution when crossed.

Hermanos de Venganza, Latrice, had called them. Even with rusty high school Spanish, she could translate that— Brothers of Vengeance.

Not really seeing where she was going, other than to the doors and getting out, she moved faster and bumped into a waitress with a full tray of glasses. Knocked off-balance, the girl tried righting the tray, but one tipped over the edge. Esme reached out to catch it, but her hands were shaking so badly, and her reflexes sluggish with panic, she missed, watching helplessly as one then another bounced, fortunately in one piece, off the carpeted section of the floor.

“I’m so sorry. I wasn’t watching.”

“No harm done. This happens, especially with bodies packed in here like sardines on nights like tonight.”

The band started playing again, and a deafening cheer went up from the crowd.

“Oh, this is my favorite song. Don’t you love them?”

Esme turned as the familiar lyrics to “Bring Me Back to Life” filled the large room. Through a break in the mass of people pressing close to the stage, she saw the lead singer’s long, wavy black hair and gauze tank dress.

“Is that...”

“Amy Lee. Can you believe how lucky we are to have her here live?”

*Wake me up inside...*

Her gut clenched. She knew the words to the song by heart.

Finn had done that to her, woken her up, but what was to keep her from dying again when he took a bullet in his throat, put there when the Brotherhood settled the score?

A horrible vision suddenly blocked out everything around her.

The deafening crack of a gun firing, the soft thud as lead ripped through flesh, the man next to her crying out in pain.

She reached for him, desperate to staunch the blood gushing in rhythm with his heartbeat from the mortal wound, her lifesaving attempts futile.

In her distraught mind, blue eyes turned to green and sandy-blond hair became dark brown with auburn streaks. Broken sobs racked her chest as she pleaded with him not to leave her. But her appeal went unanswered as the man she loved, this time a charismatic, larger-than-life Irish charmer, slipped through her fingers just...like...Andrew.

She whirled and ran for the doors as the chorus soared—*bring me to life*. With a strangled sob, she stumbled through them, an anguished cry of, “Not again. I can’t,” bursting from her lips.

The receptionist, not bitchy Alicia but someone new, shot her a concerned look, as did the security guard.

“Do you need help?” he asked her.

“No.” Quickly, she rushed to the exit. “I just... I’m late.”

“Wait. I can’t let you leave this way,” the man said as he rounded the counter.

But she didn’t wait, she couldn’t. Without slowing, she pushed through the solid wooden doors and hurried out into the late-afternoon sunshine. She didn’t look back when the guard demanded that she stop, or a few seconds later when a woman called her name. Ignoring them was rude, but what did it matter when she wouldn’t see them again? She didn’t plan to come back—ever.

She was done with the club, with Finn, and the whole idea of another relationship. Limiting her world to the office and her apartment had been working just fine until Pax dragged her to Decadence.

So what if she lived a dull, isolated existence? It was safer and far less painful.

All she needed for companionship was Phin.

Her steps faltered as the name echoed in her head and thoughts of Finn sent a pang shooting straight to her heart.



She'd have to nix the shortened version of his name. Even Phineas was out. Kitty would have to do from now on.

As she hurried down the street, with dusk falling over the city, she heard a familiar male voice shout her name. But she pushed herself harder, not stopping even for Master Eric.



AS HE JOGGED DOWN THE steps from the owner's apartments, Keiran combed his fingers through his damp hair. Though late already, he'd taken the time to shower and change. He wouldn't subject Esme to the smell of his sweat or the taste of salt on his skin. And he'd never touch her with blood on his hands, literally.

The psycho stalker had resurfaced about a week ago, but his attempts to get their client's attention had become desperate. He'd grown bolder. Today, he'd broken into her home and tripped the silent alarms they'd installed. Before the LAPD could blink, his men were on the scene, which turned into something out of a weird suspense thriller. The stalker had stripped naked and crawled into her bed, rubbing her expensive linens all over his body and jacking off on her pillow.

To make matters worse, she'd been home.

Lying in her tanning bed with the fan on, she hadn't heard him break in, but when she'd walked into her bedroom and found him, her screams had freaked him out. He'd taken his knife—they still weren't sure what he'd planned to do with that while naked in her bed—and lunged for her. They struggled, both ending up bleeding. Nothing life-threatening; her cuts were superficial, but the 110-pound woman had done serious damage with her acrylic nails.

Since he was first through the door, he had pulled her off him. It was enough for him to need disinfecting in the shower.

LA had plenty of whack jobs, which was good for business, but damn...

Now, he had to switch gears and settle himself, so he could handle Esme with the care she needed tonight.

Entering the lounge from the administration hallway, he stopped and stared at the mob scene in front of him.

“What the fuck?”

He scanned the room for Esme but didn't see her anywhere. On a regular night, her bright red-gold curls would be hard to miss, but the frenzied crowd on the dance floor looked like a fucking mosh pit, and the overflow into the bar area looked eager to join in.

He frowned but seeing at least six DMs on duty, all of them Rossi men, he figured they could handle whatever this was, and made his way to the bar.

Samson walked up just as he did.

“Whiskey, straight. It's been a helluva day.”

“It's not gonna get better any time soon, my friend,” the big burly bartender informed him.

“What now? This scene is unusual, but it's under control. Is there trouble in the dungeon?” He threw back the shot slid in front of him then stated emphatically, “If Dupree's short of monitors, he'll have to find someone else. I have plans.”

“Not anymore.” This came from Latrice on the stool next to him. She hadn't been sitting there when he arrived; he was positive. “She ran out of here about fifteen minutes ago like the devil was after her.”

“Who?”

“Esme.”

He eyed her red leather corset and skirt, the quirt she always carried tapping against the side of her spike-heeled thigh-high boot. The domme was likable, did her share of volunteer work at the club, but often found herself in the middle of controversy, like a drama magnet.

“What did you do, Latrice?”

“Me?” she exclaimed, taking instant offense. “I'm no poacher. She said she was yours. The next minute, she freaked. Seems high strung, and a bit unstable, either that or in need of

firm discipline. I'm willing to take her on when you're done with her."

"Did you tell her that?"

"Of course." She raised her hands, palms out, when he growled. "What? I didn't know you'd claimed her as yours. I didn't see a collar."

That was something he'd have to remedy. But first, he had to get a handle on his submissive and curb her tendency to freak out and run scared.

"What else did you say to her?" he snapped.

"Nothing. We talked about the membership and current events."

"What about events?"

"Well, lately, that's been you, Martin Lopez, and Rossi."

"Why would that upset her?"

"I don't know, but it did. She turned as white as a ghost, said she'd forgotten something, and the next second was gone."

A ghost. That had to be it. Something Latrice said must have triggered something, and he was certain it had to do with her dead husband.

"Fuck," he stated emphatically. He could fight a man and help her deal with demons from her past, but how did he defeat a ghost?

"I'm worried about her, Master Keiran." This came from Val who stood beside Eric, both having arrived unnoticed during his discussion with Latrice. "I can't be sure, but this seems like more than unresolved grief. It sounds more like triggered memories, perhaps flashbacks, like a victim of PTSD."

"You see her on Thursday?"

"Yes, but I'd planned to talk to her as a friend, away from Decadence, and offer her referrals. I can't ethically treat her since we're moving in the same social circles now."

He looked up at Eric. “I need to talk to her.”

“If she’s been through a trauma, perhaps you should find out what you’re up against first.”

“There’s something deeper at play here,” Keiran stated, the weight of his concern for Esme settling like a boulder in his gut. “I’m going to dig and find out exactly what happened in Baltimore. I’ll call Jonas in, if necessary. Once I find out, I’m going to her, and we’ll deal with it.”

“Be careful,” Val warned, her hand squeezing his forearm to relay the seriousness of what this was. “She’s fragile. If you push too hard, she could break.”

“Maybe I was wrong to give her that ultimatum,” Eric stated, while rubbing his face, clearly agitated by his role in the situation. “I just thought—”

His wife placed her hand on his chest and leaned into him. “You saw a submissive in trouble and wanted to help. There isn’t anything wrong with that, master. We all could tell something wasn’t quite right. You cared enough to do something about it.”

Covering her hand with his, he nodded but didn’t look convinced. “If we could reach Ryan Paxton, he’d have the answers.”

“I’ve got a friend in the Bureau,” Samson offered. He’d been leaning on the bar listening, but now he stood and pulled out his phone. “If he’s undercover, it might take a few days, but he’ll eventually check in.”

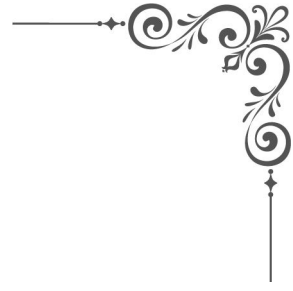
“I can’t wait a few days,” Keiran growled. Determined to resolve whatever this was with Esme ASAP, he turned to leave. The press of bodies hampered his exit, however. “What the hell is this? A concert?”

“Yes,” Sam, Eric, and Val all said at once.

“Fucking hell,” he growled, which instantly cleared a path through the group of giddy fan girls in front of him.

He was still within earshot when Val commented, “He fell for her fast.”

“Baby, you know as well as I do, here at Decadence, things tend to happen that way.”



## Chapter 16

TWO SHOTS RANG OUT. The first embedded in the wall behind them. The second with a soft thud and an exclamation of pain.

In front of her, protecting her body with his own, Andrew lurched forward and sank to the floor. On her knees beside him, when she rolled him onto his back, she saw blood gushing up through his fingers, clutching his throat. His blue eyes met hers, dazed with shock and pain.

Her screams for help mingled with her cries to him. “Stay with me. Please, don’t go.”

Sirens sounded in the distance.

“Help is on its way. Hang on a little longer. Please, master, for me,” she whispered as she pressed her hands to the burbling hole in his flesh, but the blood—so much of it—welled between her fingers. His hand encircled her wrist, and he squeezed, though with fading strength, and only for a moment. Then it went slack and dropped limply onto his chest.

“Andrew!” she wailed as the light went out of his eyes. But as they stared vacantly back at her, they weren’t the light blue they always were but a deep familiar green.

Again, she screamed her anguish, but oddly, her shrill shrieks were mixed with the startled high-pitched yowl of a cat.

Esme shot up in bed, shaking from the skewed-yet-vivid dream, her pajamas wringing wet with sweat.

The dreams had been frequent, almost nightly in the first year. Prescription drugs had helped decrease them thereafter, but they’d never entirely stopped. Now, stressful events triggered them, like Latrice’s revelations about Finn, and the vision that followed.

But today, they had changed. Before, they’d always been an exact replay of the shooting with her waking just as

Andrew faded away. It hadn't ever altered or included anyone else.

Esme stumbled weakly to the bathroom. She stripped and stepped into the shower, turning the water on full blast, not waiting for it to warm, and not caring if it was ice cold. Turning her back to the wall, she wrapped her arms around her trembling body as she slid down the tile to the floor. As the water went from frigid to lukewarm, to steamy, the spray heated her skin and the shaking finally stopped.

A horrible thought occurred to her then.

What if it hadn't been a dream but a premonition?



SHE DIDN'T GO BACK to sleep, too afraid to. With the rest of the weekend yawning in front of her, she decided to go to work. Alone in the quiet office, she could catch up on what had piled up all week while she'd been distracted by Finn.

"There'll be no more of that," she told herself firmly, as she headed upstairs to get dressed.

By the time she grabbed her purse and keys and was ready to head out, it felt like late afternoon rather than eight thirty, which is what happened when you stayed up all night. She eyed the instant coffee she kept on hand for Pax but couldn't bring herself to drink it. Instead, she retrieved her usual twenty-ounce diet Dew from the fridge.

Twenty minutes later, and still feeling sluggish, she turned into a drive-thru for another vat of caffeine to go.

Needless to say, by the time she unlocked her door and set down her keys and purse, she was wired. She also had to pee, really bad.

In the ladies' room, once she'd attended to urgent matters, she stood in front of the mirror trying to do something with the atrocious bun she'd configured—messy didn't begin to describe it. While she could smooth it into something half decent, there was no help for the circles under her eyes. If any of her colleagues had seen her looking like death warmed



over, they would have held up a cross to ward off her bad energy. Okay, that would have been Jasmine, but the others would have kept their distance and urged her to go home and rest, and since she worked with a bunch of germaphobes, insisting she stay home until she was better.

But resting might lead to sleeping, which meant dreaming. She couldn't handle that, not now, maybe never. In fact, she might never sleep again.

At her desk, she took a sip of bottled water then dug through her purse for Val's card. She dialed the number, hoping to get her machine, leave a brief message about her need to cancel then work nonstop as she compartmentalized like she always did.

Damn her luck. Instead of an automated message, Val answered on the first ring.

“Valerie Thornton.”

Her eyes shot to the clock. Eight-fifty a.m. What were the odds she had a private practice, a new husband who kept late hours, and she'd be available early on a weekend morning to answer her own calls?

“Um, Val, it's—”

“Esme, thank God. Are you all right? We've all been worried sick.”

“Why?”

“The way you ran out last night. You had a flashback, didn't you?”

“How—”

“I've seen it before and, honey, Eric and Keiran... Well, they own a security firm and they're both licensed investigators. Did you think they wouldn't dig?”

“It isn't any of their business.”

“One runs the club where you're a member and you're involved with the other. They think it is.”

“Not anymore.”

There was silence on the other end for a count of five.  
“Not anymore to which one?”

“Both. I won’t be back. I can’t.”

“Don’t decide now, while you’re upset. What if we meet for lunch? We can talk.”

“I’m sorry, Val. Being at the club and with Finn brings up too much—I can’t.”

“I understand, Esme. It’s scary starting over. I had to do it myself after my husband died, but I didn’t have the added trauma of him dying tragically in my arms.”

She closed her eyes. “Finn knows about that, too?”

“Like I said, they’re PIs, and very good at their jobs.”

“Isn’t that my freaking great luck?” she grumbled under her breath. “Listen, Val, I appreciate your concern, but I need to go.”

“Are you going to be all right?”

“I’ve survived five years with these memories. I’ve learned to cope.”

“Honey, survive you may have done, but trust me, you aren’t coping. Promise to call me if you need to talk. Any time.”

“I will, Val. Thanks.”

“A word of caution. Don’t be surprised if a worried, very pissed-off, extremely good-looking Irishman with a panty-melting accent—sorry, but you know it’s true—arrives at your door first thing.”

“I came into the office to catch up on work.”

“Then expect him at your office door second thing. These guys are good at finding people, too.”

“I’ve got the alarm system on.”

She chuckled, and Esme could picture her shaking her head. “I don’t think an alarm exists that a Rossi man can’t bypass.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“You’ve met Keiran Finnegan, haven’t you?” she deadpanned. “Good luck, Esme, and don’t forget I’m here if you need me.”

She stared down at the screen as the call ended. The wallpaper was a close-up of Phineas. What she wouldn’t give for a kitty cuddle, or better, a Finn hug.

“That was Val warning you I was on my way, I take it?”

Closing her eyes, she willed her heart, which had jumped into her throat, back into her chest. It didn’t go, nor did it slow, before she looked up. Finn leaned in her doorway, watching her.

“How did you know I’d be here?”

“I didn’t. I pinged your phone.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Do I even want to ask how?”

“It’s probably best if you didn’t.”

“You shouldn’t have come, Keiran. I’m swamped and can’t talk right now.”

Something flashed in his eyes at her use of his first name, probably because she’d never used it before. But he didn’t comment, his gaze shifting to her desk, empty, the way she’d left it Friday at five o’clock when she’d emptied her inbox. Caught in a fib, she felt the heat of embarrassment slowly rise in her cheeks.

One dark brow arched. “What did I say about honesty, Esme?”

“I know you know about Andrew. Val told me. But it’s not something I discuss with anyone—ever.”

“Which is part of your problem, lass. You can’t keep such an awful thing bottled up inside you, but I’m sure Val told you that.” He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. “You didn’t close your eyes last night, did you?”

