

NO SAFEWORD SERIES - BOOK 3

Taming Lia

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Chapter 1

Lia aimed her phone camera at the full-length mirror in her tiny bathroom. Instead of the black leather jacket and ripped jeans she preferred, that evening she wore a blue silk off-the-shoulder evening gown, a string of pearls around her neck. Her hair was still pink, despite her mother's lamentations that she'd never find the right sort of boy with that hair, not to mention those "disgusting facial piercings and that dreadful tattoo."

The dreadful tattoo in question was a very tasteful dove on Lia's upper back, an olive branch in its mouth. If Loretta had known her daughter also had a colorful snake curling around her hip and a BDSM triskelion on her shaven mons, she would have had a heart attack. Or no, not a heart attack. A fainting spell, complete with smelling salts.

Grinning at the thought, Lia snapped a picture and sent it to Lucia in a text message.

I'm trying to pass as a debutante socialite. What do you think?

Almost immediately, Lucia texted a response.

I barely recognize you with clothes on, LOL. You look absolutely gorgeous. Where are you going?

Lia thumbed back:

The Andrew Baird-Cecelia Mansfield wedding at the Biltmore. Only THE event of the season, or so my mom tells me. She's over the moon because I'm going with a guy who checks all the boxes on her FIND A HUSBAND FOR LIA list, including the right pedigree, career and social prospects.

Lucia replied:

The right man for you prefers black leather and carries a whip. ;)

Lia snorted and sent back a devil emoji.

Setting down her phone, she added a touch of lip gloss and ran her fingers through her spiky pink hair. The tiny diamond still twinkled above her left nostril and gold hoops rimmed the outer perimeter of each ear. She'd removed her eyebrow hoop, not because she was trying to tone down her appearance, but because she was tired of it.

Travis should be there at any moment. She stepped out from behind the partial wall that separated her bedroom from the rest of the studio apartment.

She hadn't bothered to correct her mother's assumption that Travis had invited her to this gala affair as his date. If nothing else, it would get Loretta off her back, at least for a while. If Lia had to hear one more time about how she wasn't getting any younger and all the good men would be snapped up before she turned twenty-five, she thought she would scream.

In fact, Travis and she had never been more than friends, and that only because she'd tutored him in English. Unexpectedly, they'd gotten along well despite moving in totally different social circles at high school. He was a jock who interviewed the cheerleaders when choosing his latest girlfriend. She hung out with the goth and emo kids, when she hung out with anyone at all.

They hadn't kept in touch at all while she'd been away at college. They'd only reconnected by accident, running into each other at a deli when she'd first returned to Asheville several months back. When he'd asked her if she'd mind tagging along to this wedding thing, she'd been surprised.

"You'd be doing me a favor," he'd said. Though he hadn't put it quite so bluntly, he basically wanted a female friend in the guise of a date. That way he'd be free to potentially hook up with women who attracted him but have the safety valve of a plus-one in case one of those women got a little too clingy.

"Some things never change," Lia had teased. She had agreed primarily out of curiosity. It would be interesting, from an anthropological point of view, to watch the monied Asheville elite strutting and preening in their natural habitat.

Now Lia looked out her window into the parking lot. Just as she saw Travis's Porsche pulling in, another text came through her phone from Lucia.

I have something I want to discuss with you—something exciting. I have to go into a dungeon session in a minute. I'll text when I'm free.

To Lucia, she replied:

You're a tease! Quick, tell me the abbreviated version.

Lucia's reply came as Travis was making his way to Lia's door.

Patience, grasshopper.

Patience had never been one of Lia's virtues, as the Masters in the training program at The Enclave had been quick to point out. With a small growl of frustration, Lia slipped her phone into her beaded evening bag and opened the front door.

Travis was dressed in a tuxedo and velvet slippers stamped with some kind of crest, everything about him screaming entitlement. He looked much the same as he had in high school—boyishly handsome with round blue eyes, sun-streaked blond hair and a ready smile.

He looked her over and flashed a grin. “You clean up pretty good, Duvall.”

She laughed. “You, too, Randolph.”

The wedding was as over the top as Lia had expected. The ceremony was traditional, though mercifully brief. The bride wore a gown that was purported by social media to cost more than the GNP of a small country.

As they made their way into the main ballroom for the reception, Lia couldn’t help but gasp in awe at the lavish display. All the walls had been covered in fresh roses from floor to ceiling, the air scented with their perfume. The five-course sit-down meal for four hundred was prepared by a famous chef flown in from Paris especially for the event and the champagne and top-shelf liquor flowed freely.

Not surprisingly, Travis spent most of the evening flirting with various women. At dinner, he focused on Nicole, the woman seated on his other side. Nicole alternated her attention between Travis on her right and the man on her left, simpering at each in turn. When the full-piece orchestra started to play, the other guy got a jump on Travis, immediately asking Nicole to dance.

Travis was scowling after them when someone appeared beside the table and said in a smooth baritone, “Hey there, cousin. I thought that was you.”

Lia’s heart skipped a couple of beats when she took in the guy, who stood with an easy, elegant confidence in his perfectly tailored suit. Tall and drop-dead gorgeous, she pegged him as being in his mid-thirties. He had dark, wavy hair, a single lock of which fell appealingly over his forehead. His eyes were an arresting green, fringed with dark lashes.

Their almost feminine beauty was balanced by the masculine angles of his jaw.

Travis pushed back from his chair and jumped up. The two men slapped each other heartily on the back as Travis exclaimed, “Hey, Beau. It’s great to see you. You’re coming to the barbeque next Saturday, right?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Beau replied. When he turned his attention to Lia, his mouth lifted in an amused half smile. “Love the pink hair.”

Lia couldn’t quite tell if he was being sarcastic or sincere. She decided to go with sincere. “Thanks.”

Turning back to Travis, he added, “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your date?”

Travis glanced at Lia as if just remembering she existed. “This is my friend, Lia Duvall. Lia, meet my cousin, Beau Jackson.”

Beau extended his hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Lia.”

He held her hand for several, heart-stopping beats as he stared directly into her eyes. She stared back, entranced. There was something Rhett Butler-ish about this guy, with his air of amused assurance and a natural dominance she immediately found compelling. Mentally, she exchanged his bespoke suit for black leather, and replaced the drink in his hand with a long, sexy whip.

A tall, attractive blonde in a glittery gold gown appeared beside Beau, placing a hand on his arm and destroying the moment. Beau let Lia go and turned to the woman with a smile.

“There you are, you naughty boy,” the annoying woman said in an exaggerated Southern drawl as she batted her eyelash extensions. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were hiding from me.” Her gaze flickered past Lia to Travis. “Who are your little friends?”

“Lia Duvall, Travis Randolph, meet Mandy Carter,” Beau said.

Lia couldn't help but notice the woman's long, perfectly manicured nails, painted Barbie-doll pink. She put her own hands behind her back to hide her stubby, chewed nails.

Ignoring Lia entirely, Mandy focused solely on Travis. "A pleasure," she purred. Then she turned back to the sexy cousin. "Where's that dance you promised me?"

Was it only wishful thinking, or did Beau look mildly annoyed? Whatever the story, he said politely, "Of course."

As they drifted away, Travis said, "We might as well hit the dance floor, too."

Lia shrugged. "Okay."

She would have preferred to pump Travis for information about his gorgeous cousin. But she dismissed the idea. Not only was he too old for her and already taken, but he was also probably one-hundred percent vanilla and therefore of no interest to her.

The four of them made their way to the dance floor. Beau and Mandy were soon swallowed up in the crowd of swaying couples. Travis moved Lia expertly around the floor, all those ballroom dance classes from high school apparently paying off.

Lia eventually caught a glimpse of Beau with his girlfriend in his arms, her head resting against his shoulder, eyes closed in apparent rapture. In spite of herself, Lia imagined herself in those strong arms.

As Travis moved her around the dance floor, Lia couldn't quite get Beau's sexy, self-assured expression out of her mind. She'd felt...undressed by him—not physically, but emotionally. As if he'd known her secrets. As if he already understood exactly what she needed, and might, if she got down on her knees and begged, be willing to give it to her.

When the dance number ended, Travis and Lia made their way back to the table. She was pleased to see that Nicole had returned to their table as well, sans her dance partner. Travis's unattainable cousin had gotten her juices flowing for the first time since leaving The Enclave two weeks ago. It was time to

blow this popsicle stand and head to her favorite BDSM club for some hardcore play.

Leaning close to Travis, Lia murmured, "I'm gonna call it a night. You cool with that? I'll take one of those Ubers they have lined up outside."

He turned to her, his ingrained sense of gentlemanly duty clearly warring with his desire to pursue Nicole. "I can take you home. It's no problem," he said unconvincingly.

"Don't be an idiot," Lia retorted, grinning. "I'm just the wingman, remember?" She nudged him playfully, adding in a stage whisper, "Go on. Ask her to dance. You know you're dying to."

He grinned back and shrugged. Turning his attention to Nicole, he asked, "Would you care to dance?"

As the two moved onto the dance floor, Lia pushed back from the table and reached for her bag, which she'd left on the back of the chair. As if on cue, her cell phone pinged. Unzipping the bag, she pulled it out and looked at the screen. Lucia, finally.

Hey, chica. I have a little free time now. Can you chat?

Lia thumbed back:

Perfect timing. What's your exciting news??

Hopefully, whatever it was involved whips and chains.

We're hosting a full-scale impact toy event this coming Saturday and Sunday. We have top whip makers coming to sell their gear, and there will be stations set up around the main dungeon for hands-on demonstrations. Master Anthony and I would love it if you could participate as a demo volunteer the first

evening. If you're interested, I can give you all the details.

A thrill of excitement shivered up Lia's spine. The invite definitely sounded like something right up her masochistic alley. Though she'd flunked out of training 101, she still missed the intensity of experience she'd enjoyed at The Enclave. Yet she hesitated, not entirely sure how she felt about showing her face again after the way she'd basically run away.

Because The Enclave was a private BDSM community, there were none of the restrictions of a public club. Edge play of all varieties was permitted. During her brief tenure as a slave trainee, Lia had reveled in the freedom of no limits. But it wasn't long before the honeymoon ended.

She'd chafed at the submissive requirements of the program, unable or unwilling to subjugate her will to suit the whims of her trainers. She'd spent more time in the punishment cage than anywhere else, nearly always in disgrace.

She'd been forced to face the bleak realization that she just wasn't cut out for true submission, or the serenity it seemed to bring to The Enclave slaves. Maybe all she was built for was the rough stuff, without the nuance. Or the love...

Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but why me? It's not like you have a shortage of subs there. Won't it be weird for me to come back there, after the way I fucked things up so royally?

It took a while for Lucia's response to arrive, the undulating dots indicating she was typing. Finally, it appeared on Lia's screen.

Master Anthony and I both agree you'd be an excellent volunteer. Danielle will also be participating. The rest of us staff slaves are going to be busy with the invited

guests and vendors. You would definitely be an asset. And just to be clear: you didn't fuck anything up. I've told you that before and I'll keep telling you until I can convince you. Master Anthony and I were not happy with how things ended for you here. We should have figured out a better way to reach your inner submissive, and that's on us.

Though Lia knew Lucia meant well, this stark reminder of her failure to elevate her own BDSM experience from mere impact play to something sublime made her groan aloud with regret and frustration.

As if reading her thoughts, another text appeared on the heels of the first.

I'm just saying we don't see your leaving as a failure on your part, but more on ours. Which brings me to a related topic. Master Mark has a friend who recently relocated to Asheville for his work. The Masters are looking to expand some of our programs here at The Enclave, and he's going to be working with us as a part-time trainer. Between you and me, the guy is super-hot and he's single. You never know...

Lia snorted as she thumbed back:

OMG. Not another matchmaker, please. My mom is bad enough! But, yes, I'll definitely come for the weekend. It sounds awesome.

Yay! So glad you're coming. I'll let Master Anthony know, and we'll send you all the details. Love you!

Lia replied with a series of heart emojis.

As she slipped her phone back into her bag and stood to leave, she saw Travis still on the dance floor, Nicole wrapped around him like white on rice. His handsome cousin was nowhere in sight, which was just as well.

Without a backward glance, she left the Biltmore. She flagged down one of the Uber drivers. She'd make a quick stop at home to change and grab her gear bag, and then head to The Garden. A good, hard flogging would whip that guy right out of her head.

Chapter 2

Being tasked with escorting the bride's best friend from out of town hadn't been part of Beau's plan when he'd accepted the invitation to his frat brother's wedding. But when Mandy's date had unexpectedly canceled, Beau found himself pressed into service. His Southern manners had precluded him from saying no. The fact that she was gorgeous hadn't hurt either.

Unfortunately, there didn't seem too much going on in the brains department, try as he might to uncover something they had in common beyond simple physical attraction. As they danced, Beau kept a firm hand on Mandy's lower back to keep her from stumbling. He glanced around, looking for his cousin and the pink-haired hottie. Something about the girl had definitely caught his attention.

Not that he planned to do anything about it. First of all, she was with his baby cousin and certainly way too young for him. And second, he'd been raised to take home the girl he came with, however vacuous.

It was after midnight when Beau finally dropped Mandy at her hotel. He came inside with her, primarily to make sure she made it to her room. Giggling, she fumbled with the key card, dropping it twice. Finally taking the card from her, he unlocked her door and ushered her inside, his hand lightly on her waist.

She turned, throwing her arms around his neck. She pulled him down for a sloppy kiss with plenty of tongue as she pressed against him.

Even if he'd been inclined to accept her implied invitation, Beau had a firm policy never to have sex with a drunk woman. Gently but firmly, he untangled himself from her embrace.

She took a stumbling step back while simultaneously reaching behind herself to unzip her gown. She shimmied a little, causing it to puddle at her feet. Clad only in dangling earrings, high heels, a sheer, lacy bra and a pair of minuscule thong panties, she presented a very tempting picture. He wavered ever so slightly in his resolve as she wove her way to the bed.

Before he could make his excuses, she fell to the mattress and lay still. Mildly alarmed, he moved to her to make sure she was okay. Eyes closed, she muttered something unintelligible as he gently rolled her to her side. Reaching for one of the many pillows, he placed it behind her back to prevent her from rolling out of position. She continued to mutter as he pulled off her shoes and adjusted the covers around her.

He got a glass of water from the bathroom and set it beside her on the nightstand. Just as he turned to leave, she called from behind him, her voice slurred with drink, “You’re not leaving me, are you, darlin’? The night’s still young.”

He turned back with a sigh.

Mandy ran her tongue suggestively over her plump lower lip as she slipped a hand between her thighs. “You can’t go,” she said in a high, wheedling voice. “Come keep me warm, daddy. Your widdle girl needs a big, strong man to keep away the boogeyman.”

Beau shook his head. “You’ve had too much to drink, Mandy. Get some sleep. I’ll see myself out.”

Mandy stuck out her lower lip in an exaggerated pout. “Don’t you dare go. I want... I need...” She trailed off, completing the sentence with a soft snore, eyes fluttering closed once more. Before she woke again, Beau quickly took his leave, closing the door softly behind him.

The following Saturday morning, armed with a mug of coffee, Beau stepped out onto his patio. He’d texted Mandy the day after the wedding just to make sure she was okay.

She'd sent back a terse reply that she was fine, thank you. Presumably, she'd flown back to Virginia, and that was that.

Just as he sat down, his phone dinged. It was a text from his friend, Mark Wheeler.

You still able to make it tonight?

Beau quickly thumbed back:

Absolutely. I wouldn't miss it.

Mark's reply arrived a moment later.

Great! Meantime, want to get together for breakfast at Early Girl Eatery in about thirty minutes? The downtown location on Wall Street. You can meet Jaime."

Having arrived in Asheville only a few weeks before, Beau hadn't yet had a chance to get together with his old friend.

Sounds perfect. See you in a few.

Beau was excited about his upcoming adventure at The Enclave, an opportunity made possible by Mark. The two of them had first met several years ago at a private BDSM club in Charlotte.

Lair Sade was a hardcore BDSM venue for serious players, and both Mark and Beau had been serious as heart attacks at the time. After his breakup with Renee, Beau could be found there most weekend nights, attempting to distract himself with intense but casual play. Mark, too, had been dealing with a breakup, though of a different kind. His very successful rock band had imploded with the overdose death of the band's bass player while on stage. They had bonded not only over their

shared love of BDSM, but over the recent tragedies in their lives.

He and Mark had kept in touch after Mark's move to join The Enclave. When Beau had told Mark a few months back that he'd be returning to Asheville himself for a tenured professorship, Mark had floated the idea of Beau's joining The Enclave as a kind of adjunct trainer. Since Beau wouldn't start teaching until the new semester began in January, the timing was perfect.

Intrigued, Beau had agreed to a Zoom interview with the two founders of The Enclave, Anthony Gerace and Brandon Cooper. They'd discussed Beau's background and experience with BDSM, agreeing he would be a good fit. Their live-in slave training program had become a core feature, and now they were looking to expand their offerings, both privately and to the BDSM community at large. They were especially interested in Beau's expertise with *Kinbaku*.

They'd ended up talking for well over an hour, discussing The Enclave's history, mission and training techniques. Beau had learned that Anthony and Brandon had purchased the large, secluded mountain property a number of years back with the goal of creating a private BDSM community where a small group of Doms and subs could live an intensive 24/7 lifestyle. He'd been given a virtual tour of the place, which had impressed the hell out of him.

When he arrived at the restaurant, Mark and his partner, Jaime, were already seated at a small round table toward the back. Mark waved as Beau approached. Jaime twisted in her seat, revealing a lovely face with blue-gray eyes and porcelain skin, framed by long dark hair. She wore a leather collar around her neck, a diamond sparkling at its center.

Mark stood and pulled Beau into an embrace as they greeted each other. As Beau took his seat, Mark said, "Beau, this is Jaime, my slave girl."

"It's nice to meet you, Beau," she said with a pretty smile. "Master Mark has spoken of you often."

“It’s nice to meet you, too, Jaime. You’re just as lovely as Mark said you were.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Jaime said softly. She looked to Mark, the lovelight shining in her eyes. Her Dom gazed at her tenderly, a smile lifting his lips.

Beau had known that kind of love or had thought he had.

He waited for that familiar sucker punch to the gut that seeing others in love invariably caused. Yet all he felt was a vague, sour regret. Maybe he’d finally and truly relegated Renee to the past.

To distract himself from his well-worn musings, he said, “I’m looking forward to tonight. I’m excited for the opportunity to work with you guys.”

“I think you’ll be a great addition,” Mark replied. “We’re putting up our visiting whip makers at a nearby bed and breakfast for the weekend, but you’re welcome to stay at The Enclave. In fact, if you’re able, you could stay the week. One of our resident Doms, Julian, is in Europe right now with his slave boy. He’s offered you the use of his suite until his return Friday evening. If you can swing it, it would be a great way for you to really get a sense of our unique community.”

“That sounds awesome,” Beau readily agreed. “I have a few things I need to attend to at the university over the course of the week, but there’s no reason I can’t make The Enclave my home base.”

The waitress appeared, menus in hand. Jaime chose the French toast with a side of bacon, Mark the chicken biscuit and Beau the buttermilk pancakes with fresh fruit. As they ate, they caught up on each other’s lives, neither touching on the old wounds, scarred over now, if not entirely forgotten.

The couple shared funny stories about their various adventures and mishaps during Jaime’s initial training at The Enclave, and the sweet romance of their falling in love. Recalling how tortured and miserable Mark had been before coming to The Enclave, Beau was truly happy for his friend.

After a while, the waitress brought the check and they settled up. As they were leaving, Mark said, "You should come for dinner tonight so you can meet everyone in person."

"Man, I'd love to, but I promised my aunt I'd go to this family barbeque. There's no way I could gracefully get out of it. I should be able to make it up the mountain by eight or so."

"That's fine, too," Mark agreed equably. "Don't forget your gear bag," he added with a grin.

"I never leave home without it," Beau replied with a laugh.

Chapter 3

Late Saturday afternoon Lia arrived at the gates to The Enclave. She punched in the code and, after a moment, the gates swung slowly inward. She parked her motorcycle in the lot behind the mansion.

Climbing off the bike, she pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to Lucia to let her know she'd arrived. Removing her helmet, she hung it on the handlebars. She unbuckled the saddlebag and pulled out her duffel, which she slung over her shoulder.

As she made her way to the front door, Lia worried the corner of a ragged nail with her teeth. No slave trainee was permitted entry into The Enclave unless he or she was naked. Did that rule still apply to her?

No. She was no longer a trainee. The thought made her wistful in a way she hadn't expected. Despite the fact that she'd been the one to bail, she still yearned for that elusive submissive serenity Enclave slaves possessed, and which she'd never come close to achieving.

Before she could ring the bell, one of the huge double doors swung back. Lovely Lucia, with her dark hair and liquid black eyes, had a big grin on her face. She was naked, her only adornment Master Anthony's collar and the gold wedding band on her finger.

"Lia," she cried, opening her arms. "So good to see you again."

When they parted, Lucia stepped back and looked Lia up and down, frowning as she took in the leather biker jacket and heavy black boots.

“What’s all this? Slave girls don’t enter The Enclave dressed like that. Have you forgotten after only a few weeks?” Though she tried to keep her expression stern, Lucia’s eyes were dancing.

Lia barked a laugh. “I failed slave training 101, or did you forget?” She’d been aiming for playful. She heard the bitterness in her tone and silently cursed herself. She had not come back to The Enclave to rehash her failures. This was supposed to be a fun weekend of total masochistic abandon, and she’d promised herself to make the most of it.

Lucia’s expression immediately softened. “We’ve been over this, *querida*. You didn’t fail. We did.” She took Lia’s arm, pulling her along. “Come on down to the slave quarters. We’ll get you settled and you can meet our new trainees.”

They made their way down the basement stairs, Lucia lightly tripping along on bare feet, Lia clomping behind in her Doc Martens. It was a little after five o’clock, which was designated as free time for slave trainees. Lia had cherished that hour of downtime, finding it a welcome and necessary release from the constant pressures of rigorous training and forced submission.

As they neared the bottom of the stairs, Lia saw the four trainees sprawled on the sofa and chairs in the communal area. There were three women and one guy, all of them naked save for their black trainee collars. In spite of herself, Lia’s hand flew to her throat, her fingers stroking the bare skin as another wave of longing swept through her.

All four trainees appeared to be somewhere in their twenties or early thirties. Two of the women were staring down at their cell phones, the other woman and the man talking quietly. Everyone looked up as Lucia and Lia appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

“Where are Michael and Ellen?” Lia asked, referencing the two trainees she’d been with while at The Enclave.

“They both graduated from the program last week. Michael went home to his Mistress. Ellen went back to Raleigh, where

she's from. I'm hoping we can get her back to The Enclave for our first binding auction next month."

"Binding auction?" Lia asked. "What's that?"

"That's what we're calling this new type of auction, to distinguish it from our local charity auctions. Lawrence is spearheading the initiative. Binding auctions will be specially curated, invitation-only events for serious players looking for a longer-term Master/slave connection. One of our goals is to help some of our program graduates who are still looking for a permanent placement with a Master. All participants will have access to detailed profiles of participating Doms and subs prior to the bidding. The specific contract terms will be negotiated after the auction."

Lia tried to imagine auctioning herself off to the highest bidder, someone she might not even know. While it sounded sexy in an abstract sort of way, it was definitely not something she would entertain in real life.

She was distracted from her thoughts when Lucia said, "Hey, everyone. This is Lia. She'll be participating as a volunteer for this event. She'll be staying down here in the quarters while she's here."

To Lia, she said, "Meet Madison, Kinsley, Juliette and Nick."

Greetings were exchanged, and Lia did her best to commit the new trainees' names to memory. Madison was a dark-skinned beauty with dozens of black and gold box braids pulled back from her lovely face. Lia noticed the faint crisscross of fading welts on the woman's full breasts and felt a spasm of jealousy. Hopefully her own body would soon be stippled with marks from various whips and crops. She could hardly wait.

Kinsley was long and lean, with pale skin and a spray of freckles across the bridge of her pert nose, her wavy auburn hair falling loosely to her shoulders.

Juliette had large blue eyes, full, pouty lips and short black hair, long bangs falling over her forehead and obscuring one

eye. She sported a tattoo of a coiled whip on one shoulder and what looked like a butterfly on her left breast.

Nick was of medium height, with heavily muscled shoulders and torso. He had thick blond hair cut short on the sides and falling in a thatch over a high forehead. His eyes were green, his nose hawkish, his cheekbones defined. Like the girls, his genitals were shaved smooth—a requirement for Enclave slaves and trainees alike.

There was the sound of bare feet pattering down the stairs. Lia turned to see Katie, who belonged to Brandon and Marjorie. She was a pretty girl with curly red hair framing a round face, green eyes and rosebud lips.

“Lia,” Katie cried, moving toward her with open arms. “Lucia told me you were coming. It’s so great to see you again.”

“You, too,” Lia replied sincerely.

As they embraced, Lia was struck yet again by how kind and welcoming everyone at The Enclave was. Well, maybe with the exception of Lawrence, who had taken delight in punishing Lia at every turn.

“Katie and I will do hair and makeup for tonight’s event,” Lucia said. Turning to Katie, she added, “Can you get started with the trainees while I get Lia settled? We’ll join you in a bit.”

Lucia and Lia walked together down the hallway that led to the bedrooms and the large communal bathroom. There were eight bedrooms in total, all of them doorless. Each bedroom contained a bed and a small bureau.

“This one’s empty,” Lucia announced, stopping at one of the bedrooms and stepping inside. The bed was made with a brightly colored quilt and plump pillows, chains neatly coiled at the head and base of the mattress.

As Lia set down her duffel on the bureau, Lucia fixed her with a critical gaze. “You’ve got helmet hair. Go ahead and strip down. Meet me in the bathroom and we’ll get you properly fixed up.”

“Yes, Mistress,” Lia said with a laugh.

At dinner, the already long table had been extended with additional leaves to accommodate all the occupants. Along with the full-time residents and the trainees, there were the three guest whip makers plus Hannah Davies, whose brief time as a trainee had overlapped Lia’s by a few days.

Lia was now as naked as the rest of the subs, even more so since she had no collar. She’d allowed Lucia to style her hair and let Katie apply some makeup, including a little rouge for Lia’s nipples.

“Where’s the new Dom you mentioned?” Lia asked with studied casualness as she helped Lucia bring in the dinner platters.

“He should be here by eight,” Lucia assured her. “Curious, huh?”

Lia shrugged, not quite suppressing a smile. “Maybe.”

She was seated between one of the visiting whip makers, a heavysset British fellow in his fifties named Jeremy Blake, and Hannah. The older woman was a very successful BDSM romance author who wrote under the pen name Angelique Rose. Though Lia wasn’t much of one for romance, she’d read some of the Rose novels after meeting Hannah and had to admit they were smoking hot.

More importantly, Hannah had been a sympathetic ear when Lia was at her lowest point. Though they hadn’t kept in direct touch, Lucia had kept Lia informed on the budding romance between Mason and Hannah.

It was hard to reconcile the arrogant, grumpy chef and impatient, unforgiving Dom Lia remembered with the smiling man who sat on Hannah’s other side. Hannah, too, got that soft, fuzzy look of someone in love each time their eyes met.

Lia turned away from the pair, ignoring the sudden pang of longing for something she didn’t even entirely believe in, at least not where she was concerned.

Romance was overrated, she reminded herself. A good, hard whipping was all she really needed.

Once the dinner had ended, everyone scattered to finish any last-minute preparations. The event was scheduled to start at eight, only thirty minutes away. Lawrence corralled Lia, along with Madison, who was also to serve as a volunteer, and Gene, Aubrey's slave and life partner. Gene was a tall, good-looking guy in his thirties with short dark hair and an easy-going disposition. The puppy-dog adoration in his eyes when he looked at Aubrey would have been nauseating if it weren't so obviously sincere.

Lawrence, Lia's nemesis during her training, was in his late thirties, with thinning sandy-blond hair, pale blue eyes and a perpetual sneer, at least when he looked at Lia. She'd instantly tensed when she saw him at dinner, her body preparing for punishment before her mind could catch up. She'd had to remind herself she was there as a guest, no longer the constantly-in-trouble trainee.

Lawrence owned Danielle, who was model-gorgeous, with flowing blond hair, angelic features and long, shapely legs. Though Lia didn't know Danielle well, she couldn't imagine what she saw in Lawrence. The unlikely pair had apparently fallen in love during Danielle's training. According to Lucia, Lawrence was much nicer as a result, though you couldn't prove it by Lia.

"Here's how it's going to work," Lawrence explained as they entered the main dungeon. "Master Anthony will introduce our guest whip makers, who each have an assigned station for the evening. You three will be on display as they demonstrate their new toys on the canvases of your naked bodies."

He fixed his hard gaze directly on Lia. "You're only here because of your high pain tolerance, and because you're Lucia's friend. Don't think that gives you a free pass. Tonight you're an Enclave slave, and you will behave as such. Are we perfectly clear?"

“Crystal clear, Sir,” Lia replied, resisting a sudden urge to salute the man. That, or kick him in the nuts.

Jeremy had requested her as his subject that evening. She was taken to a St. Andrew’s cross where the whip maker was setting out his wares. He stood by a long table, several of his handcrafted single-tail whips and floggers neatly arranged by handle length.

“I’ve brought your first victim, er, volunteer,” Lawrence said with a dry chuckle. “She’s not much of a sub but she can definitely take whatever you dish out.”

Lia bristled at Lawrence’s description of her, though she couldn’t deny its veracity. In spite of her dislike of the man, she sighed with pleasure as Lawrence strapped her against the cross, her arms raised high, legs spread wide. As the cuffs closed around her wrists and ankles, she relaxed against the smooth, polished wood of the cross. She closed her eyes, breathing in the heady scent of leather, clean sweat and pheromones that suffused the dungeon.

More people were entering the space, the noise level rising as the room filled. Unfortunately, the cross was set such that she was facing away from the main action. Even so, her skin tingled with anticipation of the biting kiss of the lash.

Jeremy moved around her in a slow circle, finally stopping in front of her. He smiled, slow and cruel. Lia shivered with delicious fear at the sadistic gleam in his eye. “You’re a tiny little thing. You sure you’re up to this?” He spoke with a British accent that Lia found appealing.

She lifted her chin, meeting the man’s eye. “Whatever you mete out, I can take it, Sir.”

Picking up one of his whips, he snapped it in the air. In spite of herself, Lia flinched at the sound.

“We’ll see, little girl.”

Chapter 4

Beau drove slowly along the winding dirt road toward The Enclave. When he emerged from a thicket of trees, he saw a line of cars waiting at a gate bracketed by high privacy walls.

A young woman stood at the gate, letting the cars pass one by one. When Beau's turn arrived, he lowered his window. She was quite beautiful, with shiny blond hair, large blue eyes and a thick slave collar. She greeted him politely, introducing herself as Danielle. She wore a coat to fight the chill of the October evening, but she'd left it open. As she looked down at her iPad, Beau saw she was naked beneath it. Her body was as gorgeous as her face.

"Welcome to The Enclave, Sir. Your name, please?"

"Beau Jackson," he replied, dragging his eyes up to her face.

She lifted her head from her iPad, her expression suddenly animated. "Oh, of course. It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir."

"You, as well," he replied, letting his gaze wander back to those high, lovely breasts.

"Please follow the road around to the back of the house," she said, again pulling his attention back to her face, "where you'll find parking."

There were already plenty of cars in the lot. People were making their way along a wide, well-lit path. Beau grabbed his duffel and his gear bag from the back seat and followed the others to the front of the house.

A tall, slender young woman with shoulder-length auburn hair stood just inside a set of double doors, which were thrown wide open. No coat for her. She was stark naked save for a thin

black slave collar with an O-ring. Her skin was very fair, a smattering of freckles across her nose and chest. It was skin that would mark easily and, indeed, he noticed fresh whip marks on her breasts. His balls tightened with appreciation at the pretty sight.

Beau continued to admire the view while she directed the couple just in front of him into the house. As they disappeared inside, she turned to him with a smile.

“Good evening, Sir. Welcome to The Enclave. My name is Kinsley. I’m a trainee here at The Enclave.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Kinsley. I’m Beau.”

“The demonstrations are just about to begin in the main dungeon, which is to your right, Sir,” Kinsley explained. “If you care for some refreshment first, there’s a table set up in the living room, to your left.”

“There he is.” Mark appeared, a smile on his face. After a quick embrace, he added, “The demo is starting in a few minutes. Let’s pop upstairs first so you can drop your bag and see where you’ll be staying.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Beau agreed.

As Mark led him through the spacious front hall, Beau admired the display of medieval torture devices set along the walls, whips and chains hung above them in an impressive display. As they approached the stairs, he paused to glance into the huge living room, which contained not one, but two fireplaces, each big enough to walk into. A St. Andrew’s cross stood on either side of one of the hearths. This was definitely his kind of place.

“Impressive,” he observed with a smile.

“Yeah, the whole setup is pretty awesome,” Mark agreed. “Jaime and I have talked about eventually moving out to get our own place, but we’re so happy here. We’ve decided to wait until we have kids.”

Beau chuckled. “Yeah. I could see where that might get a bit weird.”

They walked up the wide, thickly carpeted stairs to the second floor. At the landing, they turned left. Mark stopped at the third door on the right and pushed it open.

“This is where you’ll be staying.”

The space contained a king-size bed set low to the ground in a black lacquered frame, flanked by two low nightstands. Instead of art, a display of whips hung on the wall above the bed. Where one might expect a sitting area, a small dungeon had been set up, including a St. Andrew’s cross, a suspension rack, a spanking bench and a cock and ball pillory. The walls on either side of the dungeon area were lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors, making the space seem far larger than it was.

“Whoa,” he said, taking in the room. “Quite a setup.”

Mark chuckled. “Yeah. Julian puts his boy toy through his paces, that’s for sure.” He pointed toward a large pocket door. “Walk-in closet is there.” He waved toward another door. “Bathroom there. Drop your stuff and let’s head downstairs.”

Beau left his duffel on the bed but kept his gear bag on his shoulder.

As they came down the stairs, Jaime was waiting in the front hall. She was naked, save for her slave collar and nipple jewelry. Mark placed his hand lightly on the back of Jaime’s neck, the gesture at once conveying tenderness and control.

“Welcome, Master Beau,” she said sweetly, leaning into her Master’s touch. “We’re so glad to have you here, Sir.”

“I’m glad to be here.”

Jaime’s breasts were full, her pierced nipples like perfect gum drops. When they’d said every slave in The Enclave was available for sexual use, did it include those already owned?

Down, boy, Beau ordered himself. This is Mark’s girl we’re talking about. Keep it in your pants.

As they entered the dungeon, people were milling about, most in leather, some naked. There were easily a dozen stations set up around the room. Whipping posts, stocks,

suspension racks, crosses and spanking benches were in plentiful supply.

A striking fifty-something woman with silvery blond hair pulled back from an aristocratic face approached them. She wore a red satin gown with slits up the sides that revealed long, shapely legs. She led a naked young woman by a leash attached to her slave collar.

As she reached them, she smiled. "Hello there. I'm Marjorie." She didn't introduce her slave. "You must be Beau. Mark has told us so much about you. We're delighted you're joining us."

"Thanks, Marjorie," Beau replied, accepting her offered hand. "I'm excited for the opportunity."

"Good evening, everyone," Anthony said through a microphone, drawing their attention. "Welcome to The Enclave." The room instantly silenced, all eyes on the imposing, silver-haired Dom. "For those of you I haven't yet met, my name is Anthony Gerace. We're so pleased you could come out tonight."

"And we're pleased to be here," someone called out, with several more chiming in good-naturedly.

"As you all know," Anthony continued with a gracious nod of his head, "this is a two-day event, starting with tonight's party, followed by a gear sale and more dungeon play tomorrow. This evening there are three scene stations set up for the whip demonstrations that will take place before general play begins. These demonstrations will take place simultaneously. You can choose which demonstration appeals to you or move from station to station. Please be sure to keep a respectful, safe distance from the impact play. Now, allow me to introduce our guests of honor."

A spotlight suddenly illuminated one of the scene stations. A large man with shaggy dark hair and rugged features stood beside a suspension rack under which a voluptuous, dark-skinned woman stood, arms extended overhead and cuffed together to the rack.

“First, we have Taggert Fitzgerald from Portland, Oregon, whose meticulously handcrafted leather gear is known throughout the world. Tonight, Taggert will demonstrate how to properly use a bullwhip inside a confined space. He will work with Madison, one of our current slave trainees.”

There were murmurs of appreciation, both for the whip maker, whom Beau had heard of, and the lovely bound slave girl. A bullwhip demo definitely sounded intriguing. Perhaps he'd check that out first.

A second spotlight drew Beau's attention. “Our second guest is Maria Stafford from Houston, Texas, who specializes in leather paddles and riding crops. She'll be demonstrating her wares on our resident slave boy, Gene.” Maria, an attractive woman with short dark hair stood beside the slave. She was dressed in a filmy white blouse tucked into a black miniskirt, thigh high boots on her long legs.

Gene was bound on a cock and ball pillory identical to the one in Julian's suite. The pillory consisted of a metal rod rising from the metal base, with a vise at its apex. The man's wrists were cuffed to the rod at thigh height, his ankles cuffed at the base. Beau winced in sympathy as he saw that Gene's cock and balls were trapped in the vise.

“He will need to stay very, very still during play if he wants to keep his family jewels intact,” Anthony added.

There was a ripple of laughter at this. The bound, cuffed man blushed, but Beau couldn't help but notice his erection.

Finally, a third spotlight illuminated yet another scene station. A heavyset guy in full leather stood beside a St. Andrew's cross, on which a petite woman was secured, her back to the room. There was a tattoo of a dove on her upper back, another of a brightly patterned snake curling around her left hip. Though she was petite, she was perfectly proportioned, her waist nipping in nicely, the globes of her perfect ass round and high. She had two adorable dimples, one above each butt cheek. As Beau's gaze traveled up her body, a sudden jolt of recognition at the sight of her spiky pink hair made him take an involuntary step forward.

Could it possibly be...?

“Last, but not least,” Anthony continued, “is Jeremy Blake, who has flown in from London to share his collection of whips and floggers. He will be demonstrating his wares on a feisty, masochistic friend of The Enclave named Lia.”

Holy fuck. It had to be.

Beau glanced quickly around both the illuminated scene station and the dungeon at large, half expecting to see his young cousin. Happily, Travis was nowhere in sight.

As he continued to eye the naked, bound beauty, he thought about the wording of Anthony’s introduction. Lia wasn’t a resident slave or a trainee, but rather a “masochistic friend” of The Enclave. What was that about?

“A few house rules before the presentations begin,” Anthony continued. “You may be aware that we at The Enclave don’t employ safewords for either our permanent slaves or our trainees. This is because our slaves aren’t engaging in simple scenes with built-in exit doors. Rather, this is a lifestyle we have chosen, in which our submissive partners freely and joyously abdicate the right of refusal. Because of the public nature of tonight’s play, however, we will employ the safety protocol of a safeword. To keep it simple, tonight’s safeword is the color *red*. In addition, we will have dungeon monitors available throughout the space to assure risk-aware, consensual kink, and to help out with anything you need. You can identify the monitors by their red leather wristbands.”

Beau glanced around, noting the wristbands on a few of the Doms and also on some of the naked submissives.

“Now that that bit of housekeeping is out of the way,” Anthony continued, “please make your way to one of the three scene stations. After the demonstrations, you are free to engage in private play, but please restrict yourself to the main dungeon. Enjoy our lovely slaves, all of whom are at your disposal for non-sexual play for the duration of the evening. You can use your own gear, and there are also impact toys available in racks around the dungeon. Everything is clean and sterilized for your safety. You’ll find refreshments and

aftercare stations set up in the living room across the hall. Enjoy, stay safe and have fun.”

People moved in various directions as they chose their scene stations. “Let’s check out the bullwhip demo,” Mark said to Jaime. He turned to Beau. “Coming?”

“Thanks, but I’m going to head over to Jeremy Blake’s station. I think I know that little pink-haired beauty, though the last time I saw her she was wearing an evening gown and pearls.”

Jaime raised her brows. “Pearls? Are you sure that’s our Lia you’re talking about?”

Beau shrugged. “It was at a society wedding I was coerced into attending last weekend. She couldn’t very well show up in nothing but a slave collar,” he added with a grin.

Mark made a face. “I wouldn’t have pegged Lia as the society wedding type. I visualize her more as a biker chick in leather and chain. She’s a tough cookie, that one.”

“I think that’s just a front she puts up to protect herself,” Jaime said, her face creasing with sympathy. “You didn’t see her down in the slave quarters crying like her heart would break.”

Mark’s expression gentled. “You’re right, my love. I know she had a tough time. She probably spent even more time in Lawrence’s punishment cage than you did during your training,” he added with a chuckle. “Which is saying a lot.”

Jaime groaned, slapping her forehead. “Don’t remind me.”

Beau was wildly curious about Lia’s story. But before he could ask any more, Mark gestured toward the station where Jeremy Blake stood, flogger in hand. “You better get over there if you want a good spot. Catch ya’ later.”

As the couple moved away, Beau headed straight for Lia. The station was set up near a wall, the cross positioned such that he couldn’t see Lia’s face. Would she recognize him in such a different context? Better just to stand back and observe, at least for now.

Jeremy Blake was already speaking as Beau joined those crowding around the perimeter of the station. “—all handmade of fine Italian leather with great attention to detail. When choosing a flogger, you need to take in consideration its weight, balance and material, as well as your particular style of play. This flogger has twenty-five suede tails. The handle is made from suede-wrapped wood.”

Jeremy ran his fingers lovingly through the flogger’s tresses. “Though I’m sure you’ve all heard it before, it bears repeating that impact play should be done on areas of the body well protected by fat or muscle. Avoid kidneys, neck, tailbone, hip bones, collarbones and anywhere where there is bone especially close to the skin.”

Beau hoisted his gear bag higher on his shoulder as he edged closer. Lia’s eyes were closed, long dark lashes brushing her cheeks. The light caught the tiny diamond that sparkled on her nose. Jeremy ran a large hand over Lia’s back and then cupped her cute bottom, kneading the flesh. Beau’s own hands flexed as he wished he were the one running the scene.

“A flogger is an unmistakable symbol of authority,” Jeremy said. “But its true power lies in the way it is used. You can trail the falls gently along a sub’s skin”—he demonstrated by brushing the tresses over Lia’s back and ass—“or bring them down in a hard, punishing blow.” The sudden thwack of leather against flesh drew a soft cry from Lia’s lips. Her eyes remained closed.

Jeremy settled into a steady rhythm. Lia’s shoulders eventually lowered as she relaxed into the flogging. She was clearly no stranger to impact play. When her skin was nicely pink, Jeremy picked up one of the single tails.

“This whip is a nice addition to any gear bag. It has a rigid handle that passes gracefully into this flexible fall. The tassel at the end adds extra sting as well as leaving a pleasing pattern.”

He snapped the whip against Lia’s bottom with a crack. The small cluster of marks left behind reminded Beau of a

flower's petals. They had to hurt, but Lia only sighed, seeming to settle more into herself.

Jeremy flicked the whip several more times, creating a series of red welt patterns over her ass and the backs of her thighs. Through it all, Lia remained silent and composed, impressing the hell out of Beau.

The whip maker apparently agreed. "This bird can take quite a whipping," the Brit commented to no one in particular. "Let's see how she handles something with a bit more bite."

Jeremy chose another whip from his selection, this one dyed a bright red. Its handle was made of a thick braid of leather. "This is a dog whip. It's a variation on the single tail, with this added loop and an exchangeable leather cracker. Notice, the cracker is braided and the handle is flexible. This little beauty packs a nasty sting that will teach your naughty puppy to behave."

He snapped the whip with a crack between Lia's shoulder blades. Finally, she visibly reacted, her hands clenching into fists above her cuffs. When the whip landed again on her back, she uttered a small, breathy cry that brought a sadistic chuckle from the whip maker's lips.

With relentless precision, he left a crisscross of red lines over Lia's back, ass and thighs. Her skin was sheened with perspiration, her breath a ragged pant, her head thrown back. Beau silently rooted for her, willing her not to use her safeword, but to take what she was given. He couldn't look away, riveted to the scene.

Finally, Jeremy broke the spell with the word, "Enough."

He set down his whip. Moving closer to Lia, he murmured something in her ear and then turned to them all with a smile. "I'll be happy to give some more demonstrations on whoever's brave enough to step up. But first, do I have a volunteer to see to this girl's aftercare?"

Beau stepped quickly forward. "That would be me," he asserted.

Chapter 5

Lia was pulled from a pleasant, endorphin-induced haze by the crackling sound of releasing Velcro at her wrists and ankles. As she came back to herself, her nerve endings reawakened with a vengeance, the skin on her back, ass and thighs stinging like crazy. At the same time, the masochistic high from the whipping left her with a deep sense of wellbeing.

Someone guided her arms down to her sides.

“You looked good in that evening gown, but you look far better in nothing at all.”

The deep masculine voice sent a jolt of familiarity through her, but what he’d just said made no sense. Until she turned to look at him.

No fucking way, her brain informed her.

Way, her body shot back, her cunt spasming with lust.

It was that same wavy, dark hair, a single sexy lock hanging rakishly over one eye. And those same knowing green eyes that had peered directly into her secrets. The lush, sensual mouth, the strong angles of his jaw...

“What the fuck?” she breathed as she tried to harness her confusion. “Beau?” she finally managed. “Travis’s cousin from the wedding?”

His lips curved into a wicked smile, promising both pleasure and danger. “One and the same.” He had exchanged his bespoke suit for a cream-colored linen pirate shirt tucked into caramel-colored leather pants that molded perfectly to long, muscular legs.

As she examined him more closely, she noted the fine lines at the corners of his eyes and bracketing his mouth. Rather than making him look older, they softened his almost-painful beauty. The guy looked way better than anyone had a right to. But what the hell was he doing at The Enclave?

“What are you doing here?” she blurted before she could stop herself.

Beau chuckled. “I could ask you the same question, but Mark gave me the abbreviated version.” He placed a hand on the back of her neck, the dominant gesture sending another spasm through her loins. “We need to get out of Jeremy’s way. Come with me and I’ll get you fixed up. Then we can talk about our colliding worlds.”

That made Lia laugh in spite of herself. After a quick thanks to Jeremy for the awesome session, she allowed Beau to lead her from the dungeon to the living room. He snagged a bottle of chilled water from one of the food tables as they made their way to an available aftercare station.

Each station included a portable utility cart stocked with first-aid items. Atop the cart there was a mini hot towel cabinet filled with damp rolled washcloths, along with several tubes of the amazing salve that Mistress Aubrey, The Enclave’s resident physician, had compounded at a special pharmacy. There was also a small, neatly folded stack of waffle weave robes like the kind spas handed out.

Lia glanced at the padded stool by the cabinet, but, ass still smarting from the whipping, she remained standing. “This is totally weird,” she said as Beau opened and handed her the bottle of chilled water. “I can’t get my head around your being here.”

“It is kind of wild,” he agreed with a grin. “Though I guess not a total surprise, given that we’re both seriously into the scene. Mark and I go back a few years. We met at a private BDSM club in Charlotte and struck up a friendship. When he heard I was moving back to Asheville, he thought I might enjoy getting involved here at The Enclave.”

Holy shit! Beau must be the new part-time Enclave trainer Lucia had mentioned in her text.

He cocked his head, smiling quizzically at her. “Uh, is there a reason your mouth’s hanging open? Is it something I said?”

Lia at once snapped her mouth shut, chagrined. “Just relaxing my jaw after the intense session,” she said lamely.

Again, that knowing smile. “Right.” Beau dropped his gear bag.

“So,” he said casually as he opened the hot towel cabinet. “Are you and my cousin together? Does he know you’re in the scene?”

Lia snorted. “No and no. We’re just friends.”

“Ah,” he said, his tone neutral. Was he fishing? Or just curious? She couldn’t quite tell.