“You’re wrong. Closing my eyes wasn’t the problem.”

“Bad dreams?”

She nodded.

“I can only imagine. What triggered them for you?”

“The club, it’s too much. I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I didn’t mean to lead you to believe that I could.”

“Bullshit.” Like a whip cracking, his expletive reverberated in the room. “You’ve been coming to the club for thirteen weeks without having a panic attack and running into the street. I stripped you naked and spanked your ass raw and you didn’t freak out. And when I blindfolded you, chained you, and made you come in the middle of the dungeon, you were begging me to fuck you, not panicking.”

Her jaw dropped then snapped shut. “I think you should leave. I have work to do.”

“Not until we settle something first.”

“You’ll get me fired.”

“If that happens, you can come work for me. I need someone to handle a two-foot-high stack of contracts, but we can discuss that later.” He walked forward, circumvented her desk, and moved into her space.

She rolled back in her desk chair, but he followed.

“I need my job, and you’ve got a lot of nerve being so nonchalant about it.”

“You’re right, I couldn’t care less about your job.” He bent over, gripped the armrests, stopping any further retreat. “I’m only interested in you, lass. What you went through was horrific, unthinkable, but it’s in your past. You’re not yet thirty, you can’t let it stifle the rest of your life.”

“I can,” she whispered. “It’s safer.”

He caught her chin, and though she resisted, gently but firmly tipped her face to his.

“What are you afraid of, Esme? Is it me?”

She didn’t hesitate in her reply. “Yes.”

“I won’t hurt you.”

“Maybe not intentionally,” she whispered.

“Ever, darlin’. I have more control than that.”

Something snapped inside her, and she leapt out of her chair. Taking him by surprise, he rose with her. She leaned toward him, her voice ravaged with emotion when she refuted his claim.

“Andrew thought he had control, but a bullet from a piece of human shit ended him.” She clapped her hands together as she shouted, “Just like that! I loved him, and he left me. And you”—in an explosion of livid energy, she pushed hard against his chest with both hands—“are just like him!”

Her shove rocked him back on his heels, but otherwise, he went no farther. As for Esme, she was far from done.

“Andrew fucked with the mob. And now, here you are fucking with drug gangs set on vengeance!” She shoved him again. “Are you insane? It’s right in their fucking name, Keiran Finnegan.”

Her hands fisted and fell to her sides, and she backed up a step, shaking her head vehemently.

“I won’t have it. Not again. I won’t fall in love with another hero set on saving the world from the dregs of humanity only to have him leave me trying to pick up the pieces of my shattered heart without him.” Esme’s voice cracked, and her shoulders slumped as the utter physical and emotional exhaustion of not only the last twenty-four-hours, but the past five years seeped from deep in her bones. “The last time broke me. To go through it again will kill me. I can’t survive it again. I’m not strong enough.”

Out of breath and energy, she trembled, her knees rubbery. Rational thought returned, and she realized all she had just shared. She hadn’t even told Pax some of those things. Venting was freeing as well as frightening, and like when he spanked her to an emotional release that first night, a strident cry erupted from her throat and a torrent of tears followed.

As he'd done then, he picked her up, set her in his lap, and held her.

When it went on, endlessly it seemed, he didn't try to stop it, just kept his arms clamped tightly around her, and with the benefit of the swivel office chair, rocked her gently, murmuring soft words of reassurance. And he didn't let go when her sobs had slowed to hitching, hiccupping breaths.

"How do you do it?" she asked brokenly, between sniffles when she could speak again.

He shifted, taking her with him, as he reached for the box of tissues she kept on a shelf next to her desk. Once he'd grabbed a handful and settled back, he asked, "Do what, sweet lass?"

"Get me to admit things I haven't told another living soul."

While he leaned her back in the crook of one arm, and dabbed beneath her eyes and wiped her cheeks, he tucked several tissues into her hand and ordered, "Blow."

She did as he told her, indelicately, because after that deluge, there was no pretty way to do it. When she was through and looked up at him, she was still sniffing.

His expression contained no judgment, and none of the anger of before. She read only concern and affection.

"Feel better?" he asked, a little smile curving his lips.

She nodded.

"Good." Then he answered her question. "I haven't done anything other than give you what you need, Esme. Whether by turning you over my knee, offering you a shoulder to cry on, or by confronting you with the truth."

"Others could have done that. A few have tried." She huffed a short, humorless laugh. "Except the spanking part, and I didn't have an emotional breakdown and bare my soul to them."

"Perhaps because you refused to let them in." One big hand cradled her face, his thumb stroking a still-damp cheek, his touch tender but purposeful in that she couldn't turn away

from his next words. “I’m different, though, aren’t I, lass? It’s been that way since the night Carlos was such an ass. You trusted me then, moving in close, seeking my protection, and you didn’t even know my name.”

“You had a badge,” she muttered, a pitiful attempt at an excuse.

“Mmm...” he hummed skeptically. “Tears are a good outlet for you, and wiser for a submissive than tearing into her dom and getting physical.”

“I shouldn’t have done either, especially shoving you. I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

He snorted as if offended. “Do I look like I can’t take it?”

“No, and you barely budged.”

“It’s good you don’t make a habit of it, or you’d have to retire your sub card and start carrying a quirt, like Latrice.”

“I’m sorry I lost it.” She sniffled again, and then, as shame washed over her, closed her eyes. “I learned pushing you around, or trying to, is very unsatisfactory. And not only because you’re as movable as a concrete wall. I don’t know how she does it.”

“Darlin’, look at me.”

She obeyed, without hesitation, seeing affection in his gaze, not the hard edge of anger and disappointment like when he’d first arrived. It stirred the warm, melty feeling inside her again. That’s when she knew her plan to become the crazy, sexless, single cat lady of Northridge was on shaky ground.

“You are no Latrice. She’s wired differently, more like me. It goes against your grain to dominate, even in anger, which is why you felt dissatisfied and remorseful afterward. We’ll take care of absolving you of your guilt with a good paddling later, and since I’ll enjoy it, too—because that’s the way I’m wired—you’ll be making it up to me at the same time.”

She sat up and stared at him. “Did you not hear me when I said I was through? I’m serious, Keiran. That goes for men, doms, and especially dominant male detectives.”

“I heard, but don’t accept it. I will help you work through this, and you can address the PTSD with whoever Val refers you to. Most of all, we’ll conquer this habit you have of pulling away from those who care about you and avoiding getting close to others because you’re afraid to lose them like you did, Andrew. You say we’re alike, so I know he wouldn’t have wanted that for you. I won’t allow it because, baby, that’s no way to live.”

“Get out of my head.”

He chuckled softly, dipping close to brush a kiss across her softly parted lips. “Not gonna happen, *mo chuisle*.”

“What does that mean?”

“Little translated it means my pulse or my heartbeat. But it’s also used as sweetheart or my darling.”

More of her shields melted. His accent got to her every time he opened his mouth, and he used it to his advantage, calling up the heavy artillery by using swoon-worthy Gaelic endearments to weaken her defenses and win this little skirmish. Not that he wasn’t well on his way to victory before he called her, his pulse.

“You’re tenacious,” she muttered. “Do you know that, sir?”

“Patient,” he replied, his green gaze unfaltering.

“Excuse me?”

“At the club, they say I’m patient as a saint. I wouldn’t go that far because last night, if I could have gotten my hands on you, I would have blistered your butt good. Today, I’m putting the plan I came up with into action.”

“Could you elaborate a little, since that plan includes me?”

“Operation live for the day begins today.” He caught her chin in his palm, when he added, “And you, sweet lass, are going to learn how to do it.”

“I don’t think I’m capable.”

“You will be because I’m going to teach you how.”



“Are you going to wear bulletproof armor 24/7? Because that’s what it’ll take.”

He grunted. “I don’t recall you being this sassy after your last deluge of tears, probably because I didn’t warm your ass first. But we’ll take care of that later.”

“Finn!”

He grinned. “I like when you call me that.”

“It slipped,” she said stubbornly. “I meant Keiran.”

His low throaty laugh chipped further away at her defenses.

“Nope, I’m Finn to you, have been since the beginning, whether writhing in chains beneath my flogger, snuggled up against me during aftercare, or while I’m fucking you. Since I’ve heard you scream it more than once while you’re coming, and I really liked it then, we’re sticking with it.”

Her head snapped around to check the door.

“I locked it on the way in just in case someone else decided to work today.”

She turned back. “Why would you want to get involved with me and all my baggage?”

“Do you think I haven’t lost anyone? I served for over a decade, Esme. The men who died in my arms weren’t as close as a husband, but they were my brothers.”

Tears flooded her eyes again, and when one overflowed, she whispered, “Oh my God, Finn, I hadn’t even considered. How do you live with the awful memories?”

“By dwelling on the good rather than the bad. Death is part of life, *a stór*, and it sure as hell is a part of war. Mourning those we’ve lost is natural, and heaven knows it’s never easy, but we can’t stop living because someone we love does.”

Her hand rose to his chest. “I know that, but I have to protect my heart. If I move on someday, it can’t be with a man who faces danger every time he steps outside. I’m sorry, but I won’t get involved with another cop.”

“I’m not a cop, Esme. And the case Latrice told you about isn’t typical for us. The men in San Antonio have dubbed the Rossi branch here in LA Security to the Stars for a reason. The bulk of our business involves installing state-of-the-art security systems and providing personal protection for the Hollywood elite. We take on venue security when they need to beef it up for a high-profile client, and our investigations are mostly into who’s cheating on whom among the rich and famous. And, occasionally, though we’ve had a run of them recently, we have investigated a few celebrity stalker cases.”

“Then how did a violent drug boss get dropped in your lap?”

“Our owner/CEO is ex-military, as are most of us. Emphasis on the ex, lass, so don’t think I’ll be deployed come tomorrow.”

“Andrew was a Marine. That doesn’t help your case, sir. He had a hero gene in his DNA, and I suspect you do, too.”

“Protecting the innocent and standing up for what is right isn’t a bad thing, Esme. It’s something we should all strive to do.”

She looked down at her hands, unable to keep from remembering the last hero she’d held in her arms. “So, you were saying about this drug boss thing...”

“It fell into our laps when we learned one of our clients was in deep with a drug pipeline running from Mexico, through San Antonio, all the way to LA. The DEA here pieced things together and called Tony. That we were the last to know did not make Tony Rossi happy. We don’t operate dirty—whether it be with money, drugs, guns, or women. Therefore, we did what was necessary to shut down this client and make sure they did not implicate us in his dirty drug deals. Lo and behold, what was happening in San Antonio led us to Lopez here, something that made the Bureau ecstatic and the LAPD pissed as hell since he’d been slipping through their fingers for months.” He reached out, caught her hands in his, and squeezed them tight. “He’s locked down now, Esme, as is his crew. In a few weeks, when the papers quit droning on about

it, we'll be out of the spotlight and back to business as usual; designing security systems for multimillion-dollar celebrity homes and dealing with pop diva's and pretty boy actors needing security for their next personal appearance or award ceremony."

She looked up at him, uncertainty roiling in the pit of her stomach. "What about when Lopez gets out? Or, if they call out a hit on you through the Mexican Mafia?"

His brows slammed together, and his lips dipped, deepening his frown. "Who told you about them?"

"Mistress Latrice."

Anger flickered in his eyes, but he replied gently, "As thanks for getting Lopez off their turf, *La Eme* is more likely to send me a gift basket than a hitman."

"Who?"

"The M, aka the Mexican Mafia. In the gang world and LA drug trade, Lopez and his clan were small potatoes and more of a pain in the ass for *La Eme* than competition."

None of it sounded safe to her. She shook her head.

"What if the big one hits California?"

"What?" she asked, his question so random she wasn't sure she'd heard him right.

"Or suppose some idiot blowing 4.0 gets behind the wheel and takes me out on the 401? I could keel over from eating too many Guerrilla Tacos chimichangas. I mentioned my obsession with the place, so believe me when I say it's a considerable amount. But there's always a chance I could live to the ripe old age of ninety-seven and die in my sleep as my grandad did."

She closed her eyes, now understanding where he was going with this. It made sense. Had she lived so long in the cocoon she'd woven around herself that she couldn't even try for a man as special as Finn?

He wouldn't let her shut him out. "Look at me, lass."

When she did, he was so close; all she could see were his beautiful green eyes.

“We can’t predict what will happen, baby. Only the big man knows that. So we have to live our lives taking every day as it comes like it could be our last, no holding back.”

She gazed back at him, the warm, melty feeling inside catching fire and becoming the heat of desire. Still, she’d never been one to gamble. Could she do so now?

“I’m not exactly a glass-half-full kind of person,” she told him uncertainly.

Smiling gently, he curled his hand behind her neck. “I get that, *a stór*. Lucky for you, I am.” He drew her even nearer until they were nose to nose and his words brushed over her lips. “Stick with me and you’ll be grabbing life by the horns and living like you were meant to.”

“Tenacious and stubborn,” she muttered, though with a rasp in her voice and a quickness to her breathing, her resolve all but evaporated.

“As the day is long. You gave me a taste of something special, and possessive dominant that I am, I’m keeping it for my own.”

He kissed her then, not gentle or sweet but hungry. With avid lips and a wickedly agile tongue, he claimed her, plain and simple, and took her breath away.

When he raised his head, she was clinging to him, her fingers somehow entwined in his hair without her knowledge.

“I’m taking you home to rest, lass. We’ll talk more afterward.”

“My car is here.”

“I’ll get one of my guys to drive it home for you.”

She stared up at him, wanting to be with him as much as she wanted to run away. But she’d felt worse in the twenty-four hours away from him than she had in a long while. Suddenly too tired to fight him, she relaxed in his hold.

“Let me shut down; then I’ll be ready to go with you.”

With an approving squeeze from his muscular arms, he set her off his lap, and moved back around her desk, out of the way so that she could see to her task.

In fifteen minutes, her hand enveloped by his much bigger one, Finn escorted her out to his car, this time a sleek, low-to-the-ground Jaguar convertible in charcoal gray. He tucked her inside it, and she sank into the plush bucket seat, running her fingers appreciatively over the leather and suede interior. Security to the stars or the BDSM club business must be lucrative ventures because his car had to cost at least twice what she made in a year.

As soon as he was behind the wheel, she turned to him. “What happened to your SUV?”

“That was a company vehicle. The Jag is mine.”

“It’s amazing.”

“I think so, too,” he agreed as he hit the push-button start. The engine roared to life then settled into a low, seductive purr.

She licked her lips as a tingly thrill shot through her. “Do you think, since we’re living for today, you could put the top down and show me what she does? I’ve never ridden in a convertible before. Or a Jag.”

He grinned, flipped a switch, and while the top was opening, crooked his finger at her. “For a price.”

Returning his grin, she leaned across the console and touched her lips softly to his. He allowed the sweet gesture for about a millisecond before his hand curled around her nape, fingers threading into her hair, and he took over.

When he pulled out of the lot and merged into traffic several minutes later, she leaned back, dazzled by the power of his kisses and savoring the taste of him still on her tongue. With the sunshine warming her face, Finn, capable and confident at the wheel, not to mention in conqueror-protector mode, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the ride—for all of thirty seconds. Then she promptly fell asleep.



KEIRAN SUSPECTED IT would happen, just not so quickly. When her head fell to the side, he picked up his Bluetooth headset, so he wouldn't be as apt to disturb her, and called Eric for her address.

"I take it you set her straight?" his partner asked.

"She's asleep in the Jag next to me and we're on our way to her house. What do you think?"

"You set her straight."

He could hear relief and satisfaction in Eric's voice. Feeling much the same, he reached over and laid his hand on Esme's thigh, needing a connection with her, even if she was out like a light.

"If not all the way straight, I'll have the kinks hammered out soon enough," he assured his friend.

"Damn, I hope not all of them? What would be the fun of that?"

"Her address, Dupree."