With a practiced touch, he ran a warm, damp cloth over the welts left by Jeremy’s whips. He dropped the towel into a basin and reached for the tube of salve. “Is this aftercare balm? I don’t see any label.”

“That’s Mistress Aubrey’s miracle salve,” Lia replied, glad for something concrete to focus on. “She’s a physician, and she has this stuff specially made for exclusive use by The Enclave. It’s better than any over-the-counter stuff you can get.”

“Cool.” Beau squirted some onto his fingers. Without looking at her, he asked, “So, how old are you, if that’s not too personal a question?”

“Old enough to know what I want,” she retorted.

A half smile lifted his sensual lips, his eyes glittering in a way that made her insides go hot and cold at once. He placed a hand lightly on her shoulder, his touch burning her skin.

“And what might that be, Lia? What exactly is it that you want?”

Lia had always considered herself good at flirting while never letting the guy get the upper hand. But, as she met Beau's gaze, heat rose in her cheeks. Ordering herself to stop acting like a twit, she lifted her chin and asserted, "Anything involving whips and chains."

His smile broadened to something more genuine. He had lovely, even white teeth. "And rope, I hope. We mustn't forget rope."

Lia laughed, some of her tension easing. "Yes. Rope is good. Absolutely."

"Glad to hear that."

He didn't elaborate, instead gently dabbing the salve over Lia's heated skin. She relaxed into his touch, a sigh of pleasure escaping her lips. Almost instantly, the salve's anesthetic properties soothed away any lingering sting. It smelled good, too, of cloves and eucalyptus.

"There's only one mark here that might give you a little trouble." He ran a finger lightly over a tender spot at the top of her left buttock. "What's your pain level, overall?"

"I'm fine. Ready for round two."

Jesus. Had she really just said that? She sounded like an idiot. To cover her discomfiture, she reached back to touch the welt. He'd put an extra dab over it, leaving it gooey to the touch. "I'm not sure about sitting on Enclave furniture with this salve still on my skin."

"You could always kneel on a floor cushion like a proper slave," Beau suggested with an arched brow.

"No, thank you," Lia said staunchly. "I'm no slave girl."

Beau chuckled. "Is that so?" He reached for one of the robes. "While it's a shame to cover such beauty, perhaps this is the solution?"

Lia eagerly reached for the robe.

"Not so fast," he said with a wicked grin. "I'm intrigued by the BDSM triskelion tattoo you have right over your pretty

little cunt. Is that a sign to the vanilla boys that they need not apply?”

Lia laughed. “Yep. That about sums it up.”

Before she could react, he reached down, cupping her shaven, tattooed mons. The tips of his fingers grazed her outer labia, sending a jolt of pure lust directly to her nipples. Startled both by his uninvited touch and her own visceral reaction, Lia took an abrupt step back, causing his hand to fall away.

Beau’s eyelids hooded, a dominant fire turning his green eyes dark.

Lia never blushed, but damn if her face wasn’t in flames. To cover her desire and embarrassment, she stood on tiptoe and yanked the robe from Beau’s hand. She shrugged into it, pulling the sash tight around her waist.

Beau chuckled. “Now I see why Anthony used the word feisty to describe you, young lady. I think a good, hard spanking is in order to remind you of your manners.”

“Better men have tried and failed,” she quipped, pleased she was back in control, or at least doing a good imitation.

“Mark mentioned you were in The Enclave’s slave training program, but that things didn’t quite work out. What’s the story there?”

Lia groaned. How much did Beau know? He was Mark’s friend and guys talked. “Short answer—I quit before they tossed me out. I thought maybe their full immersion training would enlighten me about true submission. All it did was end up convincing me what I think I already knew—I’m no sub.”

Beau regarded her with such a penetrating stare that she had to look away. “I wonder,” he said musingly.

“I’m starving,” she said, suddenly desperate to change the subject. “A good whipping always whets my appetite. Let’s get something to eat.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Beau agreed easily, though somehow she sensed they weren’t done with the topic of her failure.

They made their way to one of the snack tables. Lia piled her plate with savory snacks, taking a second plate for the dessert items. Beau, whose single plate held perhaps a third of Lia's, laughed as he watched her selecting items.

“Where the heck are you going to put all that? You can't weigh more than ninety pounds.”

Balancing her plates, Lia drew herself up to her full five foot one. “I'll have you know I weigh a hundred pounds. All of it solid muscle,” she added with a lift of her chin. “I practice Tae Bo. You don't want to cross me.”

Beau laughed. “I'll remember that.”

He led her to some comfortable chairs in a quiet corner of the room. He had thoughtfully snagged two more bottles of water, which he set on the small table between them. Shrugging off his gear bag, he set it beside his chair. They concentrated on their food for a few minutes, which, as always at The Enclave, was spectacular.

“Man,” Lia groaned with pleasure, licking her fingers. “Master Mason sure can cook.”

“That's the chef? The one who's in love with the writer?” Clearly, Beau knew a lot about this place and the people who lived here.

Lia grinned in spite of herself, still not quite able to reconcile the idea of Mason in love. “Yep. He's also incredibly skilled with knives and blood play. I wasn't his favorite person, though.” She frowned at the memory. “I was too much about the erotic pain, not enough about the protocol, slave positions and the endless kneeling and begging.”

She shook her head. “I don't know what I was thinking, signing up for sub training. As one of my trainers—Master Drill Sergeant, I mean Master Lawrence—so charmingly put it, ‘You can put lipstick on a pig, but in the end she's still a pig.’”

Beau winced. “That's harsh. And you're certainly no pig, Lia. You're a sexy, lovely young woman with lots of

complicated layers.” His lip curved again into that sexy smile. “Layers I’d like to unwrap.”

Again, absurdly, blood rushed into her cheeks. Desperate to take the focus off herself, Lia blurted the first dumb thing that popped into her head. “Enough about me. What about that woman you had on your arm at the wedding? Is she your Domme?” Tilting her head, she pretended to size him up. “Yeah. I can definitely picture you on your knees begging, ‘Please, Ma’am. May I have some more?’”

Beau’s green eyes narrowed as he let her ridiculous words hang in the air for several painful beats. Then, all at once, he reached for her throat. He gripped her tightly, thumb and forefinger pressed hard beneath her jaw.

Lia’s breath caught, her heart beating a thumping tattoo against her ribs.

“I’m no sub, Lia. I think you know that.”

She couldn’t have replied if she’d wanted to, her breath constricted by his strong hand.

Abruptly, he let her go. As if nothing had just transpired, he leaned back in his chair, his expression again casually amused.

Lia reached for her water bottle with a trembling hand. She sipped, glad for the moment to pull herself together.

“In answer to the question I think you were *actually* asking,” he said, as if he hadn’t just flipped all her masochistic switches with his primal touch, “that woman I was with at the wedding was not my girlfriend. I escorted her as a favor to the groom, who’s a friend of mine.”

Getting herself back under control, Lia shrugged, feigning indifference. It made her uncomfortable to realize just how pleased she was at his answer. Eager to change the subject yet again, she asked, “What about you? Any tattoos in interesting places?”

“Not nearly as interesting a location as yours, but yeah, I have a tattoo.” Beau tugged aside the open V-neck of his

pirate's shirt to reveal a small tattoo of what looked to Lia like Chinese or Japanese characters on his left pec.

“What's it say?” She tried to focus on the characters rather than on his smooth, tan skin and the rippling muscle beneath.

“It says *nana korobi, ya oki*,” he replied. “It's a Japanese proverb that translates as, ‘fall down seven times, stand up eight.’ It means choosing to never give up hope, and to always strive for more. Or, to put it another way—if life knocks you on your ass, you need to get back on your feet.”

“A good philosophy,” Lia offered.

“And one you might consider in your search for submissive grace,” Beau replied with a lift of his brow.

Lia snorted. “Too bad I don't possess either characteristic. Just ask Lawrence.”

“Forget Lawrence,” Beau replied decisively. Again, he fixed her with a discerning gaze. “Let's focus on you. You came to The Enclave with some kind of expectation, right? You were clearly looking for more than whatever you could get at the public clubs. What drew you to their program in the first place?”

Lia took a moment to collect her thoughts, deciding how much to share. Despite his rakish, Rhett Butler air, she somehow sensed she could trust him.

“I first met Lucia—Master Anthony's slave girl—at the BDSM club in town—The Garden. He owns it, you know.”

Beau nodded.

“He used to bring her down there sometimes to play,” Lia continued. “I would watch them scene, barely able to contain my longing for what they seemed to share.” She sighed. “Lucia always had this kind of serene glow—this deep, intrinsic peace and fulfillment that I've never experienced, not in any lasting way. Eventually, I got up the nerve to talk to them. They were super supportive and nonjudgmental when I confessed how in awe I was of their obvious connection and Lucia's inner grace. When Master Anthony told me about the

training they offer here, and actually suggested I might want to sign up, I jumped at the chance.”

She laughed bitterly. “I was an idiot. I thought if I just followed their rules, I would automatically connect with my own inner sub. Turns out I don’t have one. I’m just a hardcore masochist who doesn’t like to take orders. What is a lifestyle for them is apparently just a kink for me—a way to get off, nothing more.”

“Maybe you weren’t the problem.”

Lia snorted. “Trust me. I was *definitely* the problem. Ask anyone here.”

Beau smiled, shaking his head slightly. “Just because their particular training regimen didn’t work for you doesn’t mean there isn’t a submissive hiding inside you.” He paused a beat. “Maybe you just need a different approach.”

Chapter 6

Lia shrugged. “Maybe.”

Then she crossed her arms, the defenses going up once more. “Or maybe I’m just being realistic. I’m what they call in academia a high achiever. That means I go after things I know I can succeed at. Impossible goals don’t interest me, so I take them off the table.”

Beau was increasingly intrigued with this girl, even if she was way too young for him. She had a delicate bone structure, angular, almost feline. He liked the twinkling diamond stud in her nose and the tiny hoops that rimmed her ears. He loved the cotton-candy hair, which added whimsy to the whole sexy package.

She exhibited a tough-girl persona, which was intriguing in and of itself. He could sense the passion beneath. There was nothing sexier in his mind than a strong-willed submissive. It made the taming even more exciting. Her husky voice, at odds with her diminutive stature, was sexy as hell.

What was his own angle in all this? Why was he pressing her about finding her inner submissive? What did he really know about her, beyond the fact she handled intensive scenes with grace and courage?

Back off, Jackson, he warned himself. You’re not her advisor in BDSM or anything else.

Lia had finished her ham quiche, the mini pizza and the corn fritter bites, and was now distracting Beau with the incredibly sensual way she was licking the custard from a tiny éclair.

Looking away before she gave him an erection, Beau asked, “So, what do you do for a living, Ms. High Achiever?”

“I have a Master’s in library science. In fact, I’m starting a terrific job in the research library at UNC-Asheville the week after next. I’m really excited about it.”

“That’s great. Though you look too young to have already earned your Master’s.”

“I’m nearly twenty-five,” she sputtered indignantly.

“I have socks older than you,” he teased. “Seriously though, library science is a terrific field.” He arched a brow, “Though I have to say, it sounds like a good setup for an erotic novel. Prim and proper librarian by day, dirty girl by night.”

Lia snorted. “Art imitating life, babe,” she quipped.

Beau laughed. He couldn’t remember when he’d last enjoyed someone’s company so much, despite the fact she was a Gen Z’er just starting her career, while he was a millennial who already had tenure.

“How about you?” she asked. “What do you do when you’re not hanging out at BDSM clubs or escorting ladies to society weddings?”

“Once again, our worlds collide,” he replied. “We have the same employer. I’m a history professor. Asian studies with an emphasis on Japan. I’ve only just transferred from UNC-Charlotte to the university here.”

“Oh, my god,” she shrieked in mock horror, hands flying to her face. “So, what, you’re like, *fifty*?”

Now it was his turn to be indignant, until he saw the twinkle in those tawny eyes and the grin twitching at her lips.

“I’m thirty-five,” he said. “Not *quite* old enough to be your father.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” she quipped, pretending to wipe the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. He couldn’t help but laugh.

“So,” she continued. “Tweed-jacketed prof by day, leather-clad sadist by night?”

“Something like that,” he agreed, still smiling.

“Do you show the students your tattoo on the first day of class, Professor?” she asked with a smirk.

He smirked back. “Uh, that would be a no. I actually got it during my year abroad in Tokyo while researching my PhD thesis.”

The smirk was replaced with what appeared to be genuine interest. “Cool. What was your thesis topic?”

“The cultural and historical context of *Kinbaku*. Specifically, its evolution over time and its current place in Japanese culture and society.”

“*Kinbaku*,” Lia repeated. “That’s like *Shibari*, right?”

“Yes,” he replied, pleasantly surprised she was familiar with the words. “They’re both Japanese styles of rope bondage and the terms are often used interchangeably here in the States. But there are some differences between them. *Shibari* literally means ‘to tie’ and is generally used to describe the art of decorative rope tying. *Kinbaku* is a more specific style of bondage often associated with eroticism and BDSM. The word literally means ‘the beauty of tight binding.’ I personally find *Kinbaku* an excellent tool for exploring the power dynamic between Dom and sub and pushing boundaries within a consensual relationship.”

He stared directly into her eyes, capturing her in his gaze. “And, of course, there’s nothing more beautiful than a naked woman bound in rope, completely at the mercy of her Master.”

A small shiver moved through Lia’s frame, her lips softly parting. Beau’s cock twitched in appreciation. Then, as if coming back to herself, she tossed her head, her eyes flitting from his.

“I love bondage,” she asserted, “but not for its beauty. I just like being tied up.” She made a face. “I don’t have the patience to let someone work all kinds of intricate knots while I just stand there.” The sass had returned to her tone. “Talk about a buzz kill. Ugh.”

“Sounds like you’ve been hanging around with the wrong guys,” Beau offered with a shrug. “When practiced correctly,

Kinbaku is far from boring for either participant. It can be quite physically challenging, and highly erotically charged. It takes practice to truly let go. I'm getting the sense that might be difficult for you."

Lia bristled, her chin lifting. "It's not that I have trouble letting go. I just have no interest in it. I like to be in control. I suppose I'm what you'd call someone who tops from the bottom. I know what I want and I'm not afraid to ask for it."

"I wonder," Beau mused aloud, more intrigued than he wanted to admit, "if that's really true? Or is it more that you simply don't know *how* to let go and, high achiever that you are"—he cocked a brow, quoting her—"you therefore have taken that goal off the table?"

Lia shrugged, her eyes flitting away from his. "Maybe," she muttered.

Setting down his empty plate, Beau got to his feet. "Let's head back to the dungeon." He reached for his gear bag and hoisted it over his shoulder. "I'll introduce you to *Kinbaku*. I promise you won't be bored."

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As Lia rose eagerly to her feet, Beau directed, "Take off the robe, Lia."

It wasn't a request, but a command. Both his tone and the look in his eyes sent a shiver of anticipation through her, tinged with a hint of delicious fear. Without hesitation, Lia slipped the robe from her shoulders and left it on the chair. The promise of some intense bondage with this sexy man made her nipples hard.

When they entered the dungeon, Beau stopped and looked around. "Let's see if we can find a free bondage station."

Before Lia could reply, Lawrence appeared. Ignoring her, he focused on Beau. "You're Beau, right?"

"That would be me, yes," Beau agreed with a smile.

Lawrence thrust out his hand. "Welcome to The Enclave. Glad to have you aboard. I'm Lawrence."

“It’s good to meet you, Lawrence.” His expression deadpan, Beau added, “Lia’s been telling me a little about you.”

Lawrence barked a mirthless laugh, still not bothering to look her way. “I’ll bet she has.”

Beau let that hang in the air a beat before saying, “We were just going to enjoy some Japanese rope bondage. Is there a suspension rack available, do you know?”

“I think you’re in luck. Follow me.”

Lawrence led them to a station that included a ceiling suspension rack from which hung several large stainless-steel rings. Miraculously, no one else had claimed the spot.

“Perfect,” Beau said, shrugging off his gear bag. “The suspension rings will do nicely for what I have in mind.”

“You’ll like these rings,” Lawrence said. “They have a special integrated ball-bearing swivel for an added bit of fun, especially during full suspension.” He flicked one of the rings to demonstrate, causing it to spin.

“Nice,” Beau said enthusiastically, infusing the single word with appreciation.

Lia couldn’t agree more. *Bring it on, baby.*

Lawrence nodded toward Beau’s gear bag. “I assume you have what you need in there? But just so you know, you’ll find rope, safety scissors, a first-aid kit and a thermal blanket in the cabinet, along with bottled water and welt salve.”

“Terrific,” Beau replied. “Thanks.”

“You got it. Give me a shout if you need anything else.” Lawrence’s lip curled slightly as he turned a disapproving gaze Lia’s way. “And watch out for this one. She’s a handful.”

“I’m not worried,” Beau replied with a grin. “Don’t forget, I’m the one with the rope.”

Lawrence chuckled. “I’d recommend a gag as well. She has trouble holding her tongue.”

Lia's hands had curled into fists during this obnoxious exchange. What a pleasure it would be to sock the smug bastard in the jaw. Thankfully, he moved away before she gave in to her impulse.

"That's the guy who made the lipstick comment, huh? No love lost between the two of you, I see."

"None at all," she agreed emphatically. "I was on his shit list from day one."

"Then it's a good thing he no longer has the slightest say in anything you do." Beau placed a hand on her shoulder, his warm touch easing the tension she'd been holding in her body since Lawrence had reappeared. "Let's forget about him and focus on our scene."

"Works for me," Lia agreed.

She watched with interest as Beau opened his gear bag and removed several hanks of twisted black rope. He set them out in a neat row on the edge of the scene mat.

"I use linen rope instead of hemp or jute," he said, lifting a hank to show her. "It's much softer, and excellent for suspension."

He slowly looked her over from head to toe. She wanted to squirm under his gaze but forced herself to remain still. "No injuries or other considerations I need to know about?" he asked finally.

"Nope."

"Good. Not that I'll be suspending you completely off the ground your first time out. You'll have to work your way up to that."

Lia nearly blurted that she could handle anything he meted out. But she held her tongue, sensing this wasn't a man to goad.

"Before we get started, I need to see how flexible you are," Beau said. "Do a little stretching for me. Touch your toes, lift your arms over your head and then place your arms behind your back, wrists touching."

“I took gymnastics when I was kid,” Lia said, keeping her legs absolutely straight as she bent over, pressing her palms flat on the mat. She rose and held her arms behind her back, her body tingling in anticipation of the rope.

Beau let his gaze linger on her breasts, which were thrust forward by her position. Her jutting nipples tingled under his stare. Was that an erection growing in his gorgeous leather pants? Was it possible he was as turned on as she was? When his tongue appeared on his lower lip, she very nearly moaned aloud.

Then the moment passed, and he was once again all business. “Excellent,” he said, taking a step back. “You were made for *Kinbaku*.” He rubbed his hands together. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to bind your arms overhead, secured by a suspension ring. Then I’ll wrap your torso with a simple rope harness to accentuate your pretty breasts. Pay attention to any tingling, numbness or burning in your limbs, especially your hands and fingers. Don’t try to be the stoic, silent type. If something doesn’t feel right, say so. Also, it’s okay if you need *out* of the rope. There is no shame in that. We’ll stick to The Enclave generic *red* for your safeword. If you need me to slow down or ease up a little, you may use *yellow*. Are we crystal clear?”

“Yes, Sir,” Lia replied, the honorific slipping off her tongue of its own accord. Not that she was going to safeword. It would take a hell of a lot more than some tight rope for that to happen.

“Good. Stand here underneath this ring and raise your arms overhead, palms touching.”

Lia assumed the position, her pulse quickening with anticipation. Beau worked quickly, binding her arms from elbow to wrist. She sighed with pleasure as the soft, strong rope embraced her.

Easily a foot taller than she, Beau reached up to secure the ends of the rope to the suspension ring. He moved around her, pulling the working ends of the rope up through loops he created with a practiced hand.

In spite of her assertion that intricate rope knots bored her, she was anything but bored as Beau wrapped rope over and around her torso. He stood close to her, the linen of his shirt brushing her breasts as he worked. His actions were confident and masterful. He smelled so good—the warm, clean scent of his skin mingled with a hint of leather.

As he tightened the rope around her body, Lia relaxed into the bonds, a lovely mix of arousal and peace moving over and through her. His fingers brushed her nipples several times as he wrapped the rope in twisting patterns around her body. Each time, an electric zing of pleasure shot through her core.

Finally, he appeared in front of her. “How’re you doing? Any discomfort?”

Her breasts were bunched together in a crisscrossing harness of tight rope. The result was more pressure than pain. Her suspended arms were pulled taut overhead, but she could still easily wiggle her fingers.

“The bonds are plenty tight, but it’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Something edgy and dangerous sparked in his eyes. “We’ll see.”

Reaching up, Beau further adjusted the rope looped over the suspension ring in such a way that Lia was forced onto tiptoe. The sudden, added vulnerability of her position sent a thrill of anticipatory excitement through her.

“There,” he said with a sexy smile, eyes blazing. “That’s better.”

All at once, he reached for her erect nipples with both hands. He rolled them sensually between his fingers until she was unable to stifle a long, low moan.

“You’re a little slut, aren’t you, Lia?” he murmured, leaning down so his warm breath brushed against her cheek. If she turned her head just so, she could have kissed him.

“Yes,” she admitted, the word tumbling from her lips before she could censor it.

“That’s ‘yes, Sir,’” he snapped, giving her nipples a sudden, sharp twist that brought tears to her eyes.

“Yes, Sir,” she managed, her voice hoarse with lust. She would have sunk to her knees if the ropes hadn’t been holding her up.

With a low, knowing chuckle, he released her throbbing nipples.

“Now for that spanking I promised you earlier.”

Chapter 7

Lia had the slightly glazed expression of someone entering a light trance. She had been jittery and tense at the start of the session but had slowly calmed as he wrapped her in the tight embrace of his rope.

The methodical repetition and precise structure of rope bondage was a kind of meditation for Beau. No matter what else might be going on in his life, *Kinbaku* required him to be fully present, his focus complete.

She had claimed to find the intricacies of rope bondage boring, but she didn't seem bored in the least. On the contrary, she had assumed that dreamy, contented expression of a true sub in her element.

She looked sexy as hell, trussed up in a pleasing pattern of rope, that unusual triskelion tattoo on her mons adding to the overall artful appearance. He liked the way her irises looked golden in certain light, and how her eyes tilted upward at the outer corners, giving her an impish look.

Her stomach was flat, a hint of six-pack abs beneath smooth, creamy skin. Her legs, too, were muscular. He imagined her practicing her Tae Bo in nothing but boxing gloves and sneakers. Now, that would be a pretty sight.

He moved slowly around her, checking the knots as he went. The welts on her bottom were already mostly faded, save for that one that nearly broke the skin. Her bound breasts were now deep pink from the constricted blood flow, the nipples like dark cherries at their centers. They were beautiful breasts, round and high, the nipples begging for clamps, the smooth skin a perfect canvas for a single tail's lash.

He'd left the lower half of her body and her legs unbound this first time out. If she handled the rope well, perhaps he would introduce her to more intensive, full-body *Kinbaku*, if the opportunity arose.

He moved to stand beside her, facing her. Without warning, he brought his hand down hard against her small bottom, careful to avoid the welt still visible on her left buttock. The resounding smack followed by her startled gasp made his already hardening cock stiffen further. He smacked her again, harder this time, following up with a series of lighter blows that covered every inch of her ass.

She remained quiet as he spanked her, her lips pressed together, her eyes narrowed in apparent concentration. She was unable to put her feet flat on the ground, tethered as she was, and each stroke caused her to sway in her bonds.

He reached for her waist, catching her in a kind of sideways embrace, her hip pressed against his thigh. With his free hand, he continued to smack her reddening bottom with a cupped palm designed to increase the sting of each blow.

Still she remained quiet, save for her breathing, which was becoming more labored now.

He did a quick check of her bonds, reassuring himself there was no compromise to her circulation. Ignoring his raging hard-on, he asked, "How're you doing with the ropes? Any issues?"

"More," she replied throatily. "Harder."

Beau spun her like a marionette until she faced him. With lightning speed, he gripped her throat, holding her in place with his fingers. "Didn't we just go over this? Is that how a sub girl speaks to her Dom?"

Her eyes widened, pupils dilating, color flushing her chest and cheeks. Power coursed through him as he held her in his primal grip. In that moment, she belonged to him.

Keeping his hand where it was, he informed her, "For purposes of this scene, you are my sub. Period. If you don't like that, the scene ends now. Do you want the scene to end?"

“No, Sir,” she replied with a sweet, unvarnished urgency that made him, on impulse, dip his head to brush her lips with his. A jolt of desire brought him back to his senses. He pulled away before he lost control and actually kissed the girl.

Instead, he spanked every inch of her delectable ass and the backs of her thighs until her naked body was sheened with sweat, her breathing labored. Her ass was dark red now, some evidence of the bruising to come already apparent. Her head had tipped back and her eyes were closed.

He was impressed, having expected her to use her safeword by this point, or at the very least beg him to slow down. But she hadn't uttered a peep of protest. Though he wanted to keep going, it was up to him to end the scene before he caused her real harm.

He reached up to the suspension ring, loosening the rope so she was able to stand flat on her feet.

Lia's eyes slowly fluttered open. “Why did you stop?” she murmured breathlessly. At his glare, she added hurriedly, “Sir.”

“You've had enough,” he informed her. “As it is, you're going to have trouble sitting down for the next few days.”

“I can take it, Sir,” she asserted, her voice stronger now.

He snorted, understanding for himself what a handful she must have been for The Enclave trainers, who were used to total submission.

“You don't get to decide, sub girl,” he informed her. “That's my job.”

She frowned but, for once, was wise enough not to sass back.

Not quite ready to end the scene, he moved behind her, pulling her back against him. Her well-spanked ass was like a furnace against his thighs. Reaching around her, he slapped her bound breasts with sharp, rapid blows. Then, wrapping one arm around her throat, he smacked her smooth cunt with a sharp slap.

A small, startled gasp escaped her lips, which only spurred him on. He slapped her again, cupping his palm to add more sting. His balls ached, his cock so hard he could have hammered nails with it. He wanted nothing more at that moment than to yank open his fly, pull out his shaft and lift her onto it. Holding her in place by her hips, he would sink into her tight, wet heat in one smooth motion.

“More, please, Sir,” she begged breathily, bringing him back to the moment.

Her words were like fingers curling around his aching shaft. “Spread your legs and arch your hips forward so I can beat your cunt properly,” he commanded.

He was pleased when Lia obediently assumed the position. The sadist in him fully aroused, Beau pressed his fingers together to create a stiff paddle.

“You need this, don’t you, dirty girl?” he breathed in her ear as he smacked her slick cunt in a series of sharp, stinging blows.

“Oh, god, oh, yes, oh, please, Sir,” she begged.

He could smell her arousal—a light, musky scent that made his mouth water. She was his now, ripe for the plucking. He was tempted to slide a finger into her tight heat as he ground his palm against her hard clit. He would make her come harder than she ever had in her life.

Instead, he slapped at her inner thighs, which were actually wet with her juices. Alternating between her thighs and her swollen, slick cunt lips, he smacked her until she was whimpering, but still she didn’t utter her safeword. Finally, he let her go, taking a step back so he could do another rope check.

Her fingers were icy, her breasts starting to purple. She was bathed in sweat, her hair tousled, her eyes closed, her mouth slack.

She had had enough, even if he hadn’t.

“Hey, there,” he said softly, cupping her face in his hands. “You alive?”

Her eyes opened slowly. Her features had assumed the blurred, dreamy expression of a sated masochist. “Better than alive,” she breathed.

“You really are a very dirty girl, Lia Duvall.”

Some of her natural spark returned, her eyes narrowing as her lips lifted into a sassy smile. “You make it sound like that’s a bad thing.”

He shook his head, grinning back at her. “Quite the contrary, I assure you.” Recalling his task, he added, “I need to get you out of these ropes now.”

He worked quickly, first removing the breast harness and then releasing her from the suspension ring. He brought her arms down carefully and then unwrapped the ropes that bound them. He rubbed her flesh gently to get her circulation going again.

“There you go,” he eventually said, bringing her arms down to her sides. “A little of Mistress Aubrey’s miracle salve and you’ll be good as new.”

“Looks like we caught you at the right time.”

Beau looked up to see Anthony and a slender woman in her early forties, as petite as Lia, by his side. The woman wore a deep blue slave collar and a gold wedding band that matched the one on Anthony’s ring finger. Her breasts were striped with red lines from a recent lashing. Her smooth mons was also stippled with evidence of a single tail’s kiss.

“That was quite the scene,” Anthony said with a lift of his brow. “I’m impressed with your rope skills and your finesse in handling your sub girl.”

Beau hadn’t been aware they were being watched. Not that he should have been especially surprised. It was common in BDSM dungeons to attract an audience. There were only so many scene stations available, after all.

He acknowledged Anthony’s praise with a smile. “Those swiveling suspension rings are top notch. They made it easy.”

“Glad to hear it. We only caught the tail end of the scene.” Anthony shifted his gaze to Lia. “I trust our little spitfire behaved herself?”

“Well enough,” Beau replied with a snort.

Anthony chuckled knowingly, though with none of the derision Lawrence’s tone had carried. He placed a hand on the shoulder of the naked woman standing so quietly beside him. “This is Lucia, my slave girl.”

Ah, so this was the woman Lia so admired and had hoped to emulate. He could see why. Her submissive grace radiated around her like an aura as she bowed her head, a shy smile on her lovely face. “A pleasure to meet you, Master Beau.”

The honorific caught Beau by surprise. Though he was aware this usage was standard protocol at The Enclave, he wasn’t used to hearing himself addressed that way. He found he quite liked it.

“You, as well, Lucia.”

She stood on tiptoe to murmur something in Anthony’s ear. At his nod, Lucia moved onto the mat. The two women began to talk softly to each other.

“Tomorrow morning we can all sit down and discuss the particulars of your role here,” Anthony said to Beau. “After watching you tonight, I have some new ideas.”

Beau wasn’t sure what he meant by that but decided to wait and see. “Sounds good,” he replied.

Chapter 8

Lia collapsed into her bed in the slave quarters, physically exhausted from the intense evening but too wound up to sleep. She hadn't wanted the night to end. But, after applying more salve to her bruised bottom, Beau had basically ordered her to bed, informing her she'd had quite enough for one night.

It was shocking in retrospect to realize she'd let that man—who had just been a scene partner, after all, not her lover and certainly not her Master—tell her what to do. What was even more shocking was that she'd obeyed him.

She wasn't sure what to think or feel about Beau Jackson. Yes, he was gorgeous. And holy shit, he was good with rope. And those hands, so strong and sure as they heated her skin—and her cunt—to a fever pitch. Still, experience told her that her raging crush on the guy might only be a response to how easily he'd taken dominant control of her. Once she came down from the high of the BDSM endorphins still coursing through her, she might feel differently.

Then there was the matter of his age. Eleven years was a significant gap. Though she herself was fine with it, what could a thirty-five-year-old tenured professor possibly see in her, beyond an occasional BDSM play partner?

But, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, he was so incredibly hot tonight. So masterful. So sure. So sexy...

Whether or not that amazing scene was just a one-off, she remained almost painfully aroused, her clit throbbing. She definitely needed to climax if she was ever going to get to sleep.

Rolling to her back, she let her legs fall open. Closing her eyes, she slipped into the ropes Beau had so artfully wrapped

around her and let the feel of his strong, stinging hand heat her blood as she rubbed her aching sex.

She came quickly, gasping softly as her body shuddered with release. Warmth coursed through her body as she imagined Beau's big, strong arms wrapping around her, pulling her into a snuggling embrace as they drifted together toward sleep.

Whoa. Where had *that* come from? Dominant, sexy scene partner, yes. Warm and fuzzy snuggle bunny? No way.

With a wistful sigh, Lia gathered the quilt around her and burrowed into it. She slipped almost immediately into deep, dreamless sleep.

When Lia next opened her eyes, a glance at the digital clock by her bed told her it was already after nine. Sudden panic made her sit bolt upright. She'd overslept by more than two hours. Master Lawrence would have her ass.

As her brain clicked back on, relief coupled with chagrin washed over her. Making a sound that was half-chuckle, half-groan, she sank back onto her pillows as she waited for her pounding heart to slow its rhythm.

Not surprisingly, the quarters were deserted, the trainees having been roused hours earlier for their morning chores. Padding naked down the hallway to the communal bathroom, she used the toilet, brushed her teeth and took a quick shower.

She considered whether to dress for the day and decided against it. All the other subs would be naked. When in Rome...

When she came upstairs, she entered the dining room, her heart skipping a beat in anticipation of seeing Beau again. A lavish spread was set out on the buffet counter against the back wall of the large room, including platters of fresh cut fruit, pastries, scrambled eggs, bacon, ham and other goodies, along with a coffee urn and a pitcher of orange juice. Most of the chairs around the table were occupied by both guests and

residents, but there wasn't a tall, dark-haired hunk among them.

She entered the kitchen through the swinging doors. Mason and Hannah sat at the large oak table, their heads bent together over a recipe binder, mugs of coffee at their elbows. Hannah wore a cashmere sweater over linen slacks. While she'd completed a modified training program, she hadn't joined The Enclave community, and was submissive only to Mason.

He was in his usual black T-shirt and black jeans. He and Lia hadn't exactly parted on the best of terms, her behavior during their botched blood play scene the month before the final straw on the camel's back of her constant failure as a would-be slave girl.

The pair looked up as Lia entered. Mason, shaved head gleaming in the overhead light, gave her a curt nod, his expression unreadable. Hannah, however, smiled warmly.

"Good morning, Lia. Did you get some breakfast?"

"Not yet," Lia replied. "It looks amazing though."

She glanced around the large kitchen. The trainees Nick and Kinsley were at the sinks, naked save for their aprons, their backs to the room as they busily washed pots and pans.

"Where is everyone?" she asked, silently including Beau in the question.

"I think the resident slaves are setting up the display tables for the sale later this morning," Hannah replied.

"And some of the resident Doms are meeting in Anthony's office," Mason added in his deep, rumbly voice. He cocked a heavy brow, a knowing smirk appearing on his rugged face. "Why? Looking for someone in particular?"

He knew. Of course he did. The whole place probably knew she'd scened with Beau. One thing she'd learned during her short tenure in this tightly knit community—there were no secrets.

She ducked her head, categorically refusing to allow the color threatening to rise in her cheeks to make an appearance.

“Oh, uh, no. I mean, yes.” She lifted her head, ordering herself to stop acting like a teenager with a crush. “Lucia, actually,” she blurted. “I was looking for Lucia.”

The older couple exchanged a small smile, as if they knew she was lying. Annoyed, Lia left the kitchen with as much dignity as she could muster.

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Beau sat in Anthony’s office, coffee mug in hand, a plate of food balanced on his lap. Also in the room were Anthony, Mark, Lawrence, Brandon and Aubrey.

Before getting down to business, Anthony had pressed a buzzer on the edge of his desk. A few moments later, two naked slave girls had entered carrying trays laden with pastries, creamy scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, fresh orange juice and hot, strong coffee. After serving each Dom, they’d glided silently from the room.

As the assembled group ate, they talked about how Beau might instruct the other Doms in the art of *Kinbaku*, exploring ideas about ways he might work with both the resident Doms and with the Asheville BDSM community at Enclave-sponsored events.

From there, they moved on to discuss the progress of the current trainees to give Beau a better sense of the training culture at The Enclave. “You’ve been granted access to our private training website,” Mark explained as he airdropped the link to Beau’s cell from his own. “Among other things, the site contains detailed information about each of our current trainees, including their specific slave contracts and progress to date in attaining their goals.”

“Everyone working with a particular trainee adds notes after each session, kind of like a patient chart,” Aubrey, the physician, chimed in.

As Beau scrolled briefly through the list, his gaze snagged on the file named *Lia Duvall*. He looked up sharply. “Wait, didn’t you say this was a list of *current* trainees? Why is Lia included here?”

“We haven’t given up on Lia,” Anthony said. “And I don’t believe, based on her return to us last night, that Lia has completely given up on us. Did she tell you anything about her experience here?”

“She told me a little,” Beau said, unable to resist glancing at Lawrence, whom Lia clearly regarded as her Enclave nemesis. It wasn’t his place to share Lia’s confidences, however, so he didn’t elaborate. “And I have to agree. From our limited but intense interaction, I sense there’s a lot more to her than just the pain slut she professes herself to be.”

“An astute observation,” Anthony replied. “We usually work with deeply submissive men and women who need work with their pain tolerance, stamina, positions training and sexual servitude. This approach generally produces beautifully trained, eager submissives, even if they encounter some stumbling blocks along the way. But it’s a broad approach, involving multiple trainers with a strong focus on absolute obedience, without hesitation or question.

“During her two weeks here, Lia could physically handle whatever was required of her. But we were largely unsuccessful in tapping into the submissive core that is the essence of erotic slavery.”

“In hindsight,” Lawrence admitted, “my disciplinary approach with her might have been heavy-handed. But despite what she may think of me,” he added with a wry smile that made Beau almost like him, Lia’s scathing commentary about him notwithstanding, “I believe in second chances.” He glanced at Anthony, a slight flush moving over his face as he added, “We’ve all needed them from time to time.”

Beau was instantly intrigued by this comment, which seemed to be quite personal. He glanced over at Mark, who gave a small nod, as if to say, “I’ll tell you later.”

“Which brings us back to why Lia’s file is still included on the current trainee list,” Anthony said. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but there seemed to be a genuine spark between the two of you last night that went beyond simply compatible scene partners.”

Beau nodded his agreement, seeing no reason to deny it.

“As I mentioned,” Anthony continued, “Lia didn’t respond well to our multiple-trainer approach. But it’s possible she might do better with a single trainer.”

He leaned forward, fixing Beau with an earnest gaze. “The rapport you established last night might just be the key to reaching her. I know this is a big ask, but if you were interested and had the time, and assuming she is willing, we were hoping you might be open to working with her exclusively while you’re here this week. We understand that you have obligations outside The Enclave that might cut into your time. We can either keep her here with us while you’re down in town, or you can take her with you, if it makes sense to do so. It’s really up to you how you handle things with her. We will, of course, be available at all times to support you in any way you need.”

“Whoa,” Beau said, his mind reeling with the possibilities. “This is definitely an intriguing proposition. I agree, Lia is still searching for something. But I’m not sure I’m the Dom to help her find it. Like I told you during the Zoom interview, I don’t have a lot of formal training in slave training techniques. I operate more on instinct.”

“That’s exactly why we think you might be the right person for the job,” Aubrey interjected. “Lia hasn’t responded well to formal training. She might well respond to a different approach.”

“And what’s the worst that can happen?” Mark added with a smile. “She runs away again? At least we can say we’ve given it our best shot.”

“And, just so you know,” Lawrence added, “Lia has a clean bill of health. No STI’s or any other medical issues. Oh, and she’s on birth control—an IUD, to be precise.”

Beau flushed at the implications of this information. “I thought we were just talking about training here.”

“We are,” Anthony interjected smoothly. “But sometimes slave training, especially when it’s a one-on-one scenario, can

lead to, uh, more personal interactions. You indicated in our Zoom interview that you also have no STI's or any other health concerns we might need to be aware of. Is that still the case?"

Beau would have bristled at this personal probing, but when he thought about how intensive and overtly sexual some of The Enclave training practices were, he recognized they were just taking what for them were basic precautions.

"Yes," he answered simply. "No concerns."

Anthony leaned back with a smile. "Excellent. So, what do you think, Beau? Is this something you'd be interested in pursuing? Lia may be a handful at times, but I believe she is sincere in wanting to connect with her inner submissive."

Beau was impressed by their continued interest in helping one of their past trainees succeed, even after she'd dropped out the first time. And, if he were being totally honest, it would be the perfect way to get to continue where Lia and he left off the night before, without sending her the wrong signal—i.e., that he was interested in getting involved with her on a personal level. No, even if the possibility had flickered through his brain, she was definitely way too young for him.

Training her where experts had failed would no doubt be a challenge, but then, he wasn't one to shy away from a challenge. He would just need to keep his head on straight and his dick in his pants.

Who was he kidding? He'd made his decision the second the opportunity was offered. No way he was going to turn down the chance to take control of Lia. Their single scene had been beyond intense. Imagine what he could do with a solid week?

Beau met their expectant gazes with a grin. "Count me in."

Chapter 9

The breakfast meeting broke up soon after his acceptance. They had agreed that, rather than sitting Lia down for the formal contract negotiation that usually preceded Enclave training, Beau would approach her individually with the offer.

After returning to his suite to grab a few things, he went downstairs to find Lia. He scanned the huge living room, seeking her out. The Enclave had been once again opened to the outside guests attending the event. The room was packed with people moving along the various vendor tables perusing the impact toys and other BDSM paraphernalia for purchase.

He eventually spied Lia at one of the tables, identifying her from behind by her pink hair and petite shape. He was pleased to see she had remained naked like the resident slaves, a good sign that she felt at home and at ease at The Enclave, even when not involved in a scene. He stopped just behind her, admiring the faint bruises on her pert bottom from the spanking he'd given her the night before.

She stood in front of a display of slave collars made from soft leather dyed various colors, each one unique in its design. He moved closer.

“One of those would look beautiful around your neck. Maybe one day you’ll earn the right to wear one.”

At the sound of his voice, she whipped around, color suffusing her pretty face. Her lips parted as if in invitation to his cock, which twitched with appreciation. Within a few seconds, however, the mask of insolent amusement he was already coming to know slipped into place.

With a nonchalant shrug, she said, “I already told you, I’m not slave material.” Then she flashed an impish grin, adding,

“I was wondering where you’d got to. Figured maybe it was all too much for you.”

Before she could react, he reached for her throat as he had the night before, easily spanning it with his thumb and forefinger. He squeezed gently but with enough pressure to get her full attention. “You figured wrong. I’m only just getting started.”

The lovely erotic fear in her eyes sent a surge of blood through his cock and balls. He squeezed a little harder, watching her pupils dilate and her pretty pink nipples harden.

When he let her go, she stumbled back, gasping. He reached for her shoulders to steady her, letting the ghost of a smile curve his lips. “As to where I was, I was meeting with some of the resident Doms about my tenure here. You were the primary topic of conversation.”

“Me?” A small pucker appeared between her brows as she wrapped her arms protectively around her perfect breasts. “I’m not sure I like the sound of that.”

“Don’t worry. It was all good. In fact, they made me a rather intriguing proposal that I’d like to share with you. It would involve your spending this coming week here at The Enclave, starting today.”

She frowned. “Huh? I already failed Slave Training 101. Are you sure it was *me* they were talking about?”

Beau placed an arm around her shoulders, gently steering her from the table. “Absolutely sure.” He glanced around the crowded room. “Is there somewhere private we could go to discuss it?”

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Apprehensive but wildly intrigued, Lia led Beau to the meditation room. The space was a haven Lucia had taken her to several times after she’d been confined yet again to Master Lawrence’s punishment cage for her latest infraction. It was Lia’s favorite room in The Enclave, barring the dungeon, of course.

As they entered the room, she flicked the switch to activate the unique waterfall wall. As the water cascaded down the copper and slate design, Beau took a step back to admire it. “Wow, nice,” he said. “What a cool space.”

“Right?” Lia agreed, feeling oddly proprietary, though she’d only spent a few weeks at The Enclave. “With everything going on this morning, we should have privacy here.”

They sat a few feet apart on the large, comfortable sofa directly across from the waterfall wall. Beau was wearing a soft cotton long-sleeved black Henley shirt over faded jeans, his feet in black leather loafers that looked soft as butter. The clothing fit him perfectly, accentuating his gorgeous physique and muscular legs without being too loose or too tight. Suddenly aware of her own nakedness, Lia grabbed one of the throw pillows and hugged it to her body.

She fixed Beau with an expectant gaze while possibilities tumbled through her brain. What could possibly involve an entire week of her time? Did they want her to be his *Kinbaku* model for training demonstrations? She flashed back to the amazing night before, her body tingling at the thought of those lovely snug ropes hugging her body. She would totally be up for that, but why would it require her staying at The Enclave?

When he didn’t immediately begin to speak, her impatience got the better of her and she demanded, “So? What’s this proposal? I’m all ears.”

“Patience is a virtue, little one,” he said with a teasing grin.

“Not one I ever cultivated,” she snapped back reflexively.

“We’ll have to work on that,” he replied predictably. She managed to keep quiet until he finally volunteered, “After talking it over, they’ve agreed they’d like to give you another chance here at The Enclave, assuming you’re interested, of course. They recognize that their more traditional approach, or Slave Training 101 as you so aptly called it, didn’t work for you.”

“To put it mildly,” she interjected with chagrin.

He nodded. “We talked it over and, loosely stated, the idea is that you’d return to a training situation here. But instead of multiple trainers, you’d be working solely with me. There would be no positions training, no daily chores, no Master Lawrence waiting in the wings to slap you into his punishment cage. It would just be me and you, one-on-one.”

Lia was struck speechless as she struggled to process the enormity of what Beau seemed to be offering. A solid week with this gorgeous, sexy, masterful Dom? Her first impulse was to shout, “Hell to the yes! Bring it on, baby.”

But was she really up for another intensive experience like the one she’d so recently failed? What made them, or Beau for that matter, think her experience would be any different this time around?

As if reading her thoughts, Beau reached out to place his hand lightly on her knee. “I’ll be honest with you Lia. While I agree with The Enclave Doms that there is a submissive inside you waiting to be released, this will be an experiment for us both. I do have experience with submissive training, but it’s always been with someone I know well. While you and I were a good fit for one scene, that doesn’t necessarily translate into full-on training.”

“Go on,” she said softly, her entire being focused on his words.

“This wouldn’t just be an extended scene, Lia. Though there will be some sexual exercises included as part of your training, this isn’t some roundabout way for me to get into your pants, I assure you.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to quip, “Ah shucks, why not?” but she managed to stay quiet.

“My goal is to help you find and connect with your inner submissive. If you agree to this training,” he continued, “I will expect—no, command—your total obedience. That doesn’t mean I won’t allow your input. This will be a give and take, especially at first as we get to know each other better. But, make no mistake, if you sign up for this, you will, for all

intents and purposes, belong solely to me for the next six days.”

“Huh,” Lia breathed slowly, overwhelmed with everything he was putting on the table. At the same time, she was giddy with squealy girl excitement at the prospect of spending more time with this gorgeous, masterful hunk of a man. And the fact they’d be at The Enclave made it even better. They’d have access to all the cool BDSM equipment, and she’d have the support system of Lucia and the other slaves around her.

The only thing stopping her was her own courage, or lack thereof.

At least Beau was a real flesh-and-blood man, not a figment of the Internet, as Master Pain had turned out to be. *Master Pain*. What a stupid moniker. That should have been her first clue. Even after they’d become heavily involved in their online Master/slave relationship, he’d refused to divulge his real name. What an idiot she’d been, falling for his bullshit.

“One day—one day soon—we will meet, my love. You will show me in person what an obedient, eager girl you are. You will wear my collar and my chains. I will wrap you in the warmth of my tender love. You will submit to me with every fiber of your being. You will suffer for me and serve me. I will claim you for my own, just as you have already claimed my heart.”

His words had spoken directly to her soul, promising something she’d longed for.

Stop it, she ordered herself, irritated she’d allowed thoughts of that manipulative prick to slide back into her consciousness, even for a second. Though the wound had healed over with scar tissue in the eight months since she’d learned the truth, it still hurt when prodded. Thank god she’d never told a soul what had happened. This was one shameful secret she planned to take to her grave.

Beau was watching her with the intense gaze of a true Master. He was no figment, and what he was offering sounded off-the-charts exciting, if also a little terrifying.

She tried for cool, calm and collected. “I have to admit, this all sounds really intriguing. But what if, say, after a day or two, I decide it’s not for me?”

“Ah,” Beau replied as if he’d been expecting that very question. “That’s one point that’s nonnegotiable. You may not run this time, Lia. You either commit to the full six days or there is no deal.”