It took him several minutes to look it up, testing Keiran's vaunted patience while he chuckled the entire time. But as he glanced at the pretty redhead dozing peacefully in his passenger seat, nothing could spoil his good mood.

It was only a twenty-minute drive to her home north of the city. In a quiet, older neighborhood, Esme's house sat on a large lot with a privacy fence. Set well back from the street, it had a circle drive lined with tall shade trees. Though it wasn't big, maybe 2500 square feet, in this part of LA County, it had to go for \$800k, at least.

When he killed the engine and put up the top, she didn't budge. Nor did she move when he slid her purse from her lap, dug out her keys, and came around to lift her out.

Inside, he carried her upstairs and easily found her room because it was the only furnished one out of three. Once he set her down, he slipped off her shoes and pulled the covers up to

her chin. And he couldn't leave her without a gentle kiss, which he placed on her forehead. She didn't stir, breathing deeply. Since it looked like she'd be out for a while, he went to have a look around.

A tri-level with three-bedrooms and three-baths, the home had a cozy, feminine feel like its owner. The back of the house featured a comfy-looking den that opened up to a breathtaking backyard. It had a pergola-covered patio which provided a perfect spot to enjoy the fresh air and the stunning views of the mountains and the San Fernando Valley. He could imagine Esme curled up on the cushioned wicker furniture, sipping her morning coffee, and he looked forward to sharing the same quiet moments with her very soon.

As he continued his self-guided tour of her home, he figured her FBI agent husband had thought of contingencies and left her enough to cover it, since paralegals didn't bring in enough for an upper six-figure mortgage on their own. At least she had that, and the ability to leave her bad memories three thousand miles behind.

He couldn't imagine how difficult it had been for her. Witnessing a brutal killing was traumatic enough, but to have a loved one bleed out in her arms as she tried to staunch the blood... Little wonder she still had flashbacks five years after the fact.

In the living room, he picked up a framed photo of Esme cuddling a cat. Looking around, she saw none with her husband, her parents, or friends. Poor lass hadn't only shut down; she'd shut out everything from her past. Not all the submissives he'd been with had baggage, but many did—daddy issues, abandonment, abusive doms who didn't deserve to be called such. Esme's issues were even weightier and would take time and patience to overcome.

No matter her beauty, most men would run like hell.

He shook his head ruefully. Eric said he needed a challenge. With Esme, he had his work cut out for him, but in his gut, he knew she'd be worth it. Sweet, responsive, funny,

sexy as hell, and the way she opened fully and submitted when she finally let down those walls—fucking beautiful.

Since he planned to be there when she woke, and with hours to kill, he went out to his car and retrieved his laptop. Might as well get some work done.

When he came back and set up at her bar, an oversized tabby surprised him by landing with a solid thud directly across from him on the counter. The cat stared at him, blinked his big green eyes then meowed, making his presence before he walked forward and rubbed his cheek and the length of his body along the side of Keiran's open laptop.

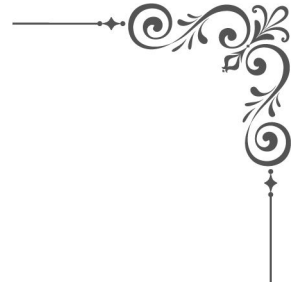
“Hello there, lad,” he murmured, extending his forefinger for him to sniff.

Tentative at first, it took only a minute before he started rubbing his face against his hand. Then, he nudged his head under his fingers for an ear scratch.

“You're a friendly one,” Keiran commented, still petting the demanding feline who promptly crawled into his lap and purred loudly.

He chuckled, not offended by being claimed, mostly for a bed, and stroked a finger under the cat's collar. When it appeared the big guy had settled in for a while, he reached for his wireless mouse and started working his way through the new client applications in his inbox. All fifty of them.





## Chapter 17

THE BED SHIFTED, AND something warm brushed against her, rousing her from sleep. Ignoring Phin, she burrowed deeper under the covers, not ready to get up yet. The something warm moved again, this time up her arm and over her shoulder then in a long, slow sweep down her back.

She tensed. Reality pulling her from sleep. No way could Phinny do that.

“*Mo chuisle*, time to wake up.”

Her eyes flew open. Finding Finn lying next to her, propped on an elbow, his head in his hand, she blinked. Her sleep-foggy brain took several minutes to reboot, but the events of the previous night and this morning came back to her. He’d dug into her past, tracked her down at the office, made it clear he wasn’t going anywhere and neither was she then kissed her until her toes curled.

She must have passed out in his car because from then until now, there was nothing. And he must have carried her to bed then stayed. She’d forgotten how nice it was to have a man taking care of her. Other than Pax, no one had since Andrew.

“If you sleep any longer, you won’t be able to tonight, and tomorrow you’ll be in the same shape, having your days and nights turned around.”

“What time is it?”

“Just past five.”

She stretched, her limbs still heavy from sleep. As close as he was, her breasts brushed his chest, and her legs, which were bare, rubbed the heavy fabric of his jeans. She’d been wearing a skirt and heels the last time she was conscious; he must have taken care of that, too.

“Are you hungry?” he asked quietly, while brushing a few tickling strands of hair from her cheek, gently tucking them behind her ear.

Their conversation from earlier replayed in her head. She could have this closeness, a man's tender nurturing, spontaneous lunches, check-in phone calls, laughter, fun, drinks at the club, dancing in a pair of strong arms, and sex—exciting, carnal sex with a dominant just like she yearned for so long. And even more important than all of that, someone to ground her and take charge when she needed him to, and to love. That's where this was headed, she was sure. And she could have it all with Finn if she could set aside her fears and live for the day.

Did she dare?

With his warm body next to hers, his feather-light touch caressing her skin, and the tender concern in his voice and his expression, her answer was a resounding yes.

It translated to a softly uttered, "I'm hungry, sir, but not for food."

With her gaze locked on his, she saw the moment his mood shifted and the kind, considerate nurturer stepped back, allowing the passionate, dominant lover to come forward. He needed no other invitation and rolled until he was on top of her. His mouth came down to cover hers as his hand swept down her arm. He found her fingers and interlaced his with her own. Deepening the kiss, he caught her other hand and brought both arms over her head. Balancing over her, he used his knees to spread her thighs then settled his hips between them, giving her more of his weight.

She welcomed it. But unable to wait for his next move, she tilted her hips upward, her body recognizing the hard proof of his desire as surely as it responded to his dominance.

When he rolled to his side, she whimpered at the loss.

"I'm not going anywhere, baby. But for this to work, both of us will have to lose some clothes."

She heard a zipper and the crinkle of a wrapper. Next came the sound of ripping fabric. As cool air wafted over her damp, heated skin, her eyes flew to his, shocked that the usually calm, composed, patient Master Finn had torn off her panties.

“I’ll buy you another pair,” he growled as he moved on top of her again. “Better yet, stop wearing the damn things.”

Feeling his skin against hers rather than denim and the insistent nudge of his cock against her pussy instead of a bulging zipper, she moaned, “Commando it is from now on, sir.”

There wasn’t much talking after that, mostly because she couldn’t, too overwhelmed by the power of his passion. Everything seemed to happen at once. His mouth captured hers with slow, drugging kisses, and he got to his knees, wedging them up close to her bottom. He draped her legs over his thighs. This left her hips tilted upward, and her pussy spread wide for him.

Wasting no time, he slid the broad head of his rigid cock through her slick folds. Her flesh quivered, her legs locking around him as best she could. Esme tensed with the anticipation of him filling and stretching her again. After a few long, delicious glides, he changed angles and aligned the tip with her entrance. Esme held her breath, waiting anxiously, a whimper of need emanating from her.

A second ticked past and another, but he didn’t move.

“Eyes on me, *a stór*.”

Her gaze rose and locked with his.

“Don’t hide from me, Esme. I want it all. You’ll look at me as I claim your pussy, so I can see your eyes as passion builds, to watch as your climax overtakes your body and you come. I want to see the pleasure written across your beautiful face.”

With their green eyes locked together, he plunged deep.

She cried out because with her hips tipped upward, once fully seated, Finn touched her in places never touched before.

He stretched out on top of her and reclaimed her hands, which hadn’t budged from where he’d placed them above her head. Then, with faces close, fingers pressed tight, and bodies entwined, he moved. His strokes were slow, sure, possessive, and her inner muscles rippled around him in response.

The delicious friction penetrated every nerve, and each well-timed thrust bumped her clit. She gasped for breath as he groaned and buried his face in her neck.

“Hand in glove,” he uttered as his mouth opened on her skin, which she took as affirmation of how perfectly they fit together.

Settling into a pattern of deep, steady thrusts and slow, measured withdrawals, Finn stirred sensations she’d never experienced before. It was beautiful, amazing, mind-blowing and every other trite adjective she’d read in any romance ever—but in this case, it was true.

And it was too much for her to take. She tried to hold back, but it was as impossible as stemming the rising tide in a storm. Pleasure washed over her, and as her orgasm peaked, her legs tightened around him, and she rode the convulsive waves of pleasure gripping her.

Rising to his knees, he braced on his arms, hands still interlocked with hers. He moved faster, hips thrusting harder, his cock driving deep until with a growl, he stiffened and planted inside her. Somehow, Esme found the strength to open her eyes and watch as he tensed above her, and with a rumble of pure satisfaction from his chest and throat, he poured himself into her.

Staring up at him, still panting from her climax, and blown away from witnessing his, she saw when his face relaxed, and his green eyes opened. Still turbulent from their explosive passion, while his gaze held hers, his lips kicked up in a lazy, sexy grin.

“I meant hungry for supper, lass, but that’ll do any day.”

Her lips parted, but before she could think of a plausible denial—which would have been an out-and-out lie—he dipped his head and took her lips in a slow, wet, bone-tingling kiss.

Long moments passed before he eased out of her and dropped to her side.

“Don’t move,” he ordered softly. “I’ll be right back.”

He exited the bed and crossed to the bathroom, likely to take care of what was in the crinkling wrapper she'd heard earlier. Lying flat on her back, staring up at her shadowed ceiling, her body tingling in the aftermath, she felt a swirling mix of emotion. Hope, that finally, she might move on, relief, that a good man like Finn existed to help her do so, and nagging guilt because as good as sex had been with Andrew, never had it been like just now.

"Nope," Finn admonished as he climbed into bed and gathered her close. "Living each day to the fullest does not include dwelling on the past."

"How do you do that?" she demanded to know.

"You wear your heart on your sleeve and your emotions on your face. And knowing your story, and what you gave me tonight, it isn't hard to put two and two together."

"I don't mean to dwell, really I don't, but it's difficult, especially at milestones."

He gazed down at her, and she could practically see the wheels turning.

"I've never been with anyone outside a club, or in my bed, not since..."

His hand rose to her face and tipped it back. "I'm honored to be a milestone, darlin'." His eyes twinkled, and a sexy grin encompassed his face. "I gather this means you think I'm something special?"

She'd used that exact word to describe him earlier. Damn! She was falling in love not only with a mind reader but one with spot-on recall. Her throat tight with emotion, a nod was the best she could do for an answer.

His smile gentled, and he dropped to her side to gather her close. With his mouth against her temple, he murmured, "For me, too, lass. We had a spark the first time we met, and it has sizzled every time since. I have a feeling this is more than special, but the beginning of something extraordinary."

"I hope so," she whispered.

“I know so,” was his confident reply.



ESME WOKE FEELING HEAVY headed and slightly disoriented. Lying still, she tried to get her bearings. It was her room. She could see her clock on the table, but the display was angled away too much for her to read it. The lamp was the same as always. Her sheets smelled like Downy, nothing new there, and Phin’s weight was across her waist, stretched long and heavy like always.

She reached down to pet him, and instead of fur, encountered skin.

With a shriek, she shot up and twisted around; her elbow catching something solid. When she heard a click of teeth and a low groan, she realized it was Finn’s chin.

Her hand flew to her chest to still her racing heart as the other slid up his arm.

“What the fuck, Esme?” he demanded to know in a deep growly voice.

“I’m sorry, but you scared me. I woke in a fog and thought you were Phin. But then you didn’t feel like Phin.”

There was a moment’s pause, before he drawled, “Darlin’, I am Finn.”

“Not Finn with an F. Phin with a Ph.” This clarified nothing for him, and he popped up on an elbow. In the dark, she could make out his perplexed frown.

Twisting, she stretched and switched on her lamp. Turning back, she shrugged apologetically then pointed to the end of the bed where Phineas sat watching them, his tail swishing back and forth at a leisurely pace. It surprised her. Usually, upon waking, he was demanding to eat.

Esme glanced at the big gorgeous man gazing at her big gorgeous cat who shared the same name—sort of.

“You named your cat Finn?” he stated incredulously. “Is that why you’re partial to calling me that?”

“Yes. But I didn’t name him after you, but for Phineas Frog, a character in a kid’s book. I call him Phin, or Phinny, for short.”

This got her a look that said don’t even think about calling the human Finn, Finny or her ass would pay the price. She wouldn’t dare, but she had to suppress a giggle because his disgruntled look was hilarious.

“Anyway,” she explained further, “I’ve had him for years, so it’s nothing recent, but it is a weird coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Phin,” he grunted, still staring at his namesake.

Suddenly, her fickle feline moved forward, walked up Finn’s big body, and planted his twenty-plus-pound booty in his lap. Esme looked on in stunned amazement as he purred and his cheek rubbed all over Finn’s chest and the underside of beard-stubbed chin.

“I can’t believe this. He hates everyone but me.”

“He’s a good judge of character,” Finn observed as he leaned back on the pillows and indulged her cat in a behind-the-ear scratch.

“You don’t get it. He even hated Andrew, and we made sure he fed him, but even that didn’t help. At best, he tolerated him.”

“Did you have him before you two married?”

“Yes.”

“He was jealous.”

“But why not of you?”

He looked at her, as did Phin. “Maybe he senses you need more than him in your life.”

He hefted the cat who looked like he’d settled in for a cozy nap on Finn’s chest. She blinked, shocked again. Usually, if moved at nap time, he turned into a grouch, and she could expect a low growl and sometimes a paw swipe—claws retracted. He wasn’t a complete animal. But when Finn leaned



over the edge of the bed and put him down, there was no drama, no formal protest, no Phinny cattitude whatsoever. He simply trotted away unperturbed.

“I think I’m still asleep and dreaming because I do not believe what I’m seeing.”

He chuckled and rolled back to her. At which point, he pulled her to him with a hand curled around her neck and after a divine kiss, whispered against her lips, “I’m sorry, lass, but I’ve got to get going.”

She looked out the window. The dark sky showed no signs that dawn was imminent. “What time is it?”

“Early. I have a meeting with a new client at eight and need to get home to shower and change first.”

“I should get ready, too, but I don’t want to.” This came out mumbled because she said it while yawning.

Finn was smiling at her when she finished, then he said, “Sick day.”

“What?”

“You’re still exhausted, lass. You’re taking a sick day.”

“I can’t. I’ve got cases to prepare and no one to do it except me.”

“You get time off, don’t you?”

“Ten paid days per year and two personal days.”

“And I bet you haven’t taken the first one.”

She couldn’t deny it, not with his alert green-eyed gaze boring into her.

“That’s what I thought. This will leave you with eleven.”

“You’re rather high-handed, especially with my job and benefits. Has anyone ever told you that?”

As soon as she asked, she regretted her words. Away from the club, in the comfort of her home, casually bantering moments ago about her cat, she’d forgotten for a moment she was talking to Master Finn.

Amusement flashed across his face. “If by high-handed you mean dominant, I hear it about every day of my life. But let me get this straight because I need to know, for future reference, so I understand how you think. You’re complaining that I’m insisting you take a day off, using a benefit you’re entitled to, so you can get some much-needed rest?”

Her lips parted, but anything she said would make her look petty since he was looking out for her. She snapped her mouth shut and shook her head instead.

“Smart girl, you know when to concede,” he murmured as the hand at her neck brought her face to his. He gave her another kiss, this one brief but just as hot then rolled to the edge of the bed and got up.