“I see,” she said slowly. Yet, even as she asked herself if she really wanted to commit to something so intense with someone she’d only just met, a deep longing swept through her, nearly making her moan aloud. She blew out a breath in her effort to regain her control.

Again, her practical side asserted itself. “What if I have to go down to town for some reason during the course of the week?”

“Then I would take you, and you would still be expected to adhere to my rules. Obviously, I would do nothing to put you at risk in any way, but you would still belong to me, and behave accordingly.”

Lia pondered possible scenarios. It would be hot to interact with non-scene people while having this delicious secret with this dominant man. The whole thing sounded like a wild adventure. Only the night before she’d been fantasizing about Beau while she had her hand between her legs. Now she was being offered nearly a solid week of intensive one-on-one interaction with him.

What was the catch?

When she looked up, Beau was watching her intently with those sexy bedroom eyes. As their gazes met, he cocked his brow, one corner of his mouth quirking. “So, what’ll it be, Ms. Duvall? Shall we try this little experiment together?”

Could it really be she just needed a different approach, another chance, to find the submissive grace she longed for? Was Beau the man who could take her there?

While Lia ached for the deep peace and serenity Lucia and the other slaves seemed to possess, did she really have it in

herself to submit? What if she blew it again? What if she was finally, irrevocably forced to admit she simply didn't have it in her?

Don't quit before the miracle...

Lucia's endlessly optimistic words came into her mind. Lia clung to them, calling on her inner tough girl to give her courage. She felt as if she was stepping off a high cliff with no idea if she had the wings to fly.

"Okay," she said with a rush of breath. "I'm in."

Chapter 10

“Excellent,” Beau replied, inordinately pleased.

He pointed to one of the silk floor cushions scattered throughout the small room. “Present yourself properly. Kneel on a cushion, back straight, knees parted, hands resting on your thighs.”

Flushing ever so slightly, Lia set aside the throw pillow. Without meeting his eye, she rose from the sofa and settled herself with reasonable grace on the cushion.

Beau let his gaze move slowly over her slender form. He could just see the outline of her cunt lips between her spread knees. It was a very pleasing picture. The head of the slim, colorful snake tattoo curled appealingly around her left hip. Her breasts, while small, were perfectly shaped and her nipples, he noticed with pleasure, were fully erect.

Given Lia’s intense masochistic leanings, he was surprised they weren’t pierced. Perhaps that would be something they explored together.

When his eyes reached her face, she met his gaze with a lifted chin. Her jagged pink bangs fell rakishly over one eye. She hid her nerves behind a saucy half smile.

“First rule: you will address me as Master Beau or Sir during our training. Understood?”

“Yes, Master Beau.” There was a hint of sass in her tone, but he let it pass, for now.

“Second rule: communicate. As I’m sure you’re aware, in this type of arrangement communication is paramount. I’m not super big on protocol, however. You may speak without asking express permission. If something doesn’t feel right, tell me.

Let me know if something I require of you needs clarification.”

He would have added more about potential triggers and hard limits, but he’d read her Enclave file, and she claimed to have neither triggers nor limits. He would, of course, judge that for himself as they got deeper into the training.

“You with me so far?”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied, her pupils dilated, the sass gone from her tone. “I understand.”

“Good. Let me be clear, though. Just because I’m giving you the right to speak and to ask questions and express reservations, don’t think that’s a way to get out of things you simply don’t wish to do. You need to understand from the outset that this isn’t an equal partnership. The exchange of power will be a complete one. You good with that?”

The saucy grin had vanished. Lia’s eyes were fixed on his face, her lips parted, her skin flushed. “Yes, Sir,” she whispered. Then, apparently unable to help herself, she blurted, “I think.”

Beau chuckled. “You can think all you like, as long as you obey.”

He let that sink in a moment.

“Third rule: for the duration of the week, whether or not you are with me, your body belongs to me and solely to me. That means you don’t touch yourself sexually unless I’m the one directing you to do so. You eat when I decide you should, sleep when I say so, use the toilet with my permission. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir.” Her pretty amber eyes were wide, lips parted, nipples erect.

“As with the other trainees here, you will not have the option of a safeword. That is, you do not have the right to either refuse what I require of you, or to end a scene. If this is a problem for you, I need to know now. Because if so, it’s a dealbreaker.”

Her lower lip was caught between worrying teeth, that cute pucker appearing again between her eyebrows. She drew in a deep breath. For a moment, he feared she might balk.

But then resolve moved over her features. When she spoke, her voice was strong and sure. “No, Sir. I understand and I’m good with that.”

Beau’s relief was palpable. He was surprised to realize just how invested he already was in this project. “Good.”

Getting to his feet, he removed the length of linen rope from his back pocket that he’d cut for this very purpose. He crouched in front of Lia and held it up for her to see.

“For the duration of this week, as long as it doesn’t interfere with your non-BDSM life, you will wear this rope collar as a symbol of your status as my trainee.”

She wrinkled her nose, her shoulders hunching slightly as she eyed the rope, which was dyed a rich burgundy red. “Can’t I have leather, Sir?”

Beau snorted. “That’s something you have to earn, little girl.”

Reaching behind her, he looped the soft but sturdy rope around the back of her neck. Then he tied the two ends into a simple knot that rested at the hollow of her throat. He made it tight enough that she’d feel the knot as she swallowed—a constant reminder of her status—but not so tight that it would constrict her breathing in any way.

Standing, Beau pointed to his feet. “Lean forward and kiss my shoe as a token of your gratitude,” he directed.

Instead of instantly obeying, she remained immobile. A brief scowl flitted over her features, giving Beau another inkling of what her previous trainers had had to deal with. Well, there was a new sheriff in town, one who would nip that sort of insolence in the bud.

Bending over, he grabbed her by the hair, using it to force her face down to his shoe. “Do as you’re told,” he said, his voice hard as stone. He kept his grip tight until she brushed her lips against the toe of his shoe.

Letting her go, he commanded, “Get to your feet and stand with your arms at your sides.”

To his relief, there was no further balking. She rose to her feet and assumed the position without protest. Her cheeks were scarlet and she kept her gaze on the ground.

“Look at me,” he said.

She looked up, both trepidation and defiance in her eyes.

“This is not how this is going to go,” he informed her. “You agreed to a complete power exchange. I don’t give a fuck if you don’t like what I tell you to do. You obey, instantly and with grace. Period. If I see another display like that, Lia, I’m done. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied, sounding genuinely contrite. Suddenly she looked very young, reminding him yet again of the significant age difference between them. “I’m sorry, Sir.” She looked down again. “It’s just...” She trailed off.

He moved closer. Placing his hand beneath her chin, he lifted her head so he could see her eyes. “Go on. It’s just what? Talk to me. I genuinely want to understand.”

“I don’t like being bossed around. I know that sounds weird for someone who claims she wants to find her inner sub. But when that particular button is pushed, I get this, I don’t know, this knee-jerk reaction of resistance.”

She sighed heavily.

“It’s what constantly had me in the punishment cage.”

Beau smiled in spite of himself, suddenly feeling a little sympathy toward Lawrence. Lia was definitely a handful.

She took a step back, wrapping her arms around herself. “I appreciate your giving me a chance, Master Beau. I really do, especially since they probably told you all about what a total fuckup I was during training.” She looked down. “But we might have to accept the fact that I just don’t have what it takes to be a submissive.”

Beau placed his hands on Lia’s shoulders. “Look at me.” He waited until she lifted her gaze to his before continuing. “I

don't believe that, Lia. And neither does anyone here, and that includes Lawrence."

At Lia's skeptical expression, Beau elaborated, "He said this morning that he believes in second chances. And let's be honest for a moment. You wouldn't be here right now if you believed in your heart of hearts that you're a lost cause. I think you want this, even if it's scary or hard. I think you *need* it."

He paused, half expecting her to protest, but instead, he saw an unmistakable glimmer of hope in her eyes.

"Sometimes in the scene we get bogged down with labels," he said gently. "Let's not worry right now whether you're submissive or just a bossy little masochist." He grinned to soften his words and was pleased when Lia smiled back. "That's something we'll explore intensively during our time together."

He allowed a bit of steel to return to his tone. "But if this is going to work, Lia, I need your full cooperation. I'm going to require a lot more than just kissing my shoe. I have no intention of dragging you kicking and screaming into anything and fighting you at every turn. Either you're all in, or you're not. If you stay, you find a way to stop controlling every interaction."

On an impulse, he reached for her cheek, cradling it gently in his hand. But not before he saw the involuntary flinch. She'd been expecting a slap.

"I'm asking you to trust me, Lia. That's a big ask, especially given that we've only just met. I get that. But I think you've been in the scene long enough to know that BDSM connections happen a lot more quickly than vanilla ones, by the very nature of the intense interaction. I wouldn't have volunteered for this if I didn't have faith in you. So, I'm also asking you to trust yourself. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'll try, Sir."

He nodded, accepting that for now. Some of the tension had eased from her body and her smile was less tentative. She

nudged gently with her cheek against his hand, reminding Beau of a cat eager to be petted.

He would need to be careful. They were to be trainer and trainee. Nothing more.

Dropping his hand, he took a step back.

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Lia nearly leaned forward, wanting his touch again.

Cut it out, she ordered herself. He signed up to be your trainer, not your boyfriend.

Thank goodness he was patient. She'd very nearly ruined everything right out of the gate with her stupid inability to control her reactions. Silently, she promised herself to do better.

“Let's go see what's for sale out there,” Beau said, turning toward the door. “You're going to help me choose a whip especially for you.”

“Oh, yes, *Sir*,” Lia replied eagerly. As they left the room, she turned off the lights and wall fountain, closing the door behind her.

The huge living room was crowded with outside guests moving from table to table. Mistress Marjorie and Katie stood behind the table displaying Master Brandon's beautiful selection of handcrafted collars. Several people were examining the collars, a few trying them on in front of the makeup mirrors set there for the purpose.

Lia's hand went to the soft rope around her own neck. She fingered the knot at her throat. She had several collars of her own back at her place, all of them she'd purchased herself. She liked to wear them as part of her outfit when she went to BDSM clubs. She had always considered them more of an accessory than anything else, until she'd come to The Enclave.

Though she still wasn't ready to be anyone's slave, she secretly coveted the lovely, unique collars each of the resident slaves wore. She had even fantasized, in a vague sort of way, about what it would be like to be collared by a dominant lover.

She supposed it made sense for Beau, a *Kinbaku* Master, to give her a rope trainee collar.

They moved slowly past various tables of BDSM paraphernalia and whip displays. Lia felt the pleasant thrum of arousal she always experienced when looking at impact toys and gear.

They eventually stopped in front of Jeremy Blake's table. As the night before, he was dressed head to toe in black leather. Juliette, one of the trainees, stood beside him, wrapping some purchases in tissue paper. The large man smiled broadly when he saw Lia. While she hadn't been in the slightest bit attracted to the guy, he had been quite skilled with his impact toys. Her skin tingled pleasantly at the memory of the excellent session the night before.

"There she is," he said enthusiastically. "Come back for some more, have you?" His eyes flickered from her to Beau. "Ah, the aftercare volunteer. Are the pair of you a package deal, then?" He looked almost comically disappointed.

"For the time being," Beau replied smoothly. He picked up one of the heavy floggers. "This is a beauty."

Jeremy's face lit up once more. He began to describe every aspect of the flogger in laborious detail. Beau listened, asking a polite question here and there. "Thanks," he eventually said when he could get in a word edgewise. "We're going to wander a little more."

They stopped in front of another vendor. A beautiful sign made from hand-tooled leather hung in front of the table, the words *Leather Master* artfully stenciled on it. The man behind this table was Taggart Fitzgerald, whom she'd briefly met the evening before at dinner.

Like Jeremy, Taggart was a big man, but instead of tending toward fat, he appeared to be all muscle. He wore a red flannel top over a black T-shirt tucked into faded jeans. He had rugged features and deep-set, kind eyes. Madison, who had been Taggart's subject during the demos the night before, stood beside him. She was making change for a woman holding her recent purchase.

“Leather Master,” Beau said, admiration in his voice. “I thought I recognized the name Taggert Fitzgerald from somewhere. I actually own a flogger I bought from your website about a year ago. It’s one of my favorite pieces.”

“That’s good to hear,” Taggert said with a smile. “It took me a while but I’m finally online, thanks to my wife, Rylee.”

“I’m sorry I missed your bullwhip demonstration last night,” Beau said. “I wish I could have been everywhere at once.”

Taggert smiled back. “I know the feeling. This place is beyond awesome.”

As another potential customer drew Taggert’s attention away, Beau stroked the long handle of one of several bullwhips coiled neatly on display. The throw was plaited with alternating strands of red and black leather that tapered to a thin tail.

“What do you think, Lia? Can you handle a bullwhip?”

Lia swallowed, feeling the knot of her rope collar as she did so. “Uh,” she hedged. “Maybe something not quite so imposing?” The throw on that thing was longer than she was, or so it seemed to her.

Beau chuckled. “Yeah. You’re probably right. We should stick with something a little more manageable. A flogger, perhaps? Or maybe a single tail.”

“This is hot,” Lia said, picking up a beautiful whip maybe two feet long. It was made from black and yellow leather artfully braided to look like a patterned snake. The end of the whip was split like a forked tongue, adding to the snakelike effect. She had never seen anything so perfect. It was as much a work of art as an impact toy.

Unable to resist, she lifted it to her face. Closing her eyes, she inhaled the rich scent of fine, oiled leather.

As she lowered it, she noticed the price tag—over three-hundred dollars. Holy crap.

“Let me see,” Beau said, holding out his hand. She gave him the whip, watching for his reaction. “Impressive,” he said. He fingered the forked tip, a cruel sexy smile curving his lips. “This should make a nice mark.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Lia agreed. “But it’s kind of pricey, Sir.”

Beau eyed the price tag and made a scoffing sound. “If his single tails are anything like his floggers, it’s totally worth it.”

When Beau had Taggert’s attention once more, he said, “Is it possible to try out this little beauty before purchase?”

Taggert grinned. “Sure.”

A swoop of excitement shot through Lia’s core. But instead of commanding her to turn around and offer her ass, Beau didn’t even look at her.

He was looking at the slave trainee. “Hey there, Madison. It’s nice to see you again.”

“You as well, Master Beau,” she replied with the hint of a smile.

Lia was immediately jealous. This was *her* Master, at least for the next week. When had he and Madison even met? After he’d packed *her* off to bed? Before she could stop herself, she made a small grunt of disapproval.

“I’d like to try out this whip on your ass,” Beau said, still ignoring Lia.

“Yes, Sir,” Madison agreed readily. “It would be my pleasure, Sir.”

I bet it would, Lia thought sourly.

As Beau walked around the table, Madison turned so her back was to him, giving Lia a profile view. Madison had a spectacular body, curvy in all the right places, her breasts large and high, her bearing regal. From where Lia stood, she could see the lingering remains of the welts from last night’s play on Madison’s shapely ass. She felt small and scrawny in comparison.

Lia watched, rapt, as Beau expertly snapped the lash against Madison's ass—once, twice, three times. Each stroke left a pretty red mark on Madison's smooth, dark skin.

“Very nice,” Beau said, tracing his finger over the small welts. Lia wasn't entirely sure if he meant the whip or Madison. As he took a step back, Madison pivoted gracefully and smiled shyly at Beau.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said sweetly.

“My pleasure,” he replied while Lia struggled to control her jealousy. Stepping back around the table, he said to Taggert, “It's beautifully made and perfectly weighted. I'll take it.”

“I'm glad you like it,” Taggert agreed as Beau handed him the whip and his credit card. “That's one of my personal favorites.”

Using a sterilizing wipe, Taggert cleaned the tail and then nestled the toy into a black oblong box with *Leather Master* stamped in shiny raised letters on the lid. He handed the box to Madison, who slid it into a sturdy brown paper bag with rope handles.

As Beau and Lia moved away from the table, she couldn't help but ask, “Can we try it out now, please, Sir? We could go to the main dungeon or one of the playrooms.”

He cocked a brow, his expression amused. “Uh, that would be a definite no. We both know that for a pain slut like you, a whipping is a reward. And rewards come with obedience, good behavior and hard work. So, let's get started, shall we?”

Chapter 11

Beau steered Lia out of the dungeon and up the stairs to his temporary quarters. As he dropped his new purchase onto the bed, she looked around the large suite with evident appreciation.

“I was in some of the Masters’ rooms when I was on bathroom scouring duty, but not this one. Master Julian has his boy, Hans, keep their room clean.”

She moved toward the dungeon space as if dragged by a magnetic field. “Nice,” she breathed, drawing out the word as she reached out to touch the St. Andrew’s cross. Made from gleaming stainless steel, it sported a sleek, minimalistic design.

“This cross is awesome.” Lia turned back toward him, her tongue flicking suggestively over her full lower lip. “Let’s try out the new snake whip,” she said in that low, husky voice of hers. In what seemed almost an afterthought, she added, “Sir.”

Beau was amused at his trainee’s decidedly unsubmitive behavior. Given the exacting standards of the trainee program, it was a wonder she’d lasted as long as she had her last time at The Enclave. Clearly, she still hadn’t learned her lesson.

He covered the distance between them in a few strides. Grabbing her by the throat, he glared down at her. He tightened his grip, enjoying the look of genuine fear in her eyes as he cut off her ability to breathe.

He let her go abruptly and she stumbled back, her hands flying to her throat as she sucked in a breath.

“It seems you’re confused about what training with me is going to entail,” he said. “So, I’ll spell it out more clearly for you. We are *not* scene partners, Lia. This is not going to be a

week-long game where you use me to indulge your kinks and get your rocks off.”

She flushed, color blazing in her cheeks. “I didn’t think... I didn’t mean...”

Reaching down, he grabbed her nipples and used them to pull her closer. She gasped, her pupils dilating as she stared up at him.

“I have a question for you,” he said, his eyes drilling into hers. “Are you serious about connecting with your inner submissive or are you just wasting my time?”

Her color still high, her gaze slid from his.

“Look at me,” he commanded, waiting until she obeyed. “Now answer the question.”

“I do want to connect with my inner sub,” she said, her tone subdued. Her eyes filled with sudden tears, which she blinked away. “It’s just...”

“Go on,” he pressed, more gently now, though his fingers remained tight on her nipples.

“I’m not sure she’s in there,” she blurted.

Beau suppressed his sudden impulse to laugh, not out of malice, but at just how adorable she was. Releasing her, he took a step back. “Listen, Lia. I get it. Letting go is really hard, especially in situations that are new for you. I get the strong sense that you’re someone used to looking out for yourself at all times, even, or perhaps especially, in a D/s situation. While that might work fine for a scene, it’s not going to work in a training situation. This is a big ask—but I’m asking you to trust me. To put aside what you think you know about how this should go and let me guide you. You’re still free to express reservations or concerns if I ask something of you that confuses or scares you. But that’s it. You *don’t* get to direct me in any way. For the next six days, I’ll be the one to decide what you do and when you do it, 24/7, and my word is final.”

She swallowed visibly, making the knot at her throat rise and fall. “Yes, Sir,” she whispered with what seemed to be genuine contrition.

He barely permitted himself to acknowledge his relief. For whatever reason, he was already invested in her success. He wanted her to achieve her goal, but it was going to be on his terms or not at all.

“Good,” he said. “Stay where you are. Don’t move.”

Grabbing his gear bag, he unzipped it and took out several hanks of undyed *Kinbaku* rope. Returning to her, he set them on the nearby spanking bench.

“Place your arms behind your back in a box formation, gripping opposing elbows.”

Lia obeyed, her eyes on the rope, her nipples still red and engorged from his manhandling. Reaching for a hank of the sturdy, soft rope, he moved behind her. He wove the rope around her wrists, creating a pattern that confined her arms securely without being overly restrictive. He worked quickly but deliberately, each knot both purposeful and aesthetically pleasing.

Like the night before, she responded well to the bondage, visibly relaxing as he worked. Maybe this would be a way to reach her where The Enclave trainers had failed. *Kinbaku* was a different focus for her, something outside her normal realm of BDSM experience. Hopefully it would offer a new way for her to connect with her truer self.

When he was done, he tested the bonds for circulation. Satisfied, he retrieved another length of rope.

He used this one to bind her breasts, creating an intricate lattice design in a circle around each breast. Moving down, he crisscrossed her abdomen with the rope, cinching it snugly around her waist.

Finally, he selected a short length of the rope. “Spread your legs to shoulder width,” he directed.

She obeyed, a dreamy, anticipatory expression on her face he recognized well. To her credit, she made no move or insinuation that implied she was expecting a scene. Hopefully, she was finally figuring out he meant business.

He positioned the rope between her legs, pulling it taut between her labia and along the crack of her pert little bottom. Her breath quickened and he again smelled the sweet, spicy scent of her arousal. Ignoring it, he tied each end to the rope belt cinching her waist. He made it taut so it would rub at her sex with each step she took.

He moved back to admire his handiwork. She looked hot as hell, her lovely body wrapped in his ropes, her jagged pink bangs falling in a curtain over one eye, her full lips softly parted. The tip of her pretty pink tongue had again appeared on her lower lip and, in spite of himself, his balls tightened at the sexy sight.

The horndog in him wanted to press her down to the ground, yank his jeans open and sink his shaft deep into her throat. The man in him knew that was a mistake and the Dom in him knew it was irresponsible.

Turning from her, he grabbed a small piece of rope from the bench and ordered, "Open your mouth."

He placed the rope between her teeth as a makeshift gag and tied it off behind her head. Finally, he attached a rope leash to her training collar. He gave it a gentle tug.

"Let's go."

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Lia did *not* like the gag and leash. It was humiliating, as if she were a muzzled dog being taken for a walk. But she couldn't deny the calming and deeply erotic feelings engendered by being constrained so securely in the lovely linen rope.

It was tight around her body, but not painfully so. Her arms were completely immobilized behind her back, her breasts lifted and pressed together in their rope harness. The snug confines helped her to relinquish control, something that was never easy for her. The physical restraint in and of itself was stimulating, leading to heightened sensations and an increased sense of arousal.

The limited movement and lack of control made her hyper-aware of her body and the sensations it experienced. Her nipples were throbbing, the feeling magnified by the restriction of blood flow caused by the ropes. Her clit pulsed against the rope between her legs, which was growing damp from her juices.

All the Masters at The Enclave had been as exacting as Beau, if not more so. They were just as quick to correct, to command and to control. She'd been bound and gagged more than once during her brief tenure at The Enclave, put on embarrassing display as yet another in the daily punishments she'd received for her inability to conform.

The one-on-one sessions with rotating Masters had been relatively brief and always impersonal. She was an object to be molded and trained, interchangeable with the other trainees. She'd been required to sexually service one and all of the Masters, occasionally subjected to forced orgasms along the way.

The exercises were designed to break her down and rebuild her into an ideal Enclave slave, something she'd thought she craved. But, instead of connecting with the serene inner sub that Lucia and Master Anthony continued to insist resided within her, she'd chafed at each new demand. She'd never been able to let go enough to truly submit.

She'd spent as much time away from the Masters as with them—doing chores, grooming, observing, hanging out with the other subs—basically being seen but not heard. When the day ended, she was relegated to her single bed in the slave quarters, while the Masters slept with their real partners two floors above.

Beau's astonishing offer to work with her had rekindled a flame of hope. But it was a tiny flame, one easily snuffed. She didn't have the conviction Lucia and Master Anthony seemed to have about her, despite how much she wanted it. In her heart of hearts, she still believed she was a lost cause.

But maybe, just maybe with Beau it would be different. The approach was certainly different. She'd signed up for

intensive, one-on-one training with a single Dom whose sole focus was her. She wasn't an interchangeable trainee. Already, in just the brief time she'd known the man, she felt both seen and heard.

Maybe he'd not only unlock the door to her deepest desires but fall madly in love with her in the process.

Whoa.

Where the hell had *that* come from?

Her ruminations were interrupted by the need to concentrate as he led her down the stairs by the rope leash. With her arms trussed behind her back, she had to focus to keep from stumbling. The annoying gag between her teeth was making her drool. She managed to swallow before too much slid down her chin.

When they got downstairs, he led her back into the living room. The crowd had thinned out some, no doubt moving into the dungeon to try out their new purchases. But there were still plenty of people milling about. Several of the resident slaves and trainees were scattered about the room, helping at the vendor tables or chatting with visitors.

All eyes seemed to be on her as Beau pulled her along behind him. She felt more exposed than if she'd been completely naked, and certainly more vulnerable.

The rope between her legs rubbed like fingers over her cunt. Despite her efforts to keep her mouth closed over the now soggy gag between her teeth, drool spilled down her chin and dripped onto her chest. Her nipples throbbed almost painfully in their confines, her bound arms forcing her to arch her back to keep her balance.

Beau finally stopped in front of Maria Stafford's table. Lia had met the whip maker along with the other two at last night's dinner. Around forty, she wore her shiny black hair in a bob that bracketed an angular, almost masculine face. Her wares included leather paddles, quirts and riding crops of various sizes.

She was chatting with someone who appeared to have just completed a purchase. The male trainee, Nick, stood beside her, naked save for his training collar. Lia couldn't help but notice his well-muscled chest was reddened and stippled with marks no doubt created by Maria's various crops and quirts. Lia's skin tingled with both sympathy and desire.

He and Lia exchanged a glance, Nick lifting a blond brow as he looked her over. Again, she experienced a heightened sense of vulnerability at her predicament.

Once the customer moved away, Maria turned her attention to them. As the night before, she was dressed in a sheer blouse tucked into a black leather skirt, though today it was red rather than see-through white.

"Well, hello there," she said to Beau with a predator's smile. "I don't recall seeing you last night at dinner. I would *definitely* have remembered."

Hands off, Lia wanted to snarl.

She immediately squelched the impulse, which was absurd. She reminded herself sternly of what Beau had so bluntly informed her not ten minutes before. They were *not* hooking up. They weren't even scene partners. He had agreed to have a try with the trainee dropout, nothing more.

"Is she yours?" Maria asked, her eyes raking Lia's bound body.

"For the time being," Beau replied.

"That's top-notch rope work," Maria said approvingly. "*Shibari*?"

"Similar," Beau agreed with a nod. "*Kinbaku*."

"Let me get a better look." Maria moved around the table to stand directly in front of Lia. "I love her round little titties," she said, still addressing Beau. "Is she for sale?"

No, I'm not for sale because I'm not owned, Lia wanted to snap. Instead, she bit down on the rope gag between her teeth.

"No," Beau replied with a chuckle. "But feel free to touch." Dropping the leash, he moved to stand just behind Lia,

his body nearly but not quite touching hers.

The Domme reached out, catching Lia by her distended nipples. Lia drew in a sharp breath as Maria twisted them between her fingers, her long, blood-red nails poking into Lia's flesh in the process. In spite of herself, a gush of moisture flooded her cunt, actually dampening her inner thighs.

"She's certainly responsive," Maria said with a sly laugh. Releasing her grip on one nipple, she cupped Lia's roped cunt. "Soaking wet."

Heat licking her cheeks, Lia took an instinctive step back. She bumped against Beau, who brought his arms loosely around her midriff with a laugh. "She is a randy little thing," he agreed with a chuckle.

What the hell? Lia bit down on the rope gag to keep from blurting something that would get her in trouble.

Still painfully gripping one of Lia's nipples, the Domme picked up a riding crop with a silver tipped handle, the leather dyed the same blood red as her lacquered fingernails. Looking past Lia to Beau, she asked, "May I?"

"By all means," Beau agreed.

Taking a step back, Maria snapped the leather tongue against Lia's sensitized nipple, pulling a gasp of pain from Lia's lips. Before she could catch her breath, Maria smacked the other nipple just as hard.

Beau remained behind her, his hands now gripping her shoulders to keep her still. Lia panted against her gag as the rectangle of leather slapped against her tenderized breasts, covering every exposed inch of each bound globe. Unbidden tears pricked her eyelids at the relentless, stinging pain, one spilling down her cheek.

At the same time, her perverse cunt pulsed with need. She shifted, pressing her thighs together in an effort to ease the throb. It only made it worse, the rope rubbing against her clit with every movement she made.

When Maria finally set down the crop, Lia sagged in relief against Beau's warm, strong body. But instead of wrapping her in a comforting embrace, as a lover might have, he let her go and moved to stand beside her.

"Nice," he said, running a finger lightly over one reddened breast. He reached for the crop Maria had returned to the table. Picking it up, he flashed a grin at the whip maker. "I'll take it."

Chapter 12

Beau slung the plastic bag containing his latest purchase over his shoulder. He led Lia, still gagged and bound, back into the front hall. She wore that smudged, well-used look of a submissive coming out of an intense scene.

Even so, she was trembling slightly, her cheeks flushed, drool coursing down her chin. There was a fine sheen of sweat on her face and throat. Her breasts were purpling beneath the stippled marks left by the crop. The circulation in her arms was still decent, but it was time to get her out of the ropes.

Leaning down, Beau placed one arm around Lia's upper back, the other beneath her knees. She gave a surprised squawk as he lifted her into his arms. He held her close against him as he carried her up the stairs and down the hall to the suite.

Pushing the ajar door open with his hip, he brought her through the sleeping quarters to the dungeon area and set her on her feet. As she swayed, he reached for her shoulders, steadying her.

Once she'd regained her balance, he reached around her head and untied the gag. Gently, he pulled the soggy rope from her mouth. He used the dry ends to wipe some of the drool from her chin and chest.

"You good?" he asked, spanning her jaw with his fingers and giving it a gentle massage.

"Thirsty," she croaked. "And my arms are numb."

"Stay put. I'll get you something."

As he set down the plastic bag containing the riding crop on the bed beside the new snake whip, he glanced around the

space. He spied what he was looking for—a mini fridge—under a counter set against the back wall. The refrigerator contained cans of German beer, soda and small bottles of water. He snagged a bottle of water and returned quickly to his charge. Unscrewing the cap, he tipped the bottle to her lips.

She drank greedily, some of the water spilling down her chin. When she'd had enough, he finished off the bottle and set it aside. "I need to get these ropes off you. Can you remain standing a little longer?"

"I think so," she replied.

Without warning, he slapped her cheek—not so hard as to leave a mark, but hard enough to get her attention.

Her body jerked, her eyes widened with outrage and confusion. She opened her mouth, but before she could speak, he spoke calmly but firmly. "That was twice in a row you failed to address me properly. You know better. Next time you'll get more than a slap. Are we clear?"

The indignation slid from her features, replaced with chagrin. "Yes, Master Beau."

He worked in reverse, first removing the length of rope between her legs. The rope was wet with her juices, the heady scent wafting to his nostrils like a siren's call. Ignoring his twitching cock, he dropped the rope to the floor.

Lia watched in the mirror as he unknotted and unwound the latticed harness from around her breasts and abdomen. Her skin was patterned with deep, dark pink indentations left by the rope.

"Oh," she breathed, her eyes riveted to her image in the mirror. "It's beautiful, Sir."

Beau smiled. "It is," he agreed, pleased she appreciated the design he'd purposely created with the knots. He ran his finger lightly over the indentations, enjoying the feel of her soft, sweat-dampened skin.

She shivered at his touch, pulling away ever so slightly.

“Does my touch hurt?” he asked, his fingers still tracing the marks. He bet her cunt hurt even more, reddened by the rope, the lips swollen, her slit wet and ready...

“Yes, Sir,” she replied huskily. “A good hurt.”

How would it feel to slide his hard shaft along her tender, swollen labia, slick with her juices? He would carry her to the bed, throw her down and plunge into her, spurred on by her breathy cries...

What the fuck was he doing?

Abruptly, he dropped his hand, letting the inappropriate image slide away. Wrestling himself back under control, he worked quickly and methodically to release the knots that held her from elbow to wrist. A glance at the mirror showed him she was again watching as he worked, as rapt as before. He dropped the ropes on the growing pile for later washing.

He caught her arms as they flopped down to her sides. Gently, he massaged them until the cold skin warmed beneath his fingers. When he let her go, she lifted a hand to trace the indentations left by the lattice work on her abdomen. Her nipples were fully erect, skin still sheened with sweat, the scent of feminine arousal delicately perfuming the air.

Beau watched her in the mirror, noting the graceful curve of biceps and the muscular thighs. He bet she'd put up a good fight in a wrestling match. He might even let her think she was winning, until he tired of the game and pinned her down.

He would straddle her chest and force his hard cock down her throat. After fucking her face for a while, he would slide his shaft from her mouth, shiny with her saliva. Holding her wrists tight, he would push apart her slender thighs with his knee and plunge into her rope-burned cunt, her sexy cries only spurring him on...

Damn it, Jackson. Enough. She might not be jailbait, but she's still way too young for you.

“You need a shower,” he announced abruptly.

He did, too.

A cold shower.

Alone.

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Lia instantly envisioned a hot, sexy shower scene with plenty of skin on skin and passionate kissing under the steamy spray. Clearly, there was a very hot bod hidden beneath Beau's clothes. She was definitely curious to see him naked. More than curious, she admitted, her clit pulsing at the thought.

Maybe he'd have her wash him from head to toe, spending plenty of time soaping up his cock and balls. Maybe, cock hard as steel from her expert caress, he'd lose his self-control and yank her to her feet. With a sensual growl, he'd press her against the glass wall of the shower stall. Or no, he'd lift her onto his hips, easily holding her in place against the glass as he thrust his big, hard cock into her sopping heat...

She turned toward the large ensuite bathroom, eager to see what he had in store for her. "Shall I get the water going, Sir?" she asked, attempting to channel good little sub girl.

"What?"

He seemed to come out of some kind of momentary trance. Following her gaze, he shook his head. "Oh. No. No, you'll be showering in the slave quarters. You may also use the toilet if you need to." He glanced at his watch. "It's already after one. I'll meet you downstairs in the front hall in thirty minutes. We can grab a bite to eat and assess where we go from here."

The sexy shower fantasies evaporated at his words. She gave herself a mental shake, glad he'd pulled her back from the brink. Her wild sex fantasies were not helpful. If anything, they were distracting. Very distracting.

"Yes, Sir," Lia said. Turning on her heel, she left the room quickly and made her way down the stairs.

She tried not to assign too much import to his sending her away. She *so* didn't want Beau to turn out to be just another Enclave Master, putting her through her paces and then dismissing her without another thought. She didn't want to be just another interchangeable trainee.

There were fewer people milling in the living room now, but the dungeon was in full swing. On her way to the basement stairs, she poked her head into the dining room, which was again set up buffet style because of the event.

She looked around for Lucia but didn't see her. She considered going into the kitchen to find her friend but decided she'd better get a move on. Taking the basement steps two at a time, she hurried down the hall past the bedrooms to the large communal bathroom at the end of the hall. It sported a row of doorless toilet stalls against one wall. The adjacent wall contained the open shower area, with six showerheads installed side-by-side, a drain set in the tiled floor. There was a huge sunken tub in one corner of the room.

Lia was intimately familiar with every tile, nook and cranny of the space, having spent one long, laborious afternoon on her hands and knees, ankles hobbled together with chain. She'd scrubbed every inch of the place with a bucket, a rag and an old toothbrush. Her knees still ached with the memory.

To her unexpected delight, Lucia was in the bathroom, along with Katie and the four trainees. They were in front of the sinks, the countertops piled with makeup and various brushes, along with some body jewelry.

Katie was blowing out Juliette's short dark hair while Madison knelt in front of Nick, fitting a black metal cock ring over his semi-erect shaft. They all looked up as she entered.

"Lia," Lucia exclaimed, momentarily pausing in the task of rouging Kinsley's pale pink nipples to a deep red. "I was wondering if we'd see you today. How's it going?"

"Pretty good, I think," Lia hedged, not quite ready to parse her feelings aloud, especially not in front of the other trainees. "What are y'all doing?"

"We're getting ready for the play auction that's taking place after lunch," Katie volunteered. "Our community guests will get to bid on the purchase of a one-hour scene with one of our trainees. The money raised will go to one of our local charities."

“Sounds fun,” Lia replied. “Y’all nervous?”

“No,” Nick and Madison replied in unison.

“Yes,” Kinsley and Juliette said at the same time.

Everyone laughed. Lia experienced a tug of longing tinged with regret. She missed the intense camaraderie she’d felt with her fellow trainees during her brief tenure at The Enclave. They’d shared the immediate closeness you feel when you’re thrust into a difficult situation and come through it together. Except she hadn’t come through it with the rest. She’d run away, tail between her legs.

But I’m back now, she reminded herself.

“I love those rope patterns,” Katie gushed, pulling Lia back to the moment.

“Very sexy,” Lucia agreed.

Lia glanced down at herself. The marks were already fading, she observed with a pang. While she hadn’t especially enjoyed being paraded past the vendor tables on a leash, she had adored the sensual way Beau had wrapped her body in those beautiful knots beforehand. As he worked, she had surrendered to the sensations, thrilling to the paradoxical embrace of restraint and the liberated way it made her feel.

“Are you joining us for the auction?” Madison asked. Lucia was now spraying Madison’s skin with a fine mist of gold oil that made her look like a gorgeous, bronzed statue brought to life.

“I’m not sure what Master Beau has planned for me. He sent me down for a quick shower.” She glanced at the large wall clock. “I need to be back up there by 1:40.”

“Let’s connect when we can,” Lucia said. “I want to hear everything. If there’s anything you need, let me know.”

“Thanks.” It was good to have Lucia in her corner.

Before heading to the shower, Lia entered one of the toilet stalls. She wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about having to ask Beau for permission for such basic functions as using the bathroom. Her brain rebelled at the restriction but her body

and soul, if she was being truly honest, thrilled to the idea of his controlling her so completely.

Flushing the toilet, she hurried to the showers. As she waited for the water to heat, she fingered the soft rope collar at her throat. Was she supposed to remove it for the shower? He hadn't said one way or the other, and she hadn't thought to ask.

She had been permitted to remove the slave collar she'd worn as an Enclave trainee when showering, but that had been a simple matter of unbuckling it. Even if she managed to get this one off, she wasn't sure she could duplicate the pretty knot he'd so effortlessly created when it was time to put it back. Just to be safe, she decided to leave it on.

After quickly washing her hair and body, she chose one of a pile of fresh disposable razors from the shelf. Using more soap, she ran the blade under her arms and over her sex, making sure her labia and mons were smooth. A natural blonde, the hair on her legs was baby-fine and barely visible. While she did sometimes shave it, she decided not to bother just then, as the time was ticking away.

She soaped up once more, her fingers lingering between her legs of their own accord. The mornings' events had left her on fire with lust, the orgasm she'd given herself the night before only a dim memory. Angling away from the others, she probed her swollen sex, still tender from the rope thong.

It was hard to think straight with her clit constantly throbbing. She really needed to do something about that. He'd said no touching herself, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Turning her back to the others, she rubbed herself with soapy fingers. Her earlier shower fantasy resumed, as if it had only been on pause on the screen of her imagination. Beau lifted her once more in his strong arms, placing her on his hips as he guided his rock-hard cock deep inside of her. Gripping her ass cheeks, he shifted her so the friction was perfect against her clit with each thrusting movement of his gorgeous, water-slicked body.

“*You’re a dirty little slut,*” he growled, his warm lips against her ear. “*You deserve whatever I give you, don’t you?*”

“*Oh, god. Oh, yes, Sir,*” she silently mouthed.

Within a few seconds, she exploded into a spasm of pleasure that made her moan aloud. As the hammer of her heartbeat eased in her ears, she heard the chuckles and clapping behind her.

Blushing beet-red, she turned off the water and grabbed a towel from the nearby stack. Wrapping herself as she turned, she was greeted by six subs, five of them grinning broadly.

“Must be nice to get to come whenever you want,” Nick said wistfully, his hand on his shaft, which had hardened in its ringed confines. “I haven’t been allowed to come for days.”

“We’re not permitted to touch ourselves without express permission and oversight,” Juliette chimed in, as if Lia hadn’t also been a trainee only a few short weeks ago.

“I would imagine Lia isn’t either.” Lucia’s frown of disapproval caused Lia to look away, her hand moving of its own accord to the damp collar around her neck.

“A word of caution, *querida,*” Lucia said. “When you cheat your Master by disobeying, you cheat yourself as well.”

Embarrassed and ashamed, Lia muttered, “I know. You’re right. I fucked up. Again.”

“Don’t worry,” Katie said sweetly. “We won’t tell.”

“That’s right,” Madison added with a snort. “What happens in the slave quarters, stays in the slave quarters.”

“As long as none of the Masters, all of whom have access, didn’t happen to be watching you on the nanny cam app on their phones,” Lucia said pointedly.

Lia followed Lucia’s gaze to the camera set high on the wall, its red light blinking directly at Lia. She’d forgotten all about that particular nanny cam.

Oops.

Chapter 13

Instead of the cold shower he'd prescribed himself, Beau decided it made more sense to take the edge off with a quick hand job. To avoid allowing Lia to slip into his masturbatory fantasies, he pulled up one of his favorite *Kinbaku* BDSM websites on his phone.

The young Japanese female subject in the video he selected reminded him of Sakura, whom he'd met while doing his thesis research in Japan two years previously. On the rebound from Renee, he'd enjoyed a brief but intense romance with Sakura, their connection revolving around a shared love of rope bondage.

The naked woman in the video was suspended upside down from a bamboo scaffold, her legs bent and bound from knee to ankle, her arms firmly secured behind her back. A second woman, also naked save for a black leather mask that covered the top half of her face, was plunging a huge, lubricated phallus in and out of the bound woman's cunt. The action was clearly staged, but it did the trick. He came quickly and exited the site.

As he headed downstairs, he saw Lia standing at the open doors of the main dungeon, her back to him. She was leaning forward as if pulled by an unseen force. The indentations created by the rope bondage had mostly faded from her fair skin, as had any trace of the impact play from the night before. If she'd been just someone he'd hooked up with at this event, he wouldn't have hesitated to take her straight into the dungeon so he could mark that creamy skin once more.

Instead, he came up quietly behind her and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Hey, there."

She jumped at his touch and whirled to face him. “Oh,” she exclaimed. “You startled me, Sir.”

“I can see that,” he said with a grin. “You looked like a kid with her face pressed up against the candy store window.”

She grinned. “What can I say, Sir? Once a pain slut...”

He chuckled. “Come on. Let’s grab something to eat and find somewhere to sit and chat.”

They entered the dining room, which was filled with people, some seated at the table, others in the buffet line. After filling their plates with warm biscuits piled with baked ham along with homemade kettle chips and, for Lia, a slice of peach pie, they made their way into the large living room.

The vendor tables had been cleared away, and, as the night before, drinks stations were set up at various points around the room offering bottled water, fresh lemonade and sweet iced tea.

They found a secluded spot in the corner that contained two comfortable chairs. “Can I get you something to drink?” he asked, setting his plate down on the small side table between the chairs.

Lia looked surprised by the question. No doubt Enclave Masters didn’t get drinks for their slaves, instead expecting to be served. “Oh, um, yes, sure. I’ll have a glass of iced tea, Sir.”

He returned with Lia’s drink and a glass of limeade for himself. “Is the food always this good here?” he asked, biting into the delicious sandwich.

“Yep,” Lia said. “Mason was a world class chef before he retired to The Enclave. He still owns a couple of restaurants in Asheville.”

“Impressive,” Beau observed.

Focusing on their sandwiches, they ate in companionable silence.

After a while, he said, “So, you’ve had some time to process on your own. You still want to go through with this?”

“Yes, Sir. I’m game if you are.”

Beau smiled, glad they were on the same page. “I am.”

“Oh,” she said, her hand going to the rope collar around her throat. “I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to remove this collar for my shower, so I left it on.”

He reached for the collar, touching the linen rope. “It’s still damp, but it should dry fine as it is, though it may tighten a bit as a result. Going forward, you have my permission to remove it before showering. I’ll show you how to retie the knot. It’s actually very simple.”

His delicious sandwich devoured, he set down his plate. “I’m going to need to leave the compound from time to time over the upcoming week. I know we kind of sprung this whole thing on you today. Did you need to go back to your apartment or handle anything in town?”

“I do have a few things I was planning to do this week. I already got my ID card at my orientation and I want to go to the research library at least once before next Monday just to get myself better acquainted with the space. Oh, and I’ll need to water my plants at my apartment. It’s cool, though. I have my own ride. I rode my motorcycle up here.”

“Your motorcycle,” Beau snorted. “Why am I not surprised? But, no. That won’t be necessary. I’ll drive you where you need to go.”

For a moment, she almost looked like she was going to protest. Wisely, she seemed to reconsider. “Okay.”

“But remember,” he added, placing a hand on her bare thigh, “even when we’re not together, you’ll still be my charge. While I’ll never compromise you, I may require certain things of you to keep you in the proper mindset while we’re apart.”

“Certain things?” she queried, looking dubious.

“That’s right. But don’t worry. I won’t ask anything that could potentially get you in trouble. As long as you’re discreet, that is,” he added with a smirk. “I’ll be the only one

who knows about the dirty slut who keeps herself hidden beneath the prim and proper librarian.”

Lia’s eyes widened, her lips parting in that sexy way that made him almost want to kiss her. Clearly, she was turned on by the idea. While that wasn’t the intent of the exercise, it might be a nice byproduct.

“Obviously, I won’t always be in a position to monitor your behavior,” he continued. “We’ll rely on the honor system. Any successful D/s relationship, be it a romantic one or a trainee situation, is based on trust. That works both ways. If you’re to succeed in tapping into your inner sub, I will require rigorous honesty from you at all times.”

To his surprise, her gaze flitted away from his, color washing over her cheeks. Clearly, he’d touched a nerve.

“What is it, Lia? What’s going on with you right now?”

Slowly, she turned her head and met his gaze, her cheeks still pink. “Um. It’s just...” She trailed off, then resumed, “Do you know about the nanny cams set up all over this place? And the phone app that allows the Doms to track them?”

Beau was further confused by the apparent non sequitur and mildly annoyed by her apparent inability to answer a direct question. “What’s going on? Just tell me straight.”

She drew in a deep breath and blew it out. “I did something wrong while I was downstairs.”

Ah. Now he was getting it. It wasn’t that his words about trust had hit home. Whatever she’d done might have been witnessed by a nanny cam, so she’d decided she better confess just to be on the safe side.

Wait. He shouldn’t be so hard on her. She was trying to tell him something now. She could have taken her chances and waited to be caught, or not. Instead, she’d brought whatever it was up of her own accord.

When she didn’t immediately continue, he prodded gently, “Tell me what you have to say, Lia.”

She mumbled something unintelligible.

“Look at me,” he commanded. “And speak up so I can hear you.”

Finally, she met his gaze, color again splashing over her cheeks and throat as she blurted, “I played with myself in the shower, Sir. I touched myself without your express permission. I’m so sorry, Sir.”

He almost laughed at the irony, as he’d done the same thing himself. But this was clearly a teachable moment, and he needed to take it seriously.

“I appreciate your honesty. Though I can’t help but wonder,” he added with the ghost of a smile, “would you have confessed if there hadn’t been a camera in the vicinity?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” she admitted, her candor surprising him. “But what you said just now really made me think about what I’d done, whether or not you saw it. Maybe that old saying that what they don’t know won’t hurt them isn’t really true. Especially, as you say, in a D/s situation.”

Beau nodded, curious to see where she was going with this.

“I don’t want to just repeat my past mistakes,” she continued. “I thought I could power my way through The Enclave training, and we both know how well *that* worked out. If I’m going to do this thing, I need to give it my all. So, yeah. I fucked up, Sir. I disobeyed you, and just because you didn’t know about it, that doesn’t make it right.”

“No. It doesn’t,” he agreed. “You will be punished for your infraction.”

Her face fell. “Yes, Sir.”

“However,” he added. “I do appreciate your honesty in admitting what you did. That definitely counts for something.”

She looked up with an impish smile. “Something involving one of the new whips, Sir?” she asked eagerly.

“We’ll see,” he said with a chuckle. “Meanwhile, finish your pie.”