Treated to her first glimpse of his sleek, muscled back, nicely shaped, taut ass, and long, sinewy legs, she lost track of the conversation.

Finn cleared his throat. Caught blatantly ogling his butt, she blushed.

“Make the call, darlin’.”

“Yes, sir.”

Satisfied, and, since she made that so easy, he gave her a few more orders. “I have to work tonight, but tomorrow, I’m taking you to dinner. I’ll make reservations at Spago for seven o’clock. Will that give you enough time to get home and changed for me to pick you up?”

“Spago! I’ve always wanted to go there. But how can you get reservations at the last minute?”

“The owner is a client, and he’s usually very accommodating.”

She gasped. “Wolfgang Puck is a club member?”

“A Rossi client, darlin’,” he corrected, grinning broadly. “We handle security at his restaurant and his residence.” He continued to the bathroom, adding, “I’ll worry about dinner. You make your call after you’re finished ogling my ass, that is.”

“I wasn’t!” she sputtered.

Suddenly, he did an about-face and strode back to the bed.

Esme’s gaze dipped down to his sculpted chest, tight abs, and so much more. The view from the front was as jaw-dropping as the back. In a blink, he was beside the bed and bending over her, his fists planted on the mattress on either side of her hips. Staring into her eyes, he said, “You were, but I can’t blame you. Reverse our positions, and my eyes would be all over your glorious round butt, too. Said butt will also be rosy red for stalling unless you pick up the phone and tell your boss you’re taking a day off.”

“I can’t call at five a.m. No one is up now except city service workers, nurses, and crazy people.”

“Call the office and leave your message there, Esme. Otherwise, you’d have to set an alarm which defeats the purpose of a day off to catch up on your sleep.”

“Right, I can do that,” she whispered, transfixed by his handsome face being so close.

Satisfied—because he’d gotten his way, of course—he leaned forward, murmured, “There’s a good lass,” then gently but thoroughly kissed her.

“Have I mentioned you’re very good at that?”

“I don’t think you put it in words, but your breathy sighs and moans gave me a hint,” he replied, amused.

Bossy and feeling full of himself this morning, too.

“At the risk of overinflating what I think is a very healthy ego, I probably need to mention...”

Did she dare?

“What is it, *a stór*?”

His treasure... Yet another reason the man could talk her into anything, even to take a leap of faith, and dare to love again.

“I’m falling for you—hard. Am I crazy? I met you at Decadence less than two weeks ago.”

“I have it on good authority, from Eric, Thomas, and Flynn, another master friend of mine, that when it happens at the club, it tends to happen quickly.”

She'd seen Commander Flynn with Cassie and knew what Eric had with Val. Watching the smoldering heat of their passion had made her ache to have something even half as intense. She did now, and there was no halfway with Keiran Finnegan. Except he hadn't returned the sentiment.

She tipped her face up to him. “And they would know?” she prompted.

He nodded, offering no further insight into how he felt. But as she'd just pointed out, it hadn't been two weeks.

*Come on, Esme.*

Still, it stung not to have the feelings returned.

“Ah, darlin', you look like I ran the Jag over your cat.”

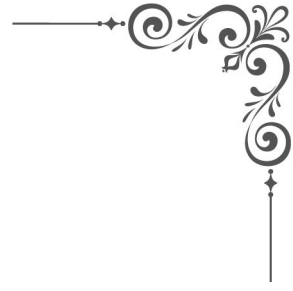
Her eyes automatically darted around the room, locating Phin curled up on his favorite fuzzy throw on the chair across the room.

He laughed softly. “Don't play poker, *mo chuisle*, you have a tell. I, on the other hand, need to go to Vegas and make my millions since you can't read from my expression I feel the same way.”

Her gaze shot from Phin to his. “You do?”

“I'm not down on one knee...but I've got good instincts. We're building something lasting, Esme. Count on it.”

This time when she blinked, it was to clear the tears from her eyes. She didn't have time to dwell on his words for long because his kiss demanded a response and sent the butterflies in her stomach into flight.



## Chapter 18

MONDAY TURNED OUT TO be a slow, lazy, perfect catch-up-on-her-sleep kind of day. After Finn left, she closed her eyes and didn't open them again until late morning, when Phin got in her face, his paw nudging her cheek insistently as he demanded his breakfast. While he ate, she poured a glass of juice and took it out to the back patio.

With a contented smile on her lips, she curled up on the lounge in the shade and slept away half the afternoon. After a light supper, a not-so-light call from Finn who made her feel warm and fuzzy, and a whole lot turned on, she was in bed by nine and didn't crack an eyelid until her alarm went off at six a.m. And wonder of wonders, she didn't dream once.

Rather than being refreshed and energized, Tuesday started out as a double Dew morning, needing more of a caffeine kick-start than usual to overcome the surprising sluggishness she felt.

Was there such a thing as too much sleep?

The dread of going back to work brought it on, more likely. Already leaning toward finding something else, Finn pointing out the unsafe neighborhood and Gerald's lax security—a symptom of his disregard for his employees in general—convinced her that giving her resume a good dusting off was past due.

The decision to begin job hunting turned out to be the highlight of her morning. Things went quickly downhill thereafter. A four-car pile-up on the freeway put her twenty minutes late, though she'd left a half hour earlier than usual. Mr. Reinhart's crappy alarm system blaring for the first ten minutes after her arrival had brought on a headache.

The police officer who responded wasn't happy since it was the third complaint of the day. He'd ordered them to unplug it, or his next stop would be with a noise citation.

Things had calmed down for an hour or so, but that didn't mean Esme had smooth sailing. Her computer wouldn't start

for some reason. She crawled around on the floor, checking to make sure plugs were firmly in sockets and cords securely plugged into jacks. After searching on her hands and knees in the cramped, dusty space, she crawled out, unable to find anything wrong.

“I have a directory with the IT consultant on my computer, but a lot of good that does me,” she grumbled.

About to call Jasmine to see if was having issues, too, male laughter made her look up.

She could hardly believe her eyes. Of all the people she might have guessed she'd find standing in her doorway, Carlos wasn't one of them.

“Looking for this?” he asked, while holding up what looked like a computer component of some kind.

The sound of his voice made her cringe, and the smell of his overpowering cologne in her tiny office made her stomach roll. She couldn't forget the feel of his rough hands on her wrist, leaving a painful ring of bruises. She had hoped never to see him again, and certainly never expected him to show up where she worked.

“What is that?”

“Your hard drive; I'm not taking any chances.”

“Chances with what?” He didn't answer, giving her a smug grin, icy contempt in his brown eyes. A chill crept up her spine.

When he stepped into her office and closed the door, the soft snick of the lock seemed deafening. Esme's alarm rose to panic levels. He had no legitimate reason for being here, let alone sealing them in an office alone, and compounding that, tampering with her computer.

“What are you doing here, Carlos?”

“That's Master Carlos to you, cunt,” he spat.

She flinched at the foul word, which only made his oily grin widen.

“What’s the matter, slut? Can’t handle the truth? What else do you call a cock-teasing submissive?”

When he moved toward her, Esme shot to her feet, stepping around her desk to keep it between them.

“I didn’t tease you. You came up and grabbed me. I never showed any interest.”

“Showing up on Edge Night having no intention of playing is teasing. Does Gerald know he’s got a frigid sub working for him?”

She stiffened, hearing him call her boss by his first name. Something was going on here beyond her rejection of him at the club.

“Step aside, please. I’m leaving.”

“You don’t give the orders here, bitch!” he snapped.

The look in his eyes scared her. They wavered and shone with a strange light. She needed to get out of there fast. Esme glanced at the door. To reach it, she’d have to get past him.

She inched around her desk to the left, hoping he would move as she did, and she could get to a place where she could make a run for it.

“Stop moving. You’re not going anywhere except onto that desk, flat on your back, while I fuck you.”

“You’re crazy if you think that’s going to happen. Get out of my way, or I’ll scream.”

“Go right ahead. No one else is here except Gerald who works for me.”

When Carlos lunged for her, she ran, shoving her chair in his path. This slowed him down but didn’t stop him. With a growl of rage, he picked it up and hurled it out of the way. The loud bang when it crashed against the wall couldn’t drown out Esme’s screams.

Winded from his explosion of rage, he glared at her across the length of her desk. Unfortunately, he was still on the side nearest to the door. His face looked harder, his eyes glowing



bright, and anger, as well as his exertions, had stained his cheeks red. She identified the latter because he was sweating profusely.

“If you expect to walk out of here when I’m through with you, I suggest you obey me and start showing me some respect. Better yet, shut the fuck up.” Suddenly, a malevolent smile split his face. “Luckily, I have something to make that happen.”

He dropped the hard drive on her desk and picked up a black bag from the floor beside her credenza. She frowned. He didn’t have it when he came in, did he? But she didn’t wonder about how it got there any further, not when Carlos removed an array of implements from the bag and laid them on the desk as though setting up for a scene. First, he pulled out a bundle of rope, next was a gag, and finally a wicked-looking short-tailed whip.

He’d planned this, obviously. Intent on carrying out whatever he envisioned for her that night at the club. After being thwarted by her and Finn, she didn’t doubt the cruelty and pain factors would be exponentially worse now. When the cuffs came out of the bag, she didn’t wait any longer. He was bigger and stronger, and while she didn’t expect a different outcome, she had to try. She couldn’t merely remain passive while he bound, whipped, and raped her.

Once again, she bolted for the door, screaming for help. Carlos was better prepared for her this time. On her in a blink, his fingers sank into hair, and he jerked her head back viciously.

Esme cried out at the searing pain in her scalp. Her hands flew to his, nails digging into his skin as she tried to break his grip. Tears flooded her eyes when he dragged her to her desk and threw her onto it. Papers, pens, and her laptop went flying. She would have tumbled over the other side, and maybe it would have been better if she had, but he caught her arm and ankle and flipped her onto her back.

“What frightens you, cunt? Not my whip, surely. That’s what you like, isn’t it? I saw you leaving with Finnegan, all

misty-eyed from his charm.” His face contorted into a frightening mask of contempt. “Do you think I’m a fool? He’s a whip master, too, which means you must crave the lash, as I suspected.”

“No, please, let me go.”

“What’s going on in there?”

Upon hearing Gerald’s muffled voice through the door, Esme felt a surge of hope. “Please, help me,” she cried.

“Go away, Gerald,” Carlos called.

Keys jangled, the knob turned, and the door swung inward. Despite her boss’ stricken expression, Esme had never been so happy to see anyone in her life.

“Butt out, Gerald. This isn’t your concern.”

“No, please,” she repeated, not stopping her struggles. “Don’t let him do this.”

“You’re supposed to be finalizing my accounts,” Carlos snapped. “By the time you’re done, I’ll have finished with your little paralegal, and we’ll go. If she pleases me...” Ruthlessly he gripped her chin, his hard fingertips pinching her skin as he angled her face his way. “Maybe I’ll take her with me. The plane ride to Argentina is long and can be tedious without something to pass the time.”

“You said nothing about harming my staff, Carlos, or kidnapping. You’re risking both our necks with this ridiculous vendetta. Let her go and let’s finish our business.”

His head shot up, and with a crazed look in his eyes, he shouted at the other man. “Don’t tell me what to do! You work for me, remember?”

While he was distracted, Esme turned her head enough to sink her teeth into his hand. Carlos yowled in pain and pulled back, cradling it to his chest. It was the chance she needed to scramble off the desk. As soon as her feet touched the floor, she ran for the door and Gerald, who stood in front of it.

“Don’t you fucking move another inch,” her attacker roared. The raw fury in his voice, and something else,

bordering on hysteria, sent a chill down her spine. Esme dared a glance back.

The man had snapped, and to prove it, reached into his jacket, withdrew a gun, and took direct aim at her chest.

A cry of terror rose in her throat as her mind flashed back to five years before and another man with murderous intent. Before it burst free, Gerald grabbed her and pushed her behind him.

“You don’t need her, dammit. The Feds are closing in, Carlos. Once you’re safely on the plane to Buenos Aires, the money I’ve stashed in your accounts will buy all the tail you could possibly want. But you won’t be able to spend it on pussy or anything else from behind bars.”

“The million dollars I’ve paid you in legal fees means I get to do whatever the fuck I want, including doing the little ice princess here. Step out of my way.”

“Stay behind me, Esme,” her boss directed. Even though he was bravely protecting her, his body trembled against hers, and she heard the quiver in his voice.

“Stay behind me, Esme,” Carlos mimicked. “Aren’t you the big hero all of a sudden? What? You’ve got a hankering for her, too? Or maybe you’ve already had a taste and want to keep her for yourself.” He shifted the muzzle of the gun toward Gerald. “I thought I told you to finish the account transfers.”

“They’re done.”

“Excellent. That means your services are no longer required.”

A gunshot exploded in the room. Gerald’s body jerked violently and flew backward, right into her.

Too terrified to scream, Esme slid down the wall and onto the floor with her would-be protector on top of her.

“Good riddance,” Carlos said while staring dispassionately at the man he just shot as though it was nothing. Then he looked at her. “Now, cunt, if you don’t want to end up the

same way, get your ass over here. I'm tired of your disobedience."

Crushed beneath Gerald's dead weight, she could hardly breathe, let alone move her ass anywhere. Her horror didn't end at Carlos' name-calling, or intentions of whippings and rape, or his death threats, or being trapped beneath her boss' still-warm corpse. It continued as his blood, warm and sticky, soaked through her clothes.

The scene was too much like the nightmare from her past. This time, Esme was the one who snapped.

When Carlos rolled Gerald off her with his foot and reached down for her, she went berserk. Fortunately, she caught him off guard. He expected her to be cowed by the gun he still held or numb with shock after witnessing someone shot dead in front of her. And she should have been; such a reaction was perfectly normal. But Esme fought him tooth and nail—literally—kicking, punching, and biting. She did anything and everything to force him to release her, determined to escape the gunshots, and the blood—so much blood.

In their struggle, she head-butted him under the chin, which snapped his head back. Seeing her opportunity, she followed it with a two-fisted backhand punch which twisted him around. The gun went flying one way and she the other—out the door, down the hall, and through the rear entrance. She took the rickety steps two at a time and with strength and speed born of pure adrenaline, raced across the parking lot.

When she got to her car and jerked on the door handle, it slipped through her blood-slick fingers. She gagged, wiped her hands on her clothes, and tried again.

"Fuck!" she screamed with frustration when it wouldn't open. Her keys and purse were in her office with Carlos and poor dead Gerald.

She sobbed hysterically. Was she living under a freaking bad luck cloud?

But in a flash of rationality, she remembered her spare key. She raced to her rear tire well and reached inside, searching

around blindly.

“Please, God, let it be here.”

Her fingers brushed the magnetic key holder and pried the metal box loose. With trembling fingers, she slid open the lid, dumped the key in her palm, and unlocked her door.

When her ass met the seat, she barely had her feet inside before she slammed the door and hit the locks. With her lungs seizing and her heart pounding like a bass drum in her chest, she tried sucking in deep breaths to keep from hyperventilating. That’s all she needed right now.

She stabbed the key at the ignition, but her hands were shaking so hard, she missed. A second and third attempt had identical results, and she mentally cursed herself for buying used instead of paying the little bit extra for the newer model with a push-button start.

Finally, on the sixth or seventh try, while using one hand to steady the other, she got the key in the small slot. Her success came at the same time an enraged shout rang out behind her.

“You’re dead, bitch!”

Convinced Carlos would end her as heartlessly as he had Gerald, she prayed her not-always-reliable eight-year-old vehicle would start. The engine turned over on the first try, and with a sob—half relief and half terror—bursting from her throat, Esme threw the car in reverse.

Without sparing a glance behind her, too afraid to, she roared out of the space. Her fear was justified because as she slammed on the brake and shoved the gearshift into drive, a gunshot rang out. Near simultaneously, a metallic ping sounded as the bullet deflected off her car.