Beau had decided he'd like to check out the auction. While Lia was also curious to see how it worked, she would rather have gone upstairs to get her reward for being honest. Though that also came with a punishment, she reminded herself.

The auction was to take place on a raised dais at the back of the main dungeon. The scene stations that usually occupied the space had been dismantled for the event, four rows each containing six chairs set up instead.

Most of the chairs were already occupied by event attendees, most of them male. Each had been given a bidding paddle with a number on it. Lia recognized several people from The Garden.

The auction was just getting started as Beau and Lia slipped into two seats in the back row. Master Brandon was apparently the auctioneer. Lia had always thought he looked like some kind of ancient Scottish Lord, with his tall, sturdy build, auburn hair and rugged features. The four trainees stood in a row toward the back of the stage, naked save for their collars and some body jewelry.

“Let’s get started,” Master Brandon said in his loud, jovial voice. “Just to reiterate the rules: bidding is silent via your paddle. Before bidding begins, each slave will present him or herself to you in a series of positions designed to show you their wares and demonstrate their grace. All money raised will go to local charities. You will have one full hour to use your slave as it pleases you, with the caveat of no exchange of bodily fluids and no sexual penetration. In other words, they can suck you but they can’t fuck you, and vice versa.” The expected chuckles followed.

“Our first offering is slave Kinsley,” Brandon boomed. “Come forward and display yourself for our bidders.”

Kinsley looked sweet and shy, her eyes downcast as she stepped forward. Her breasts were small and high, her red-rouged nipples encircled with delicate rings connected by a long gold chain that hung between them. She wore matching bangles on her wrists and ankles.

Kinsley executed various slave positions that Lia knew all too well from countless hours of drilling during her previous tenure at The Enclave. She started out with the basic *kneeling present* position, lowering herself to her knees and spreading her thighs wide. She moved from there to *kneeling submit* position, kneeling forward face down, arms stretched before her.

Beau draped his arm over Lia's shoulders. Reflexively, she leaned into his embrace. He stopped her by murmuring, "Sit up straight. No matter what I do to you, remain still and silent, eyes on the stage."

Heart picking up its pace, Lia did as she was told. His arm still around her shoulders, he let his hand drop so it covered her left breast. He cupped it, moving his palm over her nipple until it hardened to a throbbing point.

Meanwhile, Kinsley lifted herself and leaned back onto straight arms, kneeling with knees wide. She glanced toward Brandon, who gave her a nod. Rising gracefully to her feet, she assumed the *wait up* position, standing with legs slightly apart, wrists crossed over her head.

Beau shifted his arm a little, his fingers finding and gripping Lia's distended nipple. He squeezed it, lightly at first, and then tighter, twisting until a small mewl of pain escaped Lia's lips.

"I told you to be silent," he murmured, his mouth close to her ear. "Suffer for me."

He twisted again, sending another jolt of pure erotic pain through Lia's nerve endings, directly to her cunt. Prepared this time, she managed to keep her mouth shut, lips pressed in a tight line to keep from moaning.

On the stage, Kinsley lowered her arms. She seemed to hesitate, momentarily frozen in place. She glanced again at Brandon, who lifted his brows as if to say, "*Go on. Do it.*"

Color suffused Kinsley's pale cheeks as she assumed the *genital display* position, arching her hips forward and spreading her labia so her cunt was fully exposed.

At the same time, Beau, his fingers still gripping Lia's nipple, reached between her legs with his other hand. "Scoot forward on the seat and spread your legs wide, slut," he growled softly.

The two men to Lia's left were both watching her now, instead of the stage. Reminding herself she was an exhibitionist, Lia assumed the position, her left knee bumping the man closest to her in the process. He didn't move away.

Ignoring the guys, Beau rubbed Lia's rapidly moistening labia and then slid a hard finger directly inside her. Her cunt spasmed in nearly unbearable pleasure against the digit. In spite of his dictate that she remain silent, a low, feral cry escaped her lips. It was all she could do to hold her trembling body still.

"Focus," Beau softly admonished. "And don't you *dare* come." He moved his finger inside her while rubbing his palm over her slick vulva.

She tried to control her breathing as waves of raw pleasure hurtled through her. Normally, she was all about the erotic pain. Sexual pleasure was almost an afterthought. But now all she could think about was orgasming.

No doubt fully aware of exactly what he was doing, Beau chuckled with a sadist's pleasure. "Control yourself, slut."

Lia bit back a whimper. Somehow, this man had slipped past her usual defenses. She felt naked—exposed—with him in a way that was both thrilling and terrifying. And damn it, if he didn't stop what he was doing, she was going to come.

He's trying to make you come, she admonished herself. Don't give him the satisfaction. Show him you're tougher than that.

Gritting her teeth, she kept her eyes on Kinsley.

When Beau slid a second finger inside her, Lia shuddered, gasping in her effort to control herself.

Don't come. You will not come. Think about something else. The auction. The new job. Think about...

But she couldn't think of anything at all, except how incredibly sexy Master Beau was, as he worked his dark magic on her.

Then, all at once, he pulled his hand from between Lia's legs and let go of her tortured nipple.

Sagging with a combination of thwarted need and relief, Lia drew in a deep breath through flared nostrils. She didn't dare open her mouth in case another moan escaped.

Kinsley, meanwhile, had turned her back to the audience. The trainee reached back and spread her ass cheeks, giving everyone a good look at the small, perfect asterisk of her asshole.

"Good job," Beau murmured in Lia's ear. "You managed to hold yourself in check—just barely."

No thanks to you.

Kinsley was again facing the audience, her hands clasped behind her neck.

"We'll start the bidding at twenty dollars. Do I hear twenty dollars?" Brandon called from the stage.

Beau, meanwhile, pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. "Let's go upstairs. I owe you a punishment for the stolen orgasm, one that will fit the crime."

Chapter 14

Beau brought Lia back to his suite. As they entered the room, he angled slightly away from her to adjust himself. So much for taking the edge off earlier. While touching Lia, his damn cock had inflated like a bent balloon in the confines of his jeans.

He was fully within his rights as a trainer to command her to drop to her knees and worship his cock. But even as the thought occurred to him, he rejected it. He didn't want to send any mixed signals that might leave her thinking he was sexually attracted to her.

Who was he kidding? He *was* sexually attracted to her. But that didn't mean he had to give in to his impulses. The Enclave Doms had entrusted her training to him. He wasn't there to satisfy his own lust.

But that didn't mean he couldn't control *her* orgasm.

"It's time for your punishment." Grabbing his gear bag, he unzipped it and pulled out a long piece of his special linen *Kinbaku* rope. "Hold out your arms. I'm going to bind your wrists."

Beau looped one end of the soft, sturdy rope around her left wrist and the other around her right, leaving several feet of rope between the two so she would have full range of movement.

"Now, lie down on the carpet on your side, one leg atop the other, knees bent," he directed.

Instead of instantly obeying, Lia's mouth worked as if she was about to say something.

“The only thing I want to hear from you right now is, ‘Yes, Sir,’” he said preemptively. “Do as you’re told.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she replied, “Yes, Sir,” and dropped to the carpet.

As she positioned herself, Beau opened his gear bag and removed a long piece of hemp rope—not nearly as soft as his *Kinbaku* rope. He tied a series of knots into the rope at two-inch intervals, leaving several inches on either side to use as handles.

Crouching beside her, he handed her the length of knotted hemp. “Position the rope between your labia and use the knots to masturbate. Lift your top knee and keep your leg up high for the duration of this punishment so I can see exactly what you’re doing. I want the rope held taut so you can really feel those knots rubbing against you. Your only lubrication will be your own juices. If you think you’re going to come, ask for permission first.”

Biting her lower lip, Lia lifted her top knee, fully exposing her pretty cunt. She placed the rope between her legs as directed, some of the knots hidden in the folds of her dark pink labia.

“Go,” he commanded.

She moved the rope tentatively at first, the knots sliding seductively along her slit.

“Harder,” he directed. “Faster.”

She obeyed, wincing as the knotted hemp rubbed between her delicate folds. Sexual masochist that she was, the pain no doubt only added to her pleasure. It wasn’t long before she was breathing hard, her nipples erect, her labia engorged and glistening.

“Now lie on your back and let your knees flop open so I have a good view,” Beau directed. “Rub yourself like you did when you were stealing that orgasm in the shower. Show me how you can come. And don’t forget to ask permission.”

She looked sexy as hell in the rope collar and cuffs. Her cunt was reddened from the hemp, her labia spread like sticky

orchid petals. She winced slightly as she brought her right hand between her legs. After a moment, she began to rub herself, slowly at first, and then with more abandon.

It wasn't long before her breath again quickened to a pant. Her slender fingers flew over her sex. When her eyes started to flutter shut, he said, "Keep your eyes open and focused on me. Don't look away."

There was fire in those golden eyes as she locked gazes with him. She was a strong, passionate woman. He looked forward to harnessing and controlling that passion as he helped her in her quest for true submission.

Her eyes still locked on his, a tremor shivered through her body. "Please, Sir. May I come?" she gasped.

In response, he reached for the rope that bound her wrists and forcibly jerked her hand from between her legs.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Absolutely not," he said, using the rope to haul her to her feet. "This is your punishment—arousal without release. Let this be a reminder that I own that body for the next six days. The next time you climax while under my control, if and when that time ever comes, you'll have earned it."

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Tears of frustration sprang to Lia's eyes. She blinked them away as she tried to regain control of herself. She'd already been painfully aroused by his playing with her while they watched the auction. The added combination of pleasure from the stimulation juxtaposed with the erotic pain caused by the rough hemp knots had been enough to push her over the edge. His forcing her to keep her eyes on his had added a new level of intensity like nothing she'd ever experienced.

That in itself was an anomaly. While she'd been in sexual situations with Doms before where they'd required her to masturbate in front of them, she'd always remained more or less in control of the process. It was almost as if a part of her would step outside her own body, watching along with the guy as she went through the motions. She would eventually

manage to climax, but usually she did so by closing her eyes and imagining something other than whatever was happening in the moment.

With Beau, she had been right there inside the experience, unable to put herself at a remove even if she'd wanted to. She'd lost herself in his masterful gaze to such a degree that she'd felt *his* fingers on her instead of her own, as if he'd somehow entered her body and taken control.

She now understood on a visceral level what guys meant when they talked about "blue balls." Except her discomfort wasn't limited to her genitalia. Her entire body ached from being so cruelly yanked back from the brink of what she was certain would have been a mind-blowingly powerful orgasm.

"I'm getting the sense you've never really submitted before," Beau remarked. "Not with your whole self."

A reflexive denial rose in her throat, then died on her tongue.

He was right. Try as she might, she had never succeeded in fully relinquishing control. In her heart of hearts, she didn't really believe she was capable. But this sexy, strong Dom seemed to have at least a little faith that it might be possible.

"No, Sir," she said softly, both chastened and hopeful in equal measure. "I don't think I have."

Beau smiled. "We have our work cut out for us, that's for sure. We may not succeed, but we'll give it our best shot. Agreed?"

She smiled back in spite of herself. "Agreed."

"But first," he added with a grin, "Your honesty in confessing your crimes does deserve a little reward."

Taking her hand, Beau led Lia to the bed. For a crazy second, she thought he was going to pull her down onto it and wrap her in his big, strong arms. Before she could decide if that would be wonderful or if it would ruin everything, he pointed instead to the two new impact toys he'd purchased earlier.

“Which one of these sexy toys would you prefer to be marked with?”

It took Lia a second to shift gears.

Focusing on his question, she replied, “The snake, Sir.”

A cruel smile lifted his sensual lips. “Then we’ll use the crop.”

Bastard! She should have known better when dealing with an erotic sadist.

Instead of ordering her onto the spanking bench or, even better, to stand against the St. Andrew’s cross, Beau said, “Let’s go down to the main dungeon.”

As before, he attached a leash to her rope collar and used it to lead her down the stairs to the first floor. As they entered the dungeon, she saw that the auction was over, the four trainees no doubt in the hands of whoever had bought them for the hour. She looked around for Lucia and Master Anthony, but they were nowhere to be seen.

To her dismay, Lawrence appeared beside them. Ignoring Lia as usual, he smiled at Beau. “Hey, there. How’s it going? Has she managed to get through half a day without needing to be punished?”

Fuck you, Lia wanted to snarl, even as she was aware her anger was for herself more than Lawrence.

Beau chuckled. “Uh, that would be a no.”

Lawrence guffawed, making her either want to disappear into the floor or sock him in the nose. “Why am I not surprised?” He snorted. “Maybe we’ve set you up without meaning to. Maybe this girl is too much of a lost cause to bother with.”

Beau shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know, Lawrence. Aren’t you the one who said he believes in second chances?”

For a moment Lawrence looked uncomfortable. The look was gone as quickly as it appeared, however, his usual smug sneer falling back into place. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said with

a shrug of his own. Finally, he met Lia's gaze. "What do *you* think, Lia? Are you worth a second chance?"

"Yes," she blurted before she even realized what she was saying. "I am."

He lifted his brow as if surprised by her retort. Then he shook his head. "Still can't remember how to properly address your Masters, I see."

"Excuse me, Sir," she said quickly, not for Lawrence's sake but for Beau's. Damn it, she wanted to show him she was worthy, and she kept tripping herself up.

"I think you are, too," Beau said, his words filling her with warmth. "In fact," he added, now addressing Lawrence, "She also happens to have earned a reward for good behavior."

Reaching into the gear bag on his shoulder, he pulled out the silver-handled crop, holding it for Lawrence to see. "I'm thinking a nice, thorough cropping from shoulder to thigh would do very well for this little masochist. What do you think?"

Who cared what *Lawrence* thought? *She* was all in. Bring it on!

"I think that's an excellent idea," Lawrence replied. He led them past various stations where scenes were in progress to a small station near the back that contained a portable suspension rack. Lia waited impatiently for him to take his leave.

"Perfect," Beau said, taking in the space. "This should work very nicely with my *Kinbaku* rope." He fixed Lia with a burning gaze. "I'll bind your wrists and suspend you from the rack beam so you're on tiptoe. Would you like that, sub girl?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied huskily.

"Need help with that?" Lawrence annoyingly volunteered.

Go. Away.

"No, I've got this part," Beau replied as he detached the rope leash from Lia's collar. Maybe Lawrence would finally take the hint.

But instead, to her horrified dismay, Beau held out the new crop to Lawrence. “I know you’ve had ample opportunity to punish this naughty slave girl. Would you care to turn the tables now and give Lia her reward?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Lawrence said, flashing an evil grin in Lia’s direction.

Chapter 15

Whatever else the guy might be, Lawrence definitely knew his way around impact toys. It was a pleasure to watch his finesse with the crop as he took Lia from stinging pleasure to edgy stimulation to ouch-I-can't-take-one-more stroke and back again.

At first, no doubt due to her continued antipathy toward Lawrence, Beau sensed her resistance, reflected in her body language and facial expression. But it wasn't long before she surrendered herself fully, if not to the man, at least to the experience. Beau could almost *feel* her drifting upward to that dark, sweet place where pleasure and pain were one and the same.

When they finally let her down, Lia dropped gracefully to her knees. Looking up at Lawrence with a beatific smile, she breathed, "Thank you, Sir," without a trace of snark.

"Maybe there's hope for her yet," Lawrence quipped. But it was obvious he was pleased.

Lucia and Danielle came to the edge of the scene station while Beau was putting away his ropes. "Excuse me, Sir," Lucia said politely. When she had his attention, she continued, "It's free time right now for the resident slaves. If it suits you, Sir, may we take Lia down to the quarters for a little aftercare and rest?"

"Of course," Beau agreed. A little time apart from each other was probably a good idea.

"Thank you, Sir," Lucia said, taking Lia's hand. "Oh, and Master Mark asked me to let you know he's out on the veranda, if you would like to share a drink with him before dinner."

“Excellent idea. Thanks.”

As the girls headed downstairs, Beau made his way to the veranda. The chill of the October evening was offset by tall outdoor space heaters set nearby.

“Hey, there,” Mark said, lifting a hand in greeting as Beau approached. “Have a seat. I’ve got some very fine small batch bourbon here, if you’d care for a snifter before dinner.”

“Sounds perfect,” Beau agreed, admiring the crystal-cut decanter that held the amber liquid. Mark poured a few fingers into a snifter and handed it to Beau as he took his seat.

“So, how’s it going with Lia?” Mark asked. “Is she responding better to your approach than when she was here last?”

“It’s probably too soon to say for sure,” Beau replied. “She did break a rule pretty much right out of the gate,” he added with a chuckle. “But then she confessed her sins and accepted her punishment.”

“Tell me everything,” Mark demanded with a laugh.

Beau complied, leaving out his occasional difficulty keeping his own inappropriate lust at bay. Once he’d satisfied his friend’s curiosity, he had a question of his own.

“So, what’s the deal with Lawrence? I got a sense that his remark this morning about second chances was personal.”

“You’re not wrong,” Mark said. “And while I don’t want to gossip, I’ll share the story with you because it involved my Jaime.”

Beau raised his brows, both surprised and curious. “Really? How so?”

“It was several years back when The Enclave wasn’t yet fully staffed. I’d been staying here as a guest for a couple of months and was still on the fence about whether I’d be joining the community as a full-time trainer. Jaime had recently come to The Enclave on a trial basis to see if she would be a good fit as a resident slave. Danielle, a recent addition herself, engaged

in some very duplicitous behavior designed to make Jaime look bad.”

“Lawrence’s slave girl did that?” Beau asked, surprised. “Why in the hell would she do that?”

“Danielle wasn’t Lawrence’s slave girl back then. As to why she did it, Danielle had gotten her wires crossed and thought she and I were, uh, more than just trainer and trainee. Or she wanted that to be the case, I guess,” he added, flushing slightly. “She saw Jaime as competition and decided she’d get Jaime thrown out of the program. Among other things, she sabotaged Jaime’s assignment of making sure the main dungeon was in tiptop shape for an important visiting Dom. When Lawrence brought the guy in for the grand tour, he found a mess and immediately blamed Jaime without giving her a chance to defend herself.”

“Very uncool,” Beau frowned. “On both Danielle and Lawrence’s parts.”

“To put it mildly,” Mark agreed. “But what Lawrence did next was even worse. He went way overboard in delivering Jaime’s punishment, without taking the time to find out the truth. In the process, he inadvertently triggered one of her deepest fears, which was and is being confined in very tight spaces.”

“What did he do to her?” Beau asked, not entirely sure he even wanted to know.

Mark’s face darkened. “After whipping her to shreds, he bound and gagged her and forced her into a small punishment cage. Even worse, he left her unattended and told no one what he’d done.”

“Jesus,” Beau breathed, appalled. “What the fuck?”

Mark nodded. “What the fuck is right. Jaime and I weren’t even together at that point, and still Anthony had to restrain me from beating the guy to a bloody pulp when I found out. At the very least, I wanted him thrown out.”

“Why wasn’t he?” Beau asked, shocked that kind of behavior had been tolerated.

“Because, Anthony being Anthony, he understood Lawrence’s inappropriate anger toward a trainee masked some core issues of insecurity and weakness. Anthony believed that with anger management counseling and some retraining, Lawrence could still make an excellent trainer and Master. To his credit, Lawrence really worked at it, and he’s become a much better person as a result. He also apologized to Jaime, a sincere, heartfelt apology.”

“And what about Danielle?”

“Anthony was seriously considering asking Danielle to leave The Enclave after what she’d done, but Jaime pled Danielle’s case.”

“Jaime? Why in the world would she do that?”

“Because Jaime is totally awesome,” Mark replied with a proud smile. “Danielle broke down when she realized how damaging her actions had been. She was truly devastated, and genuinely sorry for what she had done. It didn’t hurt that Lawrence promised he’d assume personal responsibility for Danielle’s behavior and keep her on the straight and narrow. Turns out he was secretly, wildly in love with her all along. And, to Danielle’s credit, she’s really become an asset to The Enclave since then. Even if she had the questionable taste to fall for Lawrence,” he added with a chuckle.

“Still not your favorite guy, then,” Beau noted with a wry smile.

“We’re not buddy/buddy, no. But he’s come a long way, probably in no small part because he’s happy now. Love tends to improve everyone, even assholes,” he added with a smile.

“I guess,” Beau agreed, wondering if he would ever be able to trust enough to fall in love again.

As if reading his thoughts, Mark said gently, “I know it was rough, what happened with your ex. But I hope you haven’t let it close your heart to possibilities.”

Beau shrugged noncommittally.

“There’s something in the air here at The Enclave,” Mark continued musingly. “It makes people, even old curmudgeons

like Mason, even longtime widowers like Anthony—shit, even jaded, entitled ex rock stars like me—fall head over heels in love with our slave girls.” He gave Beau a playful push on the shoulder. “You never know, bro. This training thing with Lia might turn into a whole lot more.”

Beau snorted at the ridiculous idea. “Lia? She’s barely out of college. Way too young for me. I’m her temporary trainer, nothing more.”

“Right,” Mark replied with an answering chuckle. “We’ll see.”

≈

Beau led Lia out of the dungeon by the rope leash. Once in the foyer, he removed the leash, tucking it into his back pocket. “Time for bed.”

Lia opened her mouth to say she wasn’t tired but ended up yawning instead. Though still flying high on the endorphins of the excellent scene they’d just enjoyed with Master Anthony and Lucia, she had to admit, she was exhausted.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied.

After the truly excellent cropping she’d received from Lawrence, she’d gone down to the slave quarters with Lucia to decompress and refresh. During her aftercare and then relaxing together in the lounge area, they’d dissected every moment of her time so far with Beau.

“He sounds like a solid trainer,” Lucia had commented, “if a little unorthodox. Doesn’t hurt that he’s super cute and seems really nice. Not to mention single,” she’d added with a big grin.

“He *says* he’s single,” Lia replied as Master Pain, a.k.a. George Ackerman, married father of twins, attempted to claw his way back up the slippery walls of things best forgotten.

Lucia shook her head. “Don’t worry on that score. Master Mark knows him personally. He can vouch for him.”

“If you say so,” Lia muttered, but still, she was relieved.

For all her grouching, Lia couldn't deny a bit of proprietary pride at the dinner table, seated next to "her" Dom, rather than just being one of the trainees. After dinner, they'd joined Master Anthony and Lucia in some intensive play involving plenty of rope, nipple clamps and some delicious predicament bondage.

Now she stood uncertainly, not sure if she needed to wait for a more formal dismissal before heading down to her temporary room in the slave quarters.

But instead of sending her on her way, Beau surprised her by adding, "Let's go upstairs."

Lia drew in a sharp breath of excitement at this unexpected turn of events. She'd just assumed he'd meant it was time to go to sleep, but it seemed he might have a different plan in mind. A plan that involved his pulling her down onto the bed and taking her into his strong arms. A plan that included his strong, masculine weight pressing her down against the mattress as his lips met hers and his knee nudged her thighs apart...

Okay, chill, she admonished herself, pushing those fantasies back into the masturbatory slot where they belonged. This isn't a romance. Stay in the moment. Don't anticipate.

Even so, once in Beau's suite, Lia watched with hungry eyes as he casually stripped out of his clothing, right down to a sexy pair of black boxer briefs. His body was drool-worthy, with broad shoulders and a smooth, muscular chest, his nipples like copper coins against tan skin. His abs were flat without being overly defined. And, unlike some guys who had a great body but pencil legs, his were lean but well-muscled—the legs of a runner or swimmer. And he had those sexy indents on either side of his hip bones that she adored, not to mention what appeared to be a very nice package hidden beneath those boxers.

"Everything all right, Lia?" His tone was amused, as if he knew exactly how gorgeous he was. "I was thinking we'd just brush our teeth and splash a little water on our faces before bed. We can shower in the morning."

Suddenly aware her mouth had actually been hanging open as she gaped at him, Lia quickly pulled herself together. “Yes, Sir. My stuff is down in the slave quarters, though. Toothbrush and whatnot.”

“There’s a spare in the bathroom,” Beau replied as he headed in that direction. “You can bring up your stuff tomorrow.”

So he *was* planning to have her stay with him!

What had he said earlier that morning? There would be “sexual exercises” included as a part of her training. Did those so-called exercises involve his cock and whatever orifice of hers suited his fancy? If so, bring it on, baby.