Screaming in terror, she ducked down just as another bullet hit, this time shattering her rear window. She didn’t think, just reacted, and stomped the gas pedal to the floor. The tires spun and squealed, telling her to let up a bit. When she did, the vehicle hurtled toward the exit.

Someone up above must have been watching over the crazy lady on Wilshire that day because when she barreled out

of the lot doing sixty and turned onto the always-busy street without looking, no one was coming. Esme recognized that small piece of luck on a horrific day such as today, couldn't possibly hold out and scooted up in her seat just enough to peek over the dash. With no destination in mind other than getting away from Carlos as fast as possible, she went straight if the light was green, turning right when it was red, doing whatever was necessary to keep from stopping.

She'd witnessed a murder and an attempt on her own life. He'd come after her to protect his ass. She had to go somewhere safe.

The police station was the obvious choice, but the only one she knew of was in her Northridge neighborhood ten miles away. Calling 911 wasn't an option because her phone was with her keys and purse at the office. She didn't dare stop to make a call.

Finn's image popped into her head. If not him, one of his men would be in the office this time of day, surely. Searching the street signs to find her bearings, she passed a sign for I-110 and realized she was headed the wrong way.

"Shit!" she cursed, sensing the black cloud creeping over her again. Crossing two lanes of traffic, she made a left at the next light, her eyes shifting between her mirror and the road constantly, like she was at a tennis match.

And in all that time, she never passed one police station or patrol car.

The only space in front of his building was the fire lane. She didn't care at this point, and pulled into it. Opening her door, she checked both ways. With no deranged man intent on murdering her in sight, she sprinted for the glass double doors with the Rossi company name etched in black and gold. Her legs were rubbery as shock took hold, so her sprint was more of a stagger.

The receptionist, who looked up as she entered, gasped, "Dear God." Even though she stared at her, horror-struck for some reason, she reached for her phone. Her alert of "Code 6 in the lobby" echoed from speakers overhead.

“I’m calling EMS now, honey. Hang on.”

“No. Call Finn first, if he’s here, then the police.”

A door slamming open coincided with a ding, and she turned toward the barrage of thudding footsteps that came next. Four big men, all of whom she’d seen before in the unlabeled, nondescript, warehouse-big, bondage club across the street, skidded to a halt when they spotted her. All except Master Eric who shouldered past the two frozen men in front of him and came toward her.

“Jesus, fuck, Esme,” he exclaimed. “Where are you hurt?”

“Were you shot?” one of them asked.

“Joan, call 911,” another demanded.

“I’m doing it now,” the woman told them. “Gunshot wound. Rossi Building. Beverly Boulevard.”

“Call Thomas, too. He’s at the club,” another man advised. “Tell him to bring his kit.”

“How are you on your feet, sweetheart?” Eric, next to her now, took her gently by the shoulders while he scanned her chest and abdomen.

“I’m not shot.”

“Then where are you injured?”

What were they talking about? She was shaken up, and the right side of her face was numb where the bastard had backhanded her, but not badly enough for an ambulance. But as she stood there, surrounded by men who could help her, only one man would do.

Already the adrenaline surge had begun to recede. Her hands were shaking so badly, they didn’t stop when she clenched them into tight fists. As the hysteria rose within her, she felt sure she would lose it if she didn’t find Finn soon.

Her voice came out high pitched and squeaky as she pleaded, “I need to see Finn. Can you call him for me, please?”

“I’m right here, lass.”

Spinning around, she found him standing in the same doorway she had entered only moments before. Overwhelming relief washed over her. She wanted to go to him, to melt in his arms, to feed off his strength, but her feet wouldn't move. But thankfully, she didn't have to. He came to her, his hands encircling her upper arms. At his touch, her knees gave way and so did the hold she had on her tears, emerging in a loud barrage of sobbing.

His greeting was the same emphatic, "Jesus, fuck," as his friend's and followed by a similar but more frantic question. "Where are you injured?"

"Why does everyone keep asking me that?" she wailed.

"Because, baby, you're covered in blood."

Following his gaze, which moved systematically over her chest and belly as Eric's had done, for the first time she saw her blouse. Once white, it was now stained crimson. So much had soaked through the silky material it clung to her skin.

The moment Carlos put a bullet in Gerald's chest flashed before her eyes. She relived the bullet's impact, the sick sound as it ripped through flesh, and the warm splatter of blood onto her face as the bullet exited his back and came only inches from Esme's head.

"Get it off!" she cried in horror. Her fingers curled into claws as she tore at the buttons.

"*Mo chuisle,*" he uttered, attempting to soothe her as he caught her wrists. "Let me see to you."

"No! Too much blood. Get it off," she repeated, struggling against his hold.

"Esme, stop!" he ordered sharply, fingers like steel bands trapping her hands against his chest. "You'll hurt yourself more. You're in shock, baby. We'll take care of you first, then clean you up, I promise."

Suddenly, she froze, his stern command, but more so his concern for her penetrating at some level. Staring up into his handsome face, ravaged with worry, she whispered, "It's not mine, Finn."



“Then whose?” he demanded, searching her face to make sense of it.

“Carlos was at my office and shot my boss. He landed on top of me.” Her face and body crumpled, falling against him weakly, as the brutal scene flashed before her again. The sobs returned. “I’m fine, but Gerald... He’s dead; this is his blood.”

He swept her up in his arms and cradled her close. When her fingers curled into his shirt, gripping him like he was a lifeline, his hold tightened. “I’ve got you, love. Let’s get you upstairs.”

When he moved, a wave of dizziness assailed her, and she closed her eyes.

His men followed, their boots thudding loudly on the tile.

“Carlos who?” one of them asked.

“Does she mean Hernandez? From the club?” inquired another.

“Formerly of the club,” a third corrected. “Eric kicked him out.”

“What does that have to do with Esme and her boss?” the first man inquired.

“Good question,” Finn muttered.

“So much blood,” she whispered, “and death. Just like before.”

A rushing sound filled her ears, and she felt her body go limp. Her fingers no longer able to hold on, released Finn’s shirt. Then, all she knew was blackness.



ESME DIDN’T BAT AN eye when he took her downstairs to the locker room, removed her blood-soaked clothes then carried her in a dead faint into the shower. He examined every inch of her body as he washed her clean then had her dried and dressed in oversized sweats from his locker by the time the paramedics arrived. They insisted on evaluating her and, except for a nasty bruise and swelling over her right cheek,

found no other injuries. Keiran knew they were there, deep emotional wounds, invisible to the eye.

Her vital signs were normal. Still they wanted to take her in because she wasn't responding. Thomas arrived in time to explain he was her personal physician and she was under his care. They looked skeptical, but after seeing his credentials and without medical cause, other than being sound asleep from mental exhaustion, they packed up, got Thomas' MD on the dotted line, and took off.

"She'll be safer here than in a packed ER somewhere," he'd explained when Keiran thanked him. "What's going on?"

"I don't know, but it involves Carlos Hernandez and Esme's boss, a local criminal defense attorney." He gazed down at her pale face and motionless form, other than the slow rise and fall of her chest. "I don't want to leave her like this, but if you'll stay and watch over her, I'll go figure it out."

"Certainly, I will," Thomas assured him with a hard clap on his shoulder. "The little redhead got under your skin, quick."

"Yeah, and she's dug deep. If it's up to me, she's there for good."

Val arrived shortly after and sat with Esme who still slept soundly on his office couch. She wanted to be there when she woke, in case she was still in distress, and Keiran didn't argue. This freed Thomas up to man the control room, as he pulled men off noncritical assignments to help make sense of whatever shit had gone down, putting his woman smack dab in the middle.

While he made the calls, Keiran got in touch with Jonas Mitchell, the best computer man in the company, and had him dig deeper into Carlos, and Gerald Reinhart. With that in the works, he and Eric visited their contacts in the LA Police Department.

Leads were coming in, money trails were popping up, and by evening, he and his team had connected the dots, including narrowing down Hernandez's whereabouts to one of four

locations. The detectives were making headway, but they also had other homicides they were working where Keiran and his men did not. Their snail's pace wasn't fast enough for him, not with Esme's life in danger. He assembled the team at the office and gave them their assignments, expecting to have this wrapped up, with the asshole terrorizing Esme turned over to the police by morning.

Before he headed out, he stopped in once more to check on her.

Haunted green eyes met his when he sat down on the couch beside her. Even though she'd slept the entire afternoon, her ashen complexion and the shadows under her eyes made it look like she hadn't shut her eyes in a week.

Taking her hand, encouraged when her much smaller fingers curled reflexively around his own, he lifted them to his lips for a kiss. Then he leaned forward and placed another on her forehead.

"Esme, darlin', I've got to go, but Val is here, and Thomas is upstairs if you need him. I have guards posted to keep you safe until I return. And when I do, this nightmare will be over. I promise."

Her grip tightened painfully as she clung to him. "Stay with me, Finn. Let the police handle it."

"We've got leads to check out. They're strong. We can wrap this up tonight."

"No," she exclaimed, her other hand coming to his chest, her nails digging in and biting into his skin even through his shirt. "You won't come back."

"I will, baby. We'll get him and put him away where he can't hurt you again."

"No," she repeated, climbing into his lap and wrapping her arms in a choke hold around his neck.

"Hush, darlin', trust me." But she wasn't hearing him, keeping up a steady chant of "no's" and "don't go's." He looked over her shoulder at Val for help.

With tears in her eyes, she moved closer and spoke low. “She’s still in shock. In her sleep, she kept talking about blood, death, and Andrew.”

“Her husband.”

“Yes. He died in her arms, and now her boss. I think she needs sedation, maybe hospitalization.”

“She stays here, where she’s safe. Call Thomas,” he demanded. “Maybe there’s something he can give her until this is over.”

“I’ll get him,” Eric said from the doorway.

“Master Thomas? From the club?” Val clarified, turning to her husband in confusion. “What can he do?”

“He’s a doctor, love,” he told her before disappearing into the hall.

“No doctors, no hospitals,” Esme cried in his ear. “If we stay here, he won’t find us.”

He could feel her body trembling, and her voice wasn’t her own, more of a frightened child stuck in a night terror. But today, Esme’s had been all too real.

When Thomas arrived, Keiran tried to put her down so he could examine her. But she shouted, “No!” and climbed up his body like a tree, her arms and legs wrapping him up tight.

It broke his heart, but he held her still while the doctor exposed her hip for an injection. “What is it?” he inquired as he looked on.

“Lorazepam, a mild sedative. It should take effect in a few minutes, and she’ll sleep for a few hours.”

As Thomas predicted, her body stopped shaking and the death grip she had on him relaxed. In about ten minutes, he eased her down on the couch and covered her with a blanket Val handed him. Her eyes were open, though getting heavy, but the lingering fear he saw stabbed at him like a knife in the gut.

“Close your eyes and rest, baby,” he urged softly while stroking her hair back from her face. He continued to do so until he could no longer see her beautiful green gaze and her lashes lay in a dark fan against her pale cheeks. He waited another few minutes, giving the medication time to knock her out, before he moved. Seeing her like this strengthened his conviction to have Hernandez behind bars tonight, or out of her life in other, more permanent ways.

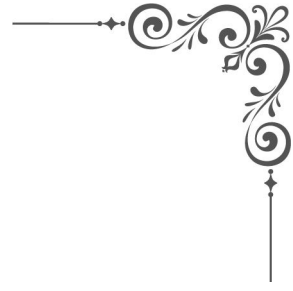
Thinking she slept, he shifted to stand, but her hand shot out to his, her grip surprisingly strong. She looked drugged but sounded lucid when she demanded, “Promise you’ll come back to me.”

“I promise, *a stór*,” he stated firmly while bending to press a kiss to her lips. “Sleep and heal, baby.”

She nodded but had one last thing to say. “If you don’t come back, and I lose another man I love, so help me God, Keiran Finnegan, I won’t mourn because I’ll never forgive you.” She said nothing more and her eyes drifted shut.

“A vow of love and a threat all in one. Your woman has a way with words, my friend.”

He rose and strode to the door, brushing against Eric as he moved through. “Come on. Let’s end this, so I can keep my promise, my woman, and her love.”



## Chapter 19

“I WANT TO GO HOME.”

Val glanced up from the notepad she'd been doodling on while trying to pass the time. “You're on lockdown, Esme. We don't know Carlos' motivation yet—revenge against Keiran, the club, you, all of it, or maybe the connection is merely Gerald Reinhart. Whatever it turns out to be, you're safer here until they have him in custody. Besides, it's Keiran's orders, honey.”

“I did this to him.”

“Who? Gerald?” Her wavy blonde hair bounced around her shoulders as she emphatically shook her head. “You didn't make Carlos pull the trigger.”

“No, Finn.”

“What are you saying?”

“Everyone I love, my parents, Andrew, Pax, and now Finn, they all wind up dead.”

“I come back to check on my patient, to see if she needs more medication, and what do I find? A submissive in need of a spanking.”

Val and Esme both gasped at this comment from Thomas as he walked in the door, black bag in hand—a doctor's bag, not a dom's. He set it down on Finn's desk then stood over her chair, glowering down at her, arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Ryan Paxton isn't dead; he's on a mission, you know that. And Finnegan is going to be fine. He's not good at his job, Esme, he's the best, and when he tracks down Carlos, the two-bit, H-pushing, scum of the earth, motherfucker, won't know what hit him.”

“H?” Val asked.

“As in heroin, Hernandez is a drug boss. Or he was until we busted his crew. They were small scale but making inroads

into the LA drug market.”

“Is organized crime everywhere?” Esme asked bitterly.

“I wish I could say no, girl, but I can’t,” Master Thomas replied. “But back to the bullshit you were spewing when I walked in. A drunk driver killed your parents, which has nothing to do with you.”

“Who told you that?”

“I read your file,” he stated.

“But I didn’t put that in my Decadence application. I kept the personal to a minimum.”

His glower deepened. “Yes, which is why we had to run another check while you were sleeping this afternoon, a very thorough one.”

Not herself, and living dangerously because of it, Esme glowered back at the surly doctor dom. “That’s just perfect. I suppose everyone at Rossi knows my blood type and when I started my period as a teen.”

“O positive and age fourteen,” he stated matter-of-factly. “That is a little old these days. You were a late bloomer.”

She gaped at him and that he’d spouted off private medical information—accurately—as though he were her doctor for real.

“Is there nothing you Rossi men don’t know about me?”

“Highly doubtful. Jonas Mitchell ran background on you, my lovely, and he doesn’t miss much.”

“Did he discover I’m cursed, and it spreads to the people I care about?”

“Here we go again,” he muttered, his face contorting in disgust. “The only curse any of us has is being human. We’re finite, girl. No one is guaranteed to see tomorrow, so we must live today to the fullest.”

“You sound like Finn,” she grumbled.



“That’s because he, like me, is a wise man. You say you’re cursed because you’ve lost people you love, but you’re looking at things wrong. You were given not only one man to love in your lifetime, but with Keiran, life or fate or destiny, whatever you want to call it, has given you the chance to have two. In my book, that’s what you call lucky, not cursed.”

Not knowing how to reply to that, she didn’t, and Thomas went on.

“Your parents could have been drunks, drug addicts, or physically abusive, but were good, hardworking people who loved you. Don’t deny it because that’s in your file, too. Is that part of your curse? Some people would give anything to have that for a year, but you got, what, twenty?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Mmm-hmm, now I see how it works.” And he wasn’t done, pressing his point further. “Your husband must have been a real asshole.”

“I get your point.”

“Do you? You had five happy years with him, not long, but would you erase it because of how it ended, or go back and do it over again?”

She didn’t answer, her head dropping into her hands. She’d give anything to replay every minute of every day she had with Andrew.

“That’s what I thought. And now you’ve got another chance at something special. You’re not cursed, Esmerelda Spade. You’re blessed.”

“You’re thinking is skewed by grief,” Val offered gently, “but if you look at it from Thomas’ perspective, you’ve had more years filled with happiness and love than not. Can any of us ask for more than that?”

“But what if I lose Finn, too?”

“It could happen,” Thomas answered, earning a severe look from Val.

The dom's response was to arc a brow at her sharply then go on just as bluntly. "Don't expect me to blow sunshine up the girl's ass. Death comes every day, but so does life, about every eight seconds. And each of those babies born will live seventy-eight years on average in the US, some a lot longer. Not trying with Finn because you're afraid he won't make the averages is like betting against the house. That's fucked-up logic."

"Thomas!" Val exclaimed.

"Am I wrong?"

"No, but she's fragile right now. You could go a little easier."

"Fragile, my ass," the painfully direct doctor shot back. "Submissives are some of the strongest people I know. They have to be to put up with the shit we doms dish out."

Val's blue eyes narrowed on the man. "What kind of doctor are you anyway?"

"Does it matter?"

"We call Thomas, Jack, sometimes, baby. Jack of all trades because he does it all. He takes a rotation as a trauma physician at County, does an annual stint with Doctors Without Borders, serves as our house doctor at the club whenever we call, and because he got his MD on the GI bill, he likes to relive his youth by moonlighting for us at Rossi." This came from Eric who was standing in the doorway watching, a grin on his face.

Finn stood alongside him, his serious expression suggesting he didn't find the conversation amusing like his friend did.

Esme looked at him, standing tall, and strong, and seemingly in one piece. To be sure, she ran her eyes over his beautiful body, searching for proof he wasn't.

"Thank you, God," she uttered in a barely audible prayer.

"Come here, Esme."

She stood to do as he ordered but froze when another man appeared behind him.

“Pax?” She blinked, not believing her dear friend, whom she’d missed and worried about for what seemed like forever, was at Rossi. “What are you doing here?”

He came forward, his arms open, and she went into them happily.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured against her hair. “I’m sorry I left you so abruptly, and to such a shitstorm.”

Her head fell back, to ask how he’d heard, but his hand came up to touch her bruised cheek, his face growing dark with anger. “Carlos did this?”

“Yes, but it’s fine.” She hugged him tight. “I’m glad you’re back safe. Are you done with your mission?”

“It wrapped up today, thanks to your man and his team.”

She glanced at Finn who still stood in the doorway looking on.

“I don’t understand.”

“Finnegan here keeps closing my cases for me. Martin Lopez and his drug family are out of business because of him, which was case number one. We never identified the leader, however, which made finding him case number two for me, which Rossi handled as well.”

She stared up at him blankly.

“It was Carlos Hernandez, sweetheart.”

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “Imagine my shock when I learned our prime suspect had joined the same club as me. I was getting ready to go undercover and couldn’t risk him seeing me. We built a solid case against him and were only days away from making an arrest, but we wanted the money, too. When Finn tipped us off today about how he was spiraling out of control, we couldn’t wait any longer. Too bad by the time we got to the

scene, we'd missed the big finish. The Rossi men had everything locked down and tied with a nice neat bow."

Eric slapped him on the shoulder. "Which proves you should stop fooling around with the Feds who are always a day late and a dollar short and come work for us." He became serious when he turned to her, and his hand cupped the side of her head in an affectionate, big-brother-style gesture. "You're safe now, little one. He won't bother you again—ever."

He spoke with finality, but she asked to be certain. "You mean, he's—"

"Dead," Pax answered succinctly.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish, my mother always said. Who took him out?" Thomas asked.

"He did it himself," Eric supplied, on the move again, crossing the room to Val.

Thomas grunted. "Knew he was a weak bastard; most bullies are. What happened that he took the coward's way out?"

"He was holed up at a family home in Walnut Park, the owner one Martina Lopez Castillo," Finn answered. Largely silent, he hadn't moved, his eyes fixed on Esme still in Pax's arms.

They were merely friends, never more so, and she loved him like family, but she could feel the intensity of Finn's gaze from across the room. She stepped back. Pax, who must have sensed it, too, let her go, a smile tipping his lips.

"Esme—" Finn started.

"Let me guess," Thomas spoke over him, trying to get the full story, since he'd missed out on the action while keeping tabs on her. "Carlos is related to Martin's mama somehow."

"You'd be right. Carlos Castillo Hernandez is her nephew," Eric supplied.

"It's so confusing when everyone has three names," Val observed.

“In Mexico, it’s tradition to take both parents’ surnames,” Esme explained to her. “I learned that only recently at work.”

“You’re right, lass. Castillo was his father’s family and Hernandez his mother’s, which is reversed to our way of thinking,” Finn told her. “That’s why we didn’t make the connection right away, and it didn’t help he dropped the Castillo when he moved to the states. If I’d had that intel, I would have linked him immediately to Lopez and Roger Cassell, aka Rogelio Castillo our client back in San Antonio.”

He held out his hand to her and repeated, “Come here, Esme,” just as Eric bit out an emphatic curse.

“I can’t fucking believe he slipped through our screening process. And I’m shocked he was the brains of the operation.”

“I don’t see how, either. He looked crazed today,” Esme declared, a tremor passing through her as she recalled his cold eyes bright with madness. “I’m surprised he held it together until now.”

“We didn’t find any mental health history while we were searching today,” Eric explained. “Carlos did well for himself, initially. He went to college, got out of the neighborhood, then he made some bad investments. His wife left him, and his child support payments for four kids were more than he wanted to pay. He reverted to the family business, recruited Martin as his lieutenant who was already dealing, but on a limited scale. Seems Carlos majored in supply chain management, and it paid off. Until Martin got cocky, sloppy, and was taken down. Left on his own, without his crew to protect him and Martin to hide behind, Carlos’ ass was swinging in the wind for weeks, and it was just a matter of time before he snapped.”

“Depression left untreated could explain a psychotic break,” Val observed. “And suicide is often the result.”

Eric nodded but offered another scenario. “Or he was scared shitless, facing a long stint in LA County for a host of drug-related crimes. Add to that the murder of Gerald Reinhart in cold blood in front of a witness, who slipped through his

fingers. He was cornered and offered himself in his aunt's house rather than do the time and face his *La Eme* brethren.”

Thomas grimaced in distaste. “Couldn't take it like a man, because he wasn't much of one.”

She shivered at the graphic and violent nature of the conversation. Everything was still fresh, and it was like rubbing salt in a wound.

“Esme, baby,” Finn repeated softly. “Come here.”

She'd heard him the previous times but was distracted by the story. Now, she looked at him and asked her own question, one no one had answered. “How did Gerald get mixed up with him?”

He exhaled heavily and moved toward her instead, stopping at the end of the small seating area where she spent most of her day while on lockdown.

“Remember me telling you about the Rossi client linked to Lopez?”

She nodded.

“They shared an attorney who was implicated. When the drug deals, dirty money, and cover-ups came to light, his license was suspended, and the family had to go shopping for a new fixer. In walks Gerald Reinhart. In financial straits, after his partner retired and billable hours declined, and with two alimony payments to make after a second divorce, he was looking for easy money, fast.”

“But we were doing free business, mostly pro bono work.”

“And on retainer for the Brotherhood, which paid the bills. Unfortunately, this meant when they said jump, he had to, no questions asked.”

“You mean I've been making a living off of drug money?” Her shiver increased to a full-body shudder. “That's makes me feel dirty.”

“Baby, you didn't know.”

“No, but I suspected he was up to something. I should have told someone sooner and reported those account numbers I found.”

“You did, Esme, to me. I had our guys looking into it, not because of any link I suspected to Carlos but because your boss sounded like an asshole and I wanted to make sure you were safe. The money trail always trips them up. In the weeks since Lopez’s arrest, Carlos was lying low while Gerald funneled his dirty money into offshore accounts. Those weren’t payments on accounts you found, Esme, but deposits in banks he could easily access when he fled to South America.”

“Gerald mentioned Buenos Aires.”

“Yeah, we found his passport. He planned to go, too. If you hadn’t given me those leads when you did, *mo chuisle*, we’d have had a much harder time piecing it all together. You helped us close in on him and end it tonight.”

“It’s over?”

“Yes, lass. But now I have a question for you.”

She looked at him, waiting.

“You were hysterical after Gerald. When I left, you were sedated. You’re calmer now but visibly shaking. This day has been traumatic, and this conversation can’t have been easy. I’ve asked you no less than four times to come to me. Why are you so far away rather than here in my arms?”

At last, she took a step forward then another, stopping out of reach. Hesitant, and not sure why.

“I thought we decided I was going to live to be ninety-seven, *a stór*.”

She nodded, his image becoming watery through her tears. “Gerald wasn’t all bad,” she blurted out. “I mean, he was a bad husband, and couldn’t keep it in his pants, and he got mixed up with Carlos, but in the end, though scared out of his mind, he stood up to him, and tried to protect me. What he did helped me get away. He saved my life.”

“I suppose that’s part of your curse, too, isn’t it, little subbie? Living to see another day?”

Finn’s head swiveled, and he frowned at Thomas. “What about a curse?”

“Have her explain it to you, Finnegan. After you beat her ass for being stubborn, then fuck her until she can’t breathe, to prove how lucky she is.”

He crossed his arms and glared at his man. “I’ll do that anyway, so I’d rather hear it from you now.”

“Doctor patient confidentiality, my man. You’ll have to get it from her.” With his black medical bag in hand, Thomas started for the door, but he stopped in front of Esme. Wagging a finger at her, he directed, “Counseling for that PTSD and negative thinking, missy. And don’t think I won’t be following up with your dom to see that you’ve followed doctor’s orders.”

“So much for confidentiality,” Val muttered under her breath, which drew a sharp look from Thomas.

“A doctor in a lifestyle community has priorities that trump convention sometimes, for the good of the subbie, little subbie.” He looked at Finn. “My prognosis for her is excellent. You’re a lucky man.”

Eric and Pax smiled after him, while Val looked ready to scratch her head. Finn’s reaction was to crook a finger at her and growl, “Esme. Here. Now.”

“He isn’t wrong,” she told him, as she moved slowly closer. “I have flashbacks, and horrible dreams, and most of the time I think in shades of doom and gloom. But recently a handsome, smooth-tongued dom with a sexy Irish accent, a seriously hard palm, and a penchant for ropes and a whip, but also for spontaneous lunches, hand-holding, and kisses, who even my fussy cat who bears his name approves of, has breathed life into me again. And now, the doom and gloom are mingled with laughter and hope and great orgasms. I mean toe-curling, seriously, fucking great.”

Behind her, Val giggled as Pax and Eric laughed outright, but she didn’t let that distract her.



“You’re right, Finn. It’s going to take more than a spanking and a few scenes to get me unstuck. I’ll have bad days, like today, when Master Thomas might need to chew me out to make me think straight, or you’ll have to take me over your knee for another catharsis. But you have to cut me some slack. A man got shot in cold blood in front of me, again.” Close enough to touch now, she tipped her head back and gazed up at him, handsome as ever, though looking tired after a busy, stress-filled day.

“Thomas chewed you out?” he asked, not looking pleased.

“Yeah, but don’t be ticked at him, or for being evasive. I needed his straight talk.” She leaned into him. “There are no guarantees; you and the doctor both told me that. I’ve known it all along but was too afraid to take a chance.” Esme laid her palms on his chest and slowly slid them upward until they encircled his neck. “I’m tired of living my life wrapped in a protective cocoon of my own making, doing just about anything to keep fate from swooping in and biting me on the butt again.”

He pulled her close, his arms wrapping around her as his hands found their way to her ass. Palming her cheeks, he hauled her up on her toes until they were nose to nose. “What are you saying, Esme?”

“I’m ready to live for the day, Finn, and I want to do it with you.”

His long arms wrapped around her, his embrace so tight, it squeezed the air from her lungs. It made her, “Ouch!” come out with a wheezing croak when something hard poked her breast.

Finn heard and relaxed his hold a bit. “Did I hurt you, lass?”

“Yes.” She rubbed at the tender spot while her other hand ran over his chest, which was usually hard and muscular, but not like this. “What is that?”

“Kevlar.” He raised his shirt, exposing a blue-and-black vest. “Living for the day doesn’t mean we thumb our nose at

fate and risk our tomorrows. Every man at Rossi wants to enjoy a long life, so we take precautions so we can go to sleep healthy and in one piece and wake up in the morning and do it all over again.”

Esme grunted. “Do today all over again? I’ll pass. Thank you very much.”

Squeezing her again, though not as fiercely, with his lips against her temple he declared, “I’m not letting this happen to you again. You’re on our radar now, and we’re very good at what we do.”

“Master Thomas said that, too.”

“I’ll clue you in, Esme.” She looked over at Val, leaning into her man, arms wrapped around his waist as she spoke to her earnestly. “Annoying as it is to admit, the lot of them are rarely wrong. Whether a master dom or a head-shrinking doctor dom with a very unconventional bedside manner.”

“Annoying?” Eric repeated. He ran his hand along her back until he reached her bottom then gave it a squeeze, which prompted a little yelp from his subbie wife.

“Maddening is more like it,” she amended with a smile in her eyes, if not on her lips.

“Lucky for you, we closed the case, put the bad guys away, and I am in a very forgiving mood or I’d prove how maddening I can be.”

Her smile encompassed her entire face when she stood on tiptoe and asked, “Can you do it anyway, master? Since you’re in such a forgiving mood?”

With a low, throaty chuckle, he leaned in and kissed her with such smoldering intensity if the smoke alarms in the room went off, Esme wouldn’t have been at all surprised. It went on and on, and Eric, nearly a foot taller than his petite bride, cupped her ass with both hands. When he straightened, her feet dangled a foot off the ground. Uncaring that she wore a skirt, Val’s legs came up and encircled his hips, while her arms snaked around his neck. Without another word to

anyone, speech impossible evidently when your tongue was down your spouse's throat, Eric carried her out of the room.

"That's my cue to leave as well, sweetheart."

"I'm glad you're home, Pax."

"Finnegan, I assume this means I'm off duty?"

"Yes, your efforts these past five years are not unappreciated. Thank you."

"Take care of my girl," he replied, his eyes shifting from Finn to her. "She's grown on me, rather like moss on a tree. You can try scraping it off, but it comes back more tenacious than before, and after a while, you don't know what you'd do if it wasn't there."

She wrinkled her nose. "You can see me standing here, right?"

"You know I love you, sweetheart. Always."

"I love you, too, Pax. Call me next week for lunch?"

His eyes shifted to Finn, silently, dom to dom, asking permission.

"Lunch is good," he agreed. "She can take you to a great taco place downtown."

Esme glanced up at him, grinning over his Guerrilla Tacos obsession and that he seemed to understand how important her friend was to her and that he posed no threat.

"I could join you and try to convince you to work for Rossi."

"I'll look forward to it," Pax affirmed then exited.

Taking her hand, Finn moved to the couch, sat, and pulled her down to straddle his lap. His hands slid around to her back, one going high into her hair, and fisting as he drew her against him. "Maybe by next week, I'll have figured out how to forget seeing you covered in blood like in a Stephen King horror flick."

She buried her face in his neck. “*Carrie*. I hated that movie; she was drenched.”

“As were you,” was his quiet, honest reply.

A violent shudder passed through her, glad she hadn’t seen it. “All that blood messes with your head.”

“Yeah, but we’re moving forward to work on dealing with those images and flashbacks rather than burying everything inside and running from those who care about you and want to help.”

It wasn’t a question or a suggestion.

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s go home, darlin’. I’m wiped.”

“Even though I slept most of the day, I am, too.” She didn’t move, except to wiggle and settle against him more fully.

“You’ve had a rough one, Esme. It’s understandable.”

“Whose home did you mean? Your apartment is just across the street.”

“Your house. You live in a great neighborhood. I like your big bed, and the view from your back patio is fantastic. I’m looking forward to having breakfast with you there in the morning. And your furry-faced feline would probably like it if you came home tonight.”

She groaned, knowing Phin would not be happy when they got there.

“Don’t be surprised if you don’t recognize him. His dinner is late. It’s not that he has nothing to eat. I leave a bowl of dry food out for him to snack on, but his wet food is hours past due. My furry-faced feline has zero patience and does not like to be kept waiting, you’ll see.”

“Seems like a perfectly reasonable reaction to me. I’m not happy when I don’t get what I want.”

Her head popped up, and she sat looking down at him. “When does that happen? It seems to me, since I’ve known

you, you've gotten everything you wanted."

"Not everything. You've made me wait more than any woman. But no more, right?"

"Right," she replied. "Thank you for being patient, Finn."

"That's me, the patron saint of patience. But I'll clue you in on something, lass. I'm more stubborn than anything, and when I see something I want, I don't veer from the course until I get it." He gazed at her, green eyes dark with emotion, when he asked, "Can you guess what that is?"

"Me," she stated with certainty.

"Damn straight." Kissing her hard and quick, he lifted her from his lap, then with her hand in his, led her out of the office. "When we get to your house, we're not leaving for a month. I'll have food delivered, and anything else we need."

"But what about work? I mean, I don't have a job anymore, and if I did, no way would I darken Reinhart and Shoemaker's doors again, but aren't you covered up at Rossi?"

"Yes, but there are eight other owners, each fully capable of stepping in." At the front entrance, he stopped and yanked her flush against his long, hard body, not caring who might see. "We're taking a sabbatical. Everyone else did when the submissive they claimed went through their trauma. And I mean each and everyone one of them, Cap, Rick, Dex, Jonas, Sean—two times over for him, at least—Lil T, and Eric. Even the general after he got shot and Joanna threatened to leave him. It's my time."

"Uh, Finn, other than Eric, I do not know who any of those people are."

"You will, darlin'. And wait until you hear their stories. Some are as horrifying as yours."

"Impossible."

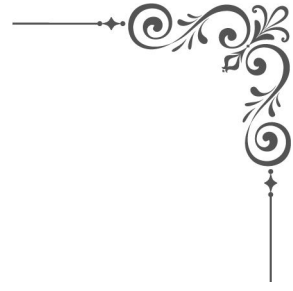
"That's where you're wrong." His hand curled beneath her chin, and he tipped her mouth up for another steamy kiss. Afterward, he whispered against her lips, "I think I'll forbid them from telling you. Drama and angst aren't my idea of

living life to its fullest. A month in bed with you? Now we're talking."

She smiled at his persistently positive attitude then laughed on a day when she thought nothing could be funny.

Finn winked at her, and with a smile gracing his gorgeous face, took her hand and led her outside to his Jag parked in front. She noticed her car was gone. Impounded probably, but they could keep it. Bullet riddled, and blood covered, she wanted no part of it.

This time, when he tucked her in his fine ride, put the top down, and steered them north of the city, she didn't fall asleep. She hung tight to the hand gripping hers, savoring every minute with Finn as she planned to from this moment on.



## Chapter 20

“DO YOU THINK WE’LL ever get to test out the Sultan’s chamber?” Esme grumbled.

“How about concentrating on where we are instead of where we aren’t?”

Leave it to Finn, her persistently positive master to look at it from a glass half full perspective.

“Yes, sir,” she replied; then after a moment simply had to add her glass-is-half-empty two cents. “It’s just that it’s been four months. You’d think in that time a dom with part ownership in this place could reserve the room of his choice.”

“Esme?” he asked quietly as he approached, looking devilishly handsome in a black Stetson, faded jeans, cowboy boots, and nothing else. This left his amazing chest bare, with loads of bunching, rippling muscles for her to stare at and drool over when she was supposed to be kneeling without talking while waiting as he prepared for their play session.

Tonight, she hadn’t quite conquered the silently waiting part.

“Yes, master?” she asked, eyes wide and giving him her sweetest submissive expression, as if sugar wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

“Open.”

She licked her lips, seeing he held a gag then obediently opened her mouth for him to insert the flexible silicone bit between her teeth. As he secured the adjustable leather strap snugly behind her head, she wasn’t surprised and didn’t mind in the least; she loved strict bondage. Ropes, cuffs, straps, blindfolds, and gags—as long as she could breathe around them—she’d yet to complain about anything Finn had tied her up with or strapped her into.

“Now, then,” he said as he pulled her hair out from under the strap and smoothed the long, thick red strands that he loved so much back behind her shoulders. “Suspension isn’t a



skill conducive to distractions, and you, pretty lass, are in a chatty mood tonight.”

He moved in front of her to check the fit; his fingers slipping beneath the leather that was snug, prevented her from speaking but wasn't too tight. Then he bent and kissed her, his lips gliding along her cheek to her ear.

“You focus on sensations, the smell of the hay, how it prickles against your skin, the rope crisscrossing your body, and how binding your breasts has them thrusting out farther and swelling beautifully. Imagine what I'll do to you next, *mo chuisle*. Perhaps I'll clamp those pink nipples so that when I hoist you in the air, I can dangle little weights from them? Or leave them bare and vulnerable for the bite...of...my...whip.”

The last few words said slowly and with pulsing emphasis piqued both her excitement and her apprehension. A soft moan drifted up from her throat and past the gag.

“Eager for my lash, baby?”

She nodded vigorously.

“And just a wee bit afraid, perhaps?”

She hesitated but nodded again as Finn's expectations—*truthful answers and honest emotion. I'll accept nothing less*—clearly stated on that not-so-long-ago Saturday night, echoed in her head.

“There's my good girl,” he murmured. “You're going to love this, darlin'. Trust me.”

She blinked up at him, trying to convey that she did. If she didn't, she'd have shouted “Red” and run screaming into the street. But she reveled in surrendering everything to this man, and when she did, soared to unbelievable heights of pleasure, spurred on by the erotic pain he expertly doled out.

Looking down at her, his lips curved into an affectionate smile. He pulled a soft cloth from his back pocket and wiped her chin. “Even gagged and drooling, you're fucking beautiful.”

He returned to the task, rigging her first rope suspension that her earlier chattering had pulled him from. And since he no longer blocked the mirror on the far wall, which didn't belong in a hayloft, unless it doubled as a bondage club, she had a clear view of her reflection.

Vanity aside, she had to agree with him. She made a beautifully erotic picture. Naked except for the white Stetson atop her head, she was on her knees, thighs spread, her hands bound behind her back, breasts swollen and standing out between the twisted, knotted rope bra he'd affixed to her body. Oh, and her boots—honey brown with hand-stitched flowers and little pinwheels in cream and pink—which she'd begged prettily for her master to let her keep on.

Though she wasn't a country girl, when she found them, she knew they'd be perfect for tonight. Their rain-check scene in the hayloft, the second most popular theme room, had taken three months on the ever-growing reservation schedule.

Construction was underway for eight more rooms. It wouldn't put a dent in the demand, but it was a start. And there was talk of a third club coming soon to San Francisco. Though it was a five-hour drive, many of their membership drove or flew in from the Bay area, and they had to do something to accommodate the hundreds of applicants on their constantly expanding waiting list.

She'd heard Finn talking to Master Eric one night, saying about the same thing she had, that owners or patrons shouldn't have to wait forever for the playroom of their choice.

As she watched Finn run foot upon foot of the natural hemp rope, he preferred through his hands, she found it hard to believe they'd been together for three months already, living together nearly six weeks.

It was actually a lot longer. She didn't remember them discussing it, except for the night of the shooting when he sang her cozy little Northridge abode's praises. But a few items in her bathroom medicine chest—toothbrush, shaving cream, a razor—and a duffle of clean clothes had soon turned into a bottle of his man soap in her shower, two of her drawers filled

with his boxers, socks, and T-shirts, and his jeans, button-up work shirts, and one suit jacket which he wore with dark jeans when meeting with clients, hanging in her closet. And each morning, unless he was working an overnight case which wasn't often, his boots were at the foot of her bed.

The only ripple in their rapidly deepening relationship was when he'd brought in the mail one day and she saw him pocket two envelopes.

“Are you getting mail here now?”

“Not yet. It goes to the office.”

She raised her brows in question.

“Your city and county taxes are due; I'm paying them, as well as the electric bill.”

“What? Finn!”

“Don't argue, Esme. If you had a mortgage, I'd be taking that over, too. I'm here every night, wake in bed with you every morning, eat supper here when we don't go out, and use the utilities.”

“But you have an apartment to keep up downtown.”

“That's a perk of ownership, and paid for out of the club profits, which are significant. You're working for Rossi now, but not raking it in. You're my woman; I'm taking care of you, end of discussion.”

“I'm earning more working for you than for Gerald. What do I do with my payday, then?”

“Buy fuck-me shoes and slinky dresses, which is also something that I enjoy, and cat food for Phin, or whatever else. Oh, and I've hired a lawn service. Neither of us is spending our limited downtime mowing and weeding.”

“But I enjoy working in my flower garden out back.”

“I'll let them know to leave it alone, but if weeding and mulching get too much, we can hand it over and you can just sit on the patio and enjoy it.” He wrapped his arm around her and hauled her against his chest. “Trust me, this is nothing

compared to what I'm bringing in between the club and Rossi. Your man is loaded, baby. Enjoy it."

"I get to ride in your Jag with the top down nearly every day, honey. I kind of suspected you were."

He grinned. "My point is, you like working. You do a good job, but if that gets too much, we hand that over, too. As for the house, it's perfect for us, except I'm getting bids on doubling the garage so I can park my Jag inside. The SUV can stay in the circle drive. And, before the kids come along, we're adding on an addition."

"Kids?" she breathed.

"You said you wanted three, Esme. You've only got two bedrooms and they're next to the master. That won't do."

"You've got it all planned out."

"Anything I've said not to your liking?"

She shook her head. She wanted his Jag in the garage next to her BMW. It was a lease, and a treat to herself after she started working at Rossi. And she wanted kids, always had. She told him early on she wanted a big family, being an only child herself. What she hadn't mentioned is she wanted at least one little boy with his daddy's beautiful dark-green eyes and auburn-streaked hair.

Adding on to the house came along with a growing family; plus, she had a large lot and tons of room. All of it was exactly to her liking, and she told him so.

"I wouldn't change a thing."

"So why are we arguing, *mo chuisle*?"

"Uh, Finn, I don't think that we are. I was just asking."

"Mmm..." he hummed in his usual sexy way, which said he wasn't buying whatever she was selling. But she smiled, which he erased when he crushed her to him and covered her mouth hungrily.

Not long after, he'd put a ring on her finger. As he did, seeing the tears filling her eyes, he'd whispered, "You don't

wait when living every day to its fullest.”

And, every day, cocooned in Finn’s love, his nurturing, and his dominance, rather than her own insulating brand of cotton wool, she was learning how to do exactly that.

And slowly, she was healing.

Lately, she’d found the strength to open the compartment in the back of her brain and let memories of Andrew out. The good ones, when they were happy, which she’d locked away with the bad. That wasn’t fair to him, or to her. She’d loved him dearly and shouldn’t shut him and the time they’d shared out of her life.

Finn agreed, which gave her the courage to tell him her stories. He was wonderfully gracious and most often would stop what he was doing, pull her into his arms, and encourage her to go on, asking questions or making comments, even laughing along with her. With Andrew, who would always hold a special place in her heart, there had been a lot of laughter.

Now and then, disturbing thoughts of Carlos’ insane wrath, getting shot at, how she could have been killed in her crazy escape onto Wilshire Blvd popped in her head. Her therapist, recommended by Val and also kink-friendly, had taught her some techniques to redirect the intrusive images of horror and the gore. Most often they worked.

Every so often, she’d see a flash of malevolent black eyes or feel the crushing weight of Gerald on her chest, and she’d shudder at the vivid memories—like now.

“Esme.” Sharp and uncompromising, Finn’s warning bark from beside her penetrated her ruminations, and she snapped back to the hayloft on the second floor of the club. “You aren’t doing as I asked and focusing on sensations. Lean forward.” He ordered, though bound as she was, what choice did she have when with his hand on her shoulder, he lowered her upper body to the hay-strewn floor?

With her butt aimed high in the air, he murmured, “That’s it.”

She felt the warmth of his fingers, gentle on her skin then something cool drizzle between her cheeks. She knew what was coming. Finn had certain nontraditional methods for redirecting her thoughts, which included a few things from his master's toy bag, which her therapist didn't have access to.

“Since your mind is wandering to things it should not—especially while you're safe with me in a place we both enjoy—I'll give you something to concentrate on.”

He spread her cheeks and slid the tip of a plug through the cool lube. When it ringed her puckered hole then pressed inward, slowly filling and stretching her, every errant thought flew out of her head and her focus settled on the little bite of discomfort giving way to a satisfying fullness.

Since she enjoyed it, he never considered it a punishment. Most often, it was a reward, especially when Finn took her from behind with a plug in her ass. It always did as he intended, taking her mind off everything else except his mastery of her.

“Isn't that better?” he asked as he massaged her upraised bottom, returning every few caresses to tap the end wedged between her cheeks, or twist it.

She could only respond with a low moan behind her gag.

He pulled the plug out slowly then slipped it back in, letting her experience the bite and the stretch all over again. She was groaning more loudly when he was ready to move on to what he had planned.

Lifting and turning her, so she sat on a hip, he finished binding her with rope. First, he rechecked the rope bra and the knots he'd made earlier, adding an intricate tie around her waist, and another rope encircled each thigh. Next, he laid her facedown in the hay and frog tied her ankles to the ropes riding just below her ass cheeks.

“You're doing great, baby,” he murmured, as he ran his hands over her bound body, looking for pinched skin and too-constraining rope. She heard a test squeak before he placed a

small rubber ball in her hand. “What’s your signal for red while you’re gagged, Esme?”

She squeezed it twice.

“Good, lass,” he hummed in approval. “Now, we’re ready.”

After a light, affectionate pat on her ass, he stood and crossed the room. A mechanical whir resonated in the room, and her rope-bound body rose slowly from the floor. She whimpered when she left the ground completely. They’d been working up to this for weeks. Finn had started her out with both feet on the ground then progressed to one leg slightly raised, and next to a bent leg suspension with only the ball of her foot touching the floor.

This was the first time she had floated entirely free.

“Easy, lass, you’re safe with me.”

Of course she was. She trusted her master with her life. That didn’t mean her heart didn’t race as she dangled several feet above the floor. Focusing on her breathing, she drew in deeply then blew it out slowly. By the time she’d repeated the cycle three times, the whirring had stopped, and her master had crouched in front of her.

“Let’s take this off.”

The bit gag loosened and came free, and Finn wiped her face again with a soft cloth—drooling a side effect of every gag they’d tried so far. With a light tug on the ropes, he swung her forward so his face was next to hers. “How are you doing, baby? Anything pinching or too tight?”

“No, sir. It was scary at first, but with you next to me, I’m perfect.”

“You are that, *a stór*. Ready for more?”

She bit her lip; the more was even more intense than suspension.

Cupping her chin in his big palm, Finn reminded her, “You have a safeword, Esme. I expect you to use it if needed.”

“I know, and I will, but I want to do this. It’s part of my living life to the fullest philosophy you’re always speaking of, and my therapist thinks if I can conquer my fear of the whip, with you, who I love and trust, you-know-who will become powerless in my dreams and the nightmares will stop.”

His green eyes searched hers. “Facing your fears head-on is an effective technique, darlin’, but it can also trigger a flashback. At the first sign of trouble, I want you to shout red. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” She was determined to do this, to take the lash for herself as much as for Finn, and if it was like everything else he’d done to her, she’d love it and soar.

With the uncanny ability to know her thoughts, as he had from the beginning, his serious expression gave way to an approving smile.

“There’s my brave, lass. From me, you’ll get the bite of my lash, a stinging butt from a spanking, tears when you need it, and a long, hard fucking until you can’t see straight. But I’ll never cause you harm or put you in jeopardy. You can count on it.”

“I love everything you do to me—except for those spankings to tears. They hurt a lot. But it’s like Val said, like it or not, you give me what I need. And I love you for that, Finn, and trust you to always keep me safe.”

“I love you, too, lass,” he murmured tenderly.

Leaning forward, he moved his mouth over hers, his tongue dipping inside and hungrily tangling with her own. When he pulled away, his green eyes were burning hot with desire.

He reached forward and caressed a dangling swollen breast. “That little slip earned you a few lashes across these pretty pink tips. Or did you forget where we are?”

How could she with the smell of straw tickling her nose? And while she wasn’t touching it any longer, it left her itchy and with her unable to scratch. Still, she replied with a little white lie and in keeping with the theme, a teasing western



drawl. “I reckon I did, Master Finn. Whatever can I do to make it up to you?”

She followed it up by aiming a saucy grin up at him, to which he laughed low and rumbly.

“You can make it up to me by taking what I give you, darlin’. Which means my cock while suspended in my ropes after I make your skin tingle with the fire of my short tail. But I’m not sure it’s wise to tease before you’ve tasted my leather.”

*Oh fuck! She hadn’t expected quite so much of a payback.*

“Um, can I have a do over?”

“Nope,” he said while coming to his feet. “Not unless you want to use your safeword. Because as they say in the West, the horse is done outta the barn, pardner.”

She groaned. “First Bogey, now John Wayne. Best not give up your day job and pursue celebrity impersonations. Frankly, sir, they suck.”

He smacked her ass sharply while he crossed to the table where he’d left his master’s bag. “No one likes a smart-ass critic, lass. Do you need that bit gag back?”

“Oh no, sir. Sorry, sir. I’ll be good, sir.”

“Let’s hope so, for my sake. I have deviant plans for that mouth.”

And she looked forward to it; Finn’s imagination was limitless.

When his boots sounded with a dull thud on the straw-strewn floor, she got serious. A few moments passed and a swish and crack rent the air. Unable to help it, she jumped.

“Easy, lass. We’ll start slow.”

Another swish and the ten-inch leather tail at the end with its soft unwoven threads—which Finn called the cracker—brushed her butt. She knew this because he’d sat her down and let her hold and examine it weeks ago. He also taught her the proper names for every part, and even let her throw it, with his

hand guiding hers. It made her feel more comfortable, but seeing the tightly braided strips of leather, and feeling the weight of it in her hand, had also freaked her out a little.

Finn didn't push her. They visited the club, playing downstairs and up, twice a week, sometimes three, and were eagerly exploring each room and every flat and vertical surface in her house. But her growing fascination with the whip and her need to conquer her fear of it made her push him. He hadn't set the scene, however, until she told him, and he agreed, she was ready.

More swishes and light whisks swept over her bottom. His aim was dead-on and had to be. With the suspension ropes, more binding her feet by her bottom and her hands crossed and tied at her lower back, there wasn't much target left. But Finn found it, and repeated it on the other side, landing two more, one after the other. The sensation was more than a flogger and less than the sharp *thwap* from a crop.

Esme relaxed, feeling silly she fretted for nothing.

The whir of the hoist sounded again, and her body angled. Instead of horizontal, she was at a forty-five-degree angle to the floor, her head upright and well above her knees.

A crack preceded the three strokes he applied in descending order down her belly. She heard Finn move and felt the sting of leather on her inner thighs. Then he alternated blows in no pattern at all. Esme never knew where he'd strike next, whether soft or with a loud dramatic crack, and with an intense, though targeted sting.

Her brain shut down as her body hummed to life, no longer trying to predict where and when, only living in the moment and enjoying how.

Soon, she was flying, both in his ropes, as each blow made her swing and revolve, and in subspace as the pleasure chemicals soared through her body, making her drunk on her master's control of every aspect of her and the scene.

Another swish, and heat bloomed in a line across her right breast. Her lips parted as the sting lingered long and melded

with the next stroke that landed directly on her nipple. She cried out as the tip drew taut in reaction and a flood of wetness surged to her pussy.

“Use your safeword if you need to, lass,” Finn reminded her.

She didn’t need to, nor did she want to. Her body was alive with sensation and enough erotic pain to make her clit pulse with pleasure and her insides clench with a desire to be filled.

“Esme,” Finn called. “Are you with me?”

“Yes,” she choked out. “Please...”

“Please what, *mo chuisle*? Ask for what you want.”

“More...” she groaned.

He didn’t hesitate, moving around the room and repeating the hot licks of leather and fire on her left breast.

Esme jerked reflexively, arching her back as much as the binding and suspension would allow, offering her breasts for more of his whip. He gave it to her, but not where she wanted or expected. It landed, repeatedly. Sometimes soft; other times with more intensity, tickling, and biting, burning, and even soothing until the endorphins released and surged through her body. Three feet off the ground as she was, her soaring went to a whole other level.

It was sublime.

Vaguely, she heard a thump, another whir, then she tasted salt on her lips.

“Open,” he commanded for a second time in an hour.

Instead of a synthetic gag, warm, male flesh filled her mouth as his cock slid inside. Instinctively, her lips closed around him and she sucked, her tongue swirling along his smooth satiny skin. She rejoiced in the husky groans coming from above her and relaxed her jaw, taking more of his considerable length, drawing hard, hoping to give him as much pleasure as he’d given her.

Suddenly, he pulled out.

Esme's cries of disappointment filled the air.

But he didn't leave her for long. Spinning her in a half circle, he fit his hips between her bound thighs and drove into her. Being filled with Finn's generous cock while still plugged was nearly too much and sent jolts of sensation through her body from her head hanging limply toward the floor, to her breasts dangling and swaying with each hard thrust, the peaks tightening with more pain than his black snack had come close to providing, and to her toes which curled up at the intense pleasure.

Attuned to her needs, Finn's hands came around and cupped her breasts, massaging gently and then pinching the aching tips. She sobbed at all the sensations bombarding her at once, and he mercifully released her, but he was far from done. Using the ropes to guide her body, he pulled her to him as his cock drove inside.

Again and again, he pumped into her, setting up a hard, fast rhythm, nudging the plug at certain angles, her breasts bouncing with every thrust. His hand came around in front, slipped between her spread thighs, and his thumb and forefinger found her clit, rolling and pinching it firmly. This final added bit of sensual torment sent her hurtling toward climax.

"Master," she groaned. "May I?"

"Fuck yeah, darlin'. Come. I'm right there with you."

She didn't know if she cried out first or if Finn did, or if the rare thing happened and they both came at once, but her body surrendered to wave after wave of scorching-hot bliss.

Limp in his ropes, she closed her eyes, savoring the last few slow strokes before he withdrew.

Neither said much in the aftermath as he lowered her to the hay. Then he both unknotted and cut through the ropes. Once he set her free, he eased out the plug then scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. Keeping with the theme, the old-fashioned metal frame squeaked as he climbed in, still holding her.

After such an intense session, she usually dozed. Tonight, she wasn't sleepy at all, though she rested against his side, her cheek on his chest, upper leg bent and hitched over his thigh, enjoying the steady beat of his heart beneath her ear. Esme especially liked the leisurely combing of his fingers through her hair.

With her body still, but her mind unusually alert, a distant, haunting melody wafted up faintly through the floor. *Wake me up inside...*

She turned her face into his chest and kissed him, before she whispered softly, "Thank you, Finn."

His fingers sank into her hair, cupped the back of her head, and brought her face up to his. "You don't have to thank me for a mutually enjoyable experience, Esme. Surely you could tell I got as much out of it as you did."

"I didn't...that's not..." she stammered, her cheeks flooding with heat at his misinterpretation of her gratitude.

Wanting to make sure he fully understood, she twisted onto her belly. With her upper body lying on his chest and propped on her forearms, she stared down at him.

"I didn't mean thanks for a mind-blowing orgasm or sending me into subspace, though both were thank-you worthy. I meant for not giving up on me when I tried to push you away. Especially when I freaked out and ran. I'd still be lost and going through the motions if you had. You brought me back to life, Finn."

His free hand came up and framed her face, his beautiful eyes gleaming with intensity. "For that, you are very welcome, baby, but I benefited from it as well. Some would call it selfishness on my part, considering I saw what I wanted and refused to give up until I had it in my grasp."

"Then how about accepting my gratitude for being a stubborn, selfish, wonderful man who dared me to be brave enough to love again?"

"Darlin'," he growled, his mouth lowering to hers for a kiss.

“I love you so much, master,” she said against his lips.

*“Chuisle mo chroí, is breá liom tú.”*

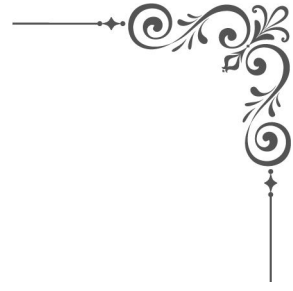
“My pulse...” she echoed, not trying to imitate his Irish Gaelic, but she recognized the familiar endearment even though he’d reversed it. The rest was lost on her. “That’s beautiful. What does it all mean?”

“Pulse of my heart, I love you, too.” Tears misted her eyes as she beamed up at him. “But the scene is over, and while in bed, snuggled up together, just the two of us—without even Phineas around to hear—it’s Finn and his sweet lass Esme.”

His gorgeous watery image wavered, and she whispered, “Okay, Finn.”

“Now get up here and kiss me.”

Issued as a growly order, no matter his insistence they were just Finn and Esme, his dominance prevailed, and she was happy to submit.



# The sensual thrill ride begins with Club Decadence...

*CAPTAIN MY CAPTAIN: Club Decadence, Book 1*

<https://books2read.com/u/4X0gE1>

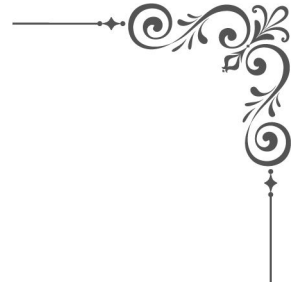
After nearly two decades serving his country, Special Forces Captain Tony Rossi is home for good and ready to transition to civilian life. With his business affairs in order, he wants to focus on his personal life and reconnect with the unforgettable Megan Sinclair. Their age gap and Cap's tours of duty abroad have forced him to remain distant for far too long. But Megan is all grown up now, and without any barriers in their way, Cap is determined to pursue his heart's every desire.

Megan has loved Tony forever, but she never knew he felt the same. Falling in his lap at a party gives her a chance to prove she's not just a cute kid anymore, but after years of unrequited love, she's hesitant about taking a giant leap with him. Strong, resourceful, and independent, Megan is used to standing on her own two feet. She isn't sure she has what it takes to fully submit to his dominance. If she does, can she find the courage to disclose her most wicked fantasies and join him behind the locked doors of his private kink club?

Before Megan can set foot inside the dungeon at Club Decadence, she finds herself embroiled in a dangerous drug cartel conspiracy. Tony must set aside his plans for their future in order to keep her safe in the present. As their dreams of a happily ever after are threatened, can Tony protect her while proving she was meant to be his all along?

Publisher's Note: *Captain My Captain* is Book 1 in the Club Decadence series. It has been revised, re-edited, and re-covered. All the books in the series are steamy, suspense-filled romances that contain power exchange, BDSM themes, and scenes with graphic violence, which may be disturbing to some.





# More Spicy Romance by Maddie Taylor

## ***DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND: DARK REFUGE BOOK 1***

<https://books2read.com/u/brX2Qz>

In the wake of her father's murder, Carina fled her life of luxury. She manages to stay one step ahead of her deranged, duplicitous uncle and Nick Devlin, the gorgeous FBI agent who stole her heart then crushed it. As she struggles to survive and stay out of sight, she soon realizes Nick is her only hope of coming out of her predicament alive.

Nick has been searching for the right woman for a very long time. When Carina turns to him for protection, she succumbs to his devilish charm once again. As his dark side unleashes her wicked desires, he knows deep down that his search is over. All that remains is keeping her safe from the Mob and winning back her trust for good.

Just as Carina starts to believe a new life with Nick is possible, her deadly past and a vengeful Godfather resurface with a chilling demand. There can be no peace, and he won't rest until more of the family's blood is spilled.

Publisher's Note: *Devil's Playground* is an extra-long, stand-alone romance in the Dark Refuge series. It contains a hot FBI agent with a protective streak a mile wide. When he gives an official order, he expects to be obeyed. The same as when he plays. If such material offends you, do not buy this book.



## ***THE BARBARIAN'S CAPTIVE***

(Primarian Mates, Book 1)

<https://books2read.com/u/ba1yqb>

Light years from home, plant biologist Lt. Eva La Croix and her all-female exploration team land on a planet they

believe is a perfect substitute for the dying Earth. They are set upon by huge alien hunters, and Eva is captured by the barbarian leader. Tossed over his shoulder, she is carried back to camp and claimed as his own.

Despite her fear, she is captivated by the gorgeous, dominant male with his long, gleaming black hair, smooth bronze skin, and glimmering golden eyes. Expecting her full compliance, he strips her and prepares her for an intimate and very thorough inspection. Horrified, Eva protests, but quickly learns defiance will be met with swift consequences, including a bare-bottom spanking until he proves to her who is in command.

Deemed compatible, she and her teammates are whisked away to the barbarians' world where they are mated to these powerful men. While pampered and protected, the women are expected to submit to their males' authority and bear their young. Will Eva learn to adapt to their unusual beliefs and old-fashioned ways? Can she sacrifice her independence and surrender to this dynamic, highly sexual alien male who has conquered her body, and perhaps her heart? Or when escape is imminent, will she flee with the others, never to see him again and feel the rampant desire that now surges through her blood for her compelling barbarian mate?



## **MARSHAL'S LAW**

(Jackson Brothers series, Book 1 of 3)

<https://books2read.com/u/bz1gpG>

When Janelle Prescott is thrown from her car as it careens off a slippery road, she expects to wake up in a hospital. Instead, to her utter disbelief, she wakes up in a jail cell which looks like something from an old western movie set. It is there, hurt and alone, with no idea what happened or how she will get back home, that Janelle first meets Aaron Jackson. As she regains her wits, however, Janelle realizes that something is terribly amiss, and her worst fears are confirmed when she learns that Aaron is the marshal of Cheyenne County, Wyoming...and the year is 1878.

When an injured, apparently addle-headed woman falls into his lap, Aaron takes it upon himself to keep her safe and nurse her back to health. Truth be told, he is instantly attracted to her despite her sharp tongue and her bizarre story—a story which the evidence quickly forces him to accept as genuine. After Aaron takes her under his wing and into his family’s home, the two clash frequently, but Aaron is more than ready to lay down the law...even if that means a good, hard, bare-bottom spanking for this feisty brat from another era.

Having little choice, Janelle must learn how to live as a woman in the Old West, including submitting to the firm-handed marshal who, in spite of everything, seems to have laid claim to her heart.



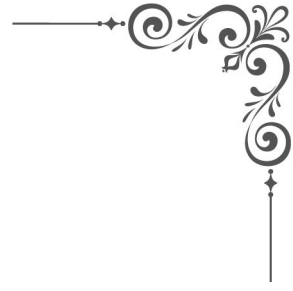
## ***TOUGH LOVE 2: DADDY’S GOLDEN RULES***

<https://books2read.com/u/meK11E>

Krista Evans knows exactly how cruel life can be. When she was twelve, she lost her dad to war. Then her mother disappeared into the bottom of a bottle. Her heart has been broken, her money stolen, and she’s had more than one run-in with the law. What the girl needs is a break. She just can’t seem to catch one.

Sheriff Samuel Golden is a lonely man with nothing but work to fill his time. When he busts a pretty young blonde in the midst of a theft, he’s tempted by his immediate attraction to her. She’s guilty as sin despite her protests to the contrary, but Sam can sense there’s a lost little girl inside of her who needs to be taught right from wrong.

In lieu of jail, Sam agrees to take Krista in hand for thirty days for some bare-bottom rehabilitation. But when their obvious chemistry becomes unavoidable, Sam will have to choose: resist the lure of the girl who so desperately needs a stern-yet-loving daddy or banish the ghosts of his past.



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