Striving for a calm she didn’t feel, she followed him into the bathroom. True to his word, he produced a brand-new toothbrush from a drawer. Before handing it to her, he asked, “Do you need to use the bathroom?”

The question made her suddenly aware of her bladder. “Yes, Sir.”

“You just need to pee or...”

“Just pee,” she hurriedly supplied.

“Okay, then. Climb into the tub and stand with legs apart. Place your hands on your head and then you may pee.”

It took Lia a moment to process the import of what he’d just said. She understood that during training she would have to ask permission, but she hadn’t factored in his wanting to watch. It was both sexy and a little intimidating to be so exposed while doing something so personal.

“Go on,” he urged, making her realize she’d just been standing there like a dope.

She climbed into the large sunken tub, feeling slightly ridiculous. She placed her hands on her head. Spreading her legs and hoping she didn’t dribble down her leg, she closed her eyes.

“Eyes open and on me,” Beau directed in a tone that brooked no disobedience.

Lia did as she was told, feeling the blush move over her face as heat seeped into the tips of her ears. It took several long, agonizing seconds, but her body finally agreed to cooperate. A stream of hot urine splashed down between her legs, tinkling against the bottom of the porcelain tub.

Beau's gaze roamed over her face and body all the while, something dark and masterful sparking in those very green eyes.

When she was finally done, she started to lower her hands, thinking to wash up.

"Keep your hands on your head," Beau directed. "I'll let you know when you can get out of position."

She admired his strong, rippling back as he bent to turn on the water. He flipped the lever to switch the flow from the faucet to the handheld showerhead. She was half expecting a blast of cold water, but it was soothingly warm. Once he'd sprayed her lower half, he took a fresh bar of soap from its holder and rubbed it in his hands to make a lather.

When he reached between her legs to wash her sex with strong, sure fingers, Lia very nearly moaned aloud. She brought a finger to her mouth and nibbled a bit of nail to distract herself.

But after only a few torturously lovely moments, he pulled his hand away. He used the showerhead to rinse away the soap. As he stood upright again, Lia's gaze was irresistibly drawn to his groin. Was it her imagination, or had that sexy package just swelled to twice its previous size?

"Climb out and dry yourself. Then join me for ablutions."

Ablutions!

Lia, who adored language, was delighted with his use of a word she'd only seen in books, but never used herself. It was almost enough to distract her from the throb in her cunt.

Almost.

While she was drying herself, Beau peed lustily into the toilet. She couldn't have watched him if she'd wanted to, as

the toilet was tucked away in an alcove.

Once they'd brushed their teeth and washed their faces, they returned to the bedroom. "Sit down on the edge of the bed," Beau instructed, his words sending another spurt of adrenaline through her. Would he sit beside her and take her into his arms? Or would he stand before her, his big cock fisted in his hand, and order her to pleasure him with her hands and mouth?

He did neither of those things, instead reaching into his gear bag and pulling out a hank of rope. Returning to her, he directed, "Hold out your left wrist."

With practiced ease, he knotted a series of loops that created a snug but comfortable rope bracelet around her wrist. "Now the other one."

Using the other end of the rope, he cuffed her right wrist in identical fashion. The net result left several feet of rope between the bracelets.

"You will wear my rope as a reminder that even in sleep you are still my trainee."

Lia nodded, this sort of restraint nothing new at The Enclave. All trainees were chained in their beds at night down in the slave quarters. This was done as a reminder that the slave trainees were owned, even in sleep. The act was more symbolic than anything, as they could easily get out of their bonds on their own if necessary.

Using a second hank, Beau crouched at her feet and looped the rope around each ankle, again leaving some leeway between the cuffs.

"If you need to pee or get up for any reason in the night, you will wake me to ask permission. Understood?"

She would be sleeping with wrists and ankles cuffed, unable to easily move from one place to another. If she was supposed to wake him up if she needed to use the bathroom, that must mean he planned to take her into his bed.

As they lie down together, he presses her onto her back and raises her arms overhead, pinning her bound wrists against

the mattress. Lifting himself over her, he eases his hard, perfect cock into her slippery heat as he devours her with his fiery gaze...

“I said, understood?” Beau repeated as he got to his feet.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied, praying nothing in her face betrayed her overactive imagination.

Taking a step back from her, he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his boxer briefs and slid them down his muscular thighs. His semi-erect shaft was as she’d imagined, large and straight, springing from a bed of soft, dark curls above heavy balls.

Her mouth actually watered at the sight. With an effort, she dragged her eyes from his groin to his face. Heat licked her cheeks at his knowing smirk. She half expected him to quip, *Like what you see?*

Instead, he only said, “Stand up so I can pull back the covers.”

She got awkwardly to her feet, arms bound in front of her, careful not to trip on the rope between her cuffed ankles.

He pulled back the covers, untucking the top sheet from the bottom of the mattress in the process. There were several plump inviting pillows piled against the cushioned headboard.

A sudden wave of exhaustion swept over Lia at the sight of the inviting tableau. While the lovemaking scenario was highly unlikely, especially given his earlier remarks about not using the training as a way to “get into her pants,” it would still be lovely to lie next to him, feeling skin on skin. Maybe he’d even take her into his strong arms and hold her close as she drifted into contented sleep.

But instead of lying down and patting the bed to indicate she should join him, Beau grabbed one of the pillows and placed it at the bottom of the mattress.

“You’ll be sleeping at my feet,” he explained with infuriating nonchalance. “Which is where a trainee belongs.”

Chapter 16

Sunlight poured through the window, the sky already a deep autumnal blue. Lifting onto his elbows, Beau saw Lia was still fast asleep, only her spiky pink hair visible.

It had taken him a while to fall asleep the night before, all too aware of the naked, bound girl at the end of the bed. While some guys might use their position as temporary Master to get some no-strings-attached sex out of the deal, that kind of behavior, however tempting, didn't sit right with Beau.

This whole training someone who wasn't your lover was new to him. He supposed he could have sent her down to the slave quarters to sleep and thus removed any inappropriate temptation. But for whatever reason, he'd wanted to keep her close.

Lia had tossed and turned for a while. Eventually she'd stilled, her breathing becoming deep and even. Once he'd been sure she was asleep, he'd jerked off into a tissue, glad the mattress was one of those kinds that didn't transfer movement.

Now, rolling toward the side of the bed, he threw back the covers. Lia moaned softly and muttered something unintelligible, but otherwise didn't stir. She looked sexy as hell in her rope chains and collar.

Turning away, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got to his feet, his morning erection bobbing from his groin like a divining rod.

"I need a shower," he muttered to himself.

Beau stood at the sink shaving when he saw Lia's reflection appear in the steamed mirror. She stepped into the

room, her gait made awkward by the rope around each ankle. “Good morning, sleepyhead,” he said, not turning around.

“Good morning, Sir,” she replied, moving toward the sinks.

As she came alongside him, he glanced at her. “I let us sleep later than I meant to. We’ll grab some breakfast and then we’re going down into town. We can stop at your place so you can grab whatever you need, and I’ll also need to swing by my apartment. Then we can head over to the university.”

She held up her shackled wrists. “What about these, Sir?”

He briefly considered leaving her in the ropes, but decided against it, as she would need to dress before they left the compound. Setting down his razor, he turned to her. “See that loop there, that one in the center?” He pointed to the bracelet cuff on her left wrist. “Just give it a tug and the cuff will unravel.”

He watched with satisfaction as she plucked at the clever knot, causing the rope to fall from her wrist. “Cool,” she exclaimed, making him smile.

“Now, do the same with your other wrist and then your ankles. Coil the ropes neatly and place them on top of my gear bag. Then you may use the toilet and shower. But don’t dawdle. I want to get going.”

He had just finished dressing, duffel and gear bags packed, when Lia came out of the bathroom. He reached for the snake whip, which he’d left on the bed. “Come over here and bend over the mattress, feet on the ground, legs spread, ass out.”

A hungry look came into her eyes as she eyed the whip. Greedy girl.

He watched with pleasure as she assumed the position. Reaching between her legs, he cupped her cunt, pleased to find it smooth and soft. A small tremor moved through her body at his touch. He pulled his hand away and picked up the whip.

“I’m going to mark you each morning for the duration of your training. It’s just a small reminder that I own you, at least for the next five days.”

Assuming an appropriate stance behind her, he reached for the whip. “You will thank me afterward. And you’ll stay in position until I give you permission to rise.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said throatily, her husky voice curling around his cock like a wet mouth.

Taking careful aim, he flicked the whip with a resounding thwack across both ass cheeks.

Lia huffed a breath of air, her hands briefly clenching into fists. Almost immediately, a beautiful red welt rose on her creamy flesh.

“Thank you, Sir,” she gasped.

“My pleasure.”

Beau reached for the tube of Aubrey’s aftercare ointment he’d snagged the night before from downstairs. He opened it now and dabbed the healing salve carefully over the welt. Recapping the tube, he slipped it into an inner pocket of his gear bag, along with the snake whip.

“You can stand up now,” he informed Lia as he hoisted both his overnight duffel and his gear bag over one shoulder. “Let’s go down and grab a bite before we head into town.”

Downstairs, there was no trace of the event of the prior two days, the whip maker guests returned to wherever they came from, the event attendees presumably back at their day jobs.

Something was already going on in the dungeon, to judge from the sound of whips cracking and the occasional breathy cry. A vacuum cleaner was being used in the living room, and two of the slave trainees were on their knees in the front hall, buckets of sudsy water beside them, wet rags in their hands.

Stepping around them, Beau and Lia made their way past the empty dining room to the kitchen. It was late enough that everyone seemed to have already had their breakfast and gone their various ways.

Mason stood in front of the huge gas range adding various spices to a large pot. Lucia and Danielle were working at a counter doing something with rolling pins and dough, naked

save for their aprons. As they entered the kitchen, Lucia looked up. “Good morning, Master Beau,” she said sweetly.

“Good morning, Lucia,” he replied.

Lucia shifted her gaze then to Lia, lifting a single brow in apparent question. They did that thing women do, sharing a silent, telepathic communication that ended in an exchange of smiles.

Mason turned from the stove, his gaze sliding over Lia to land on Beau. “Morning,” he said in his deep, rumbly voice. “You’re a little late but there are still some warm biscuits and rashers of bacon in the oven, as well as some fresh fruit there on the counter. Juice and yogurt in the fridge. Coffee’s still hot.”

“Thanks,” Beau replied.

While he poured himself a mug of coffee and helped himself to a biscuit, Lia piled her plate with two biscuits which she slathered with butter and jam. She also took four pieces of bacon and a bowl of fresh berries. She added more cream than coffee to her mug, along with several heaping spoons of sugar.

When she saw him watching her with amusement, she made a face. “What?”

“You have quite a healthy appetite.” He let his gaze move over her petite, slender form. “I was just wondering where you put it all.”

Lia shrugged. “What can I say? I have an active metabolism.”

They made their way to the dining room. Beau sat at one end of the table. Lia took a seat to his right. She winced slightly as she gingerly settled her bare, welted bottom on the chair.

Beau had a nice view of her breasts in profile. Her dark pink nipples were a pleasing contrast to her fair skin. They would look very pretty adorned in delicate jewelry, a slender chain swaying between them.

“I’m curious. I know from reading your Enclave profile that you’re no stranger to needle play. Why have you never pierced your nipples?”

To his surprise, she flushed and looked away.

He reached for her chin, forcing her to face him. “I asked you a direct question, Lia. You will answer.”

Cheeks still rosy, she stuttered, “I’m, uh. That is...” She trailed off, actually pressing her lips together to keep from finishing the sentence. Then, with a toss of her head, she said, “I just never got around to it.”

He lifted a brow, almost certain she’d been about to say something else, something more authentic. But, instead of calling her on it, he replied, “You don’t say. Maybe we’ll have to remedy that.”

When they were done eating, Beau sent Lia down to get dressed for the drive into town. He took their trays back into the kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee. The living room was empty now, smelling of lemon oil and the delicate perfume of fresh cut flowers set in vases about the large space. He was drawn to the huge picture window that opened onto a breathtaking view across the mountains and down into the valley below.

As he sipped his coffee and admired the view, a familiar voice behind him said, “There you are. I’ve been wanting to check in and see how things are progressing.”

Beau turned around to see Anthony, dressed as usual as if he just stepped out of the pages of a fashion magazine for the mature man.

“Things are going pretty well, I think, as far as they’ve gone,” Beau reported. He gave Anthony a brief recap of the training so far.

Anthony listened, offering suggestions, advice and encouragement. “Sometimes I wonder if it’s not more difficult to train someone we’re attracted to. You have to keep second-guessing yourself about your own behavior to make sure you toe the ethical line at all times.”

“No worries there,” Beau asserted, wondering how Anthony had intuited such a thing. “Lia is way too young for me.”

Anthony lifted a brow. “She is a young woman; I’ll grant you that. But you’re not exactly over the hill,” he added with a chuckle. “You’re what—thirty-two? Thirty-three?”

“Thirty-five,” Beau retorted. “And she’s twenty-four.”

Anthony shrugged. “That in and of itself shouldn’t be a deciding factor in a relationship. Look at Lucia and me. I’m nineteen years her senior. I certainly had no intention of falling for my younger friend’s widow. In fact, I resisted the obvious for quite a while. But eventually the feelings became too strong, and there was nothing I could do about it. I may be Lucia’s Master, but I’m just as surely her slave, when it comes to matters of the heart.”

Beau smiled in spite of himself. “That’s very romantic, Anthony. But no one’s talking about love here, let me assure you. Remember, you guys approached me regarding Lia, not the other way around. I signed up for a six-day training experiment, and nothing more.”

Anthony quirked a brow. “And then you’ll write up your findings and maybe publish them in the *BDSM Academic Review*, Dr. Jackson?” he teased playfully.

“What can I say?” Beau replied, playing along. “You can take the professor out of the university but...”

Lia chose that moment to appear. They both turned as she entered the room. She wore blue jeans ripped at the knees and a tight red T-shirt, her feet in heavy Doc Martens, a black leather jacket with plenty of zippers and chains slung carelessly over one shoulder, her overnight duffel dangling from one arm.

Beau grinned at her. “It looks like you’re channeling Lisbeth in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.”

Lia smirked. “I was going more for James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause*,” she quipped back. Then her gaze shifted to Master Anthony, her smirk sliding away.

“With your permission, Master Beau,” he said, turning to Beau. “Do you mind if I engage a moment with your submissive?”

Beau waved a hand in invitation. “By all means.”

Anthony turned to Lia. “Show me your mark, Lia.” His voice was calm but laced with steel.

She darted a glance at Beau, who regarded her with an implacable gaze of his own. He was curious where Anthony was going with this.

Lia looked back to Anthony. “Excuse me, Sir?”

“Master Beau mentioned he intends to mark you each morning as a reminder of your status. Please drop your jeans, turn and show us your mark.”

Another brief glance at Beau, who nodded.

Setting down her bag, Lia laid her jacket over the back of a couch. She unzipped her jeans and pulled them down to her knees. Angling away from them, she bent forward, her small, shapely ass on display. In spite of himself, Beau’s cock stirred at the sexy sight.

Anthony moved close to Lia, who remained bent over. He placed a hand on the back of her neck. “Remember, Lia. For the duration of your training, even when you’re dressed, you’re still Master Beau’s property. You will behave accordingly.”

Before she could react, he smacked her bare bottom with his open palm, the sound cracking the air.

“Yes, Sir,” Lia squeaked, Anthony’s handprint pinkening her flesh.

Anthony turned to Beau with an apologetic smile. “Please forgive me if I overstepped.” His smile broadened. “But she really had it coming.”

“That she did,” Beau replied with an answering grin.

He personally enjoyed Lia’s playful banter, but Anthony had a point. Beau had laid down some basic rules, one of them

being she always address him with the respect due to a Master, even if their talk was playful. By letting her slide, he really wasn't doing her any favors. Perhaps the lesson he'd just witnessed hadn't been only for Lia, but for him as well.

He turned to Lia, who stood with her pants still halfway down. Her cheeks were red, her face flushed, her expression difficult to read. "Thank Master Anthony for his correction," he directed.

"Thank you, Sir," she said deferentially, eyes downcast.

"Good girl," Beau said gently, resisting an absurd urge to take her into his arms. To cover his discomfiture at his inappropriate reaction, he added brusquely, "Now, pull up your pants. We're going into town."

Chapter 17

They were quiet as they drove down the winding mountain road. The leaves on the deciduous trees were changing, creating bursts of brilliant red and gold amidst the evergreens. Beau had cracked the windows, and the fresh, pine-scented air filled the car.

Lia's bottom still smarted from Master Anthony's hard hand. While she deeply respected the man, it had irked her to have him correct her in front of Beau. Beau's shit-eating grin as he'd agreed she "had it coming" had been even harder to take.

Yet, even as these mutinous thoughts swirled in her brain, she couldn't deny the thrill she had experienced when Beau had directed her to thank Master Anthony. For that moment, she had genuinely felt as if she'd belonged to him. And the tender way he'd praised her afterward had warmed her to her bones.

I have a crush on the trainer. There's no getting around it.

As they neared the bottom of the mountain, Beau asked, "What's your address?"

She told him, suddenly wondering if she'd remembered to make the bed. When had she last changed the sheets?

Stop it. He's not a prospective boyfriend, and he's not climbing into your bed.

Their earlier conversation about piercing replayed in her head. As cornbally as it was, in her heart of hearts she still harbored a ridiculous fantasy that someday "Master Right" would be the one to pierce her nipples and labia as part of a claiming ceremony. Nothing showy like they did at The Enclave, but something private and intimate. It was a stupid

fantasy—a remnant of her teenage longings, before she'd figured out she didn't have what it took to truly submit.

“That’s right by the college, isn’t it?” Beau asked, pulling her back to the moment.

It took Lia a second to recall what they'd been talking about.

“Yes, Sir. Practically walking distance.”

“Okay, so we’ll go by my place first. I just want to grab some fresh clothes and a few other things, as I hadn’t planned on spending the entire week up at The Enclave. You won’t be needing much in the way of clothes while we’re up there, of course,” he added with a quick grin in her direction. “But you should have some things for when we come down to town. Plus, I imagine you might want to change before we head over to the university.”

She glanced down at her jeans and boots. “I probably should, Sir,” she agreed.

Her mother had dragged her to various high-end boutiques earlier in the month in honor of her new job. Never that interested in clothes that didn't involve leather and chains, Lia had allowed Loretta to select a half dozen work outfits “of quality,” that would attract the “right sort of man.” Since her mother was buying, she hadn't put up too much of a fuss.

Beau’s apartment complex was nicer than hers, and he even had a dedicated parking space. He led her past several doors and around a small, nicely landscaped courtyard. Stopping at his door, he unlocked and opened it, gesturing her inside.

She looked around the living room, which contained a beige sofa and two beige chairs set around a glass coffee table, bland modern art on the walls. There was an unoccupied feel to the place, nothing personal in evidence.

“What was your inspiration when decorating this place? Holiday Inn?” she quipped.

As soon as she said the words, she brought her hand to her mouth, as if she could stuff them back in. Shit. Had she just

committed another Master Anthony type offense?

“Sir,” she added belatedly, hoping that might save her.

To her relief, Beau just grinned at her. “Good thing you added the ‘Sir.’ I might have had to give you another whack on the ass.” He sobered, adding, “Seriously, though. Regarding the way we were bantering back at The Enclave, and Anthony’s reaction, I want you to know I’m fine with the way we kid around. I get that there are certain expectations while we’re at The Enclave, but I’m not of the school of thought that believes BDSM has to be deadly serious every second of the day. As long as we’re not in the middle of a specific training session, or I haven’t instructed you otherwise, I want you to feel free to be your irreverent, sarcastic self. No need to address me formally or to censor yourself.”

He moved closer, so close she could have kissed his lips if she stood on tiptoe. He reached out, spanning her throat just above the rope collar still around her neck. The primal touch and his proximity made her skin tingle and her mouth go dry.

“I’ll let you know when or if you overstep.” His voice had deepened to a masterful timbre. “Trust me.”

Then he let her go, and she let out the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Taking a step back, he glanced around the space as if he, too, were just seeing it for the first time. “And in answer to your question, I rented this place fully furnished on a month-to-month lease. A colleague of mine is taking a year-long sabbatical starting in January and has asked me to house-sit while she’s away. I figured this was fine until then.”

Lia immediately picked up on the feminine pronoun. She ordered herself to get a grip. “Nice,” she said aloud. “The house-sitting gig, I mean.”

He nodded. He had brought his overnight bag inside with him. Patting it, he said, “I’ll just grab what I need. I won’t be a minute.”

He turned toward the hallway off the living room that presumably led to his bedroom. “You can wait for me in my

tasteless living room,” he added with a grin.

Ha. Maybe he hadn't made his bed, either.

While she was waiting, she fished her cell phone from her jeans pocket. She hadn't looked at it since Friday, too caught up in everything happening at The Enclave.

Shit. There were three missed calls from her mother plus a text that read:

Where are you?!!! Why aren't you picking up, young lady? Love, Mom.

Lia shook her head. No matter how many times she told Loretta she didn't need to sign off on texts like that, her mother persisted. She thumbed back a quick reply.

Sorry! I was staying at a friend's place in the mountains. Poor cell reception up there. Everything okay?

She waited a moment, but there was no response. If it had been any kind of emergency, Loretta would have been far more persistent in trying to reach her, so she wasn't worried. She'd done her duty by replying.

As she was tucking her phone back in her pocket, Beau reemerged from the hallway, his duffel bag over his shoulder. “Let's go.”

They got back on the road, heading for her place.

They had to park some distance from the building, all the good spots taken as usual. She led him to her door and unlocked the deadbolt first, then slid the key into the doorknob. Opening the door, she said, “Welcome to my humble abode.”

Up until recently, Lia had always had roommates. This was the first place she'd been able to make all her own. She'd had a lot of fun decorating exactly as she pleased, ignoring her

mother's horrified critiques, as well the ribbing of scene friends who couldn't quite reconcile her badass biker chick persona with the admittedly bohemian college-girl aesthetic of her place.

Gauzy, jewel-toned curtains hung over the windows, letting in the light while obscuring the view of the parking lot. She'd covered the walls with hand-painted canvases she'd bought from starving street artists, as well as cool vintage vinyl album covers she'd rescued from her parents' basement.

A low-slung white couch was draped with colorful cushions of silk and velvet, each one a unique relic of flea market treasure hunts. Bean bag chairs were set here and there around the room, perfect for flopping into after a long day. She'd partially hidden the cheap laminate flooring with small, well-worn but beautiful Persian rugs she'd inherited from her grandmother. Potted plants dangled from the ceiling and sprawled on various end tables, lending an air of untamed wilderness to the space.

She looked at Beau expectantly, curious what he'd make of her creative decorating style, such a stark contrast to his bland, cookie-cutter apartment.

His mouth hung slightly open as he took it all in. He turned to her, his lips lifting into a wry smile. "Humble isn't the first word that comes to mind. This is quite a place you have here."

"It's cool, right?"

"Sure. Who needs a theme when you can just throw every random thing you find into one room? Who knew bean bags could be a form of abstract expressionism?"

She snorted. "Okay. I guess I deserved that after calling your place a Holiday Inn."

"You did," he agreed with a chuckle. "And yeah, I'm just yanking your chain. This is actually awesome. Really creative."

She beamed. "Thanks. Come see what I did in the bedroom."

Oops. Had that sounded like an invitation? Had she meant it to?

She led him around the privacy partition that separated the sleeping area from the rest of the apartment, relieved to see that she had, indeed, made the bed.

The four-poster bed, which filled most of the small space, was the only truly valuable piece of furniture Lia owned. Inherited from a great-aunt, it was crafted from rich, dark mahogany, each corner graced by towering, fluted posts. A canopy of richly colored damask draped elegantly over the top. The bed was set quite high off the ground, making it necessary for Lia to use a small stool to access it comfortably. The stool, made from the same rich mahogany, had come with the bed.

She had draped the walls of the bedroom in diaphanous fabrics that cascaded from ceiling to floor, tiny fairy lights woven throughout. She flicked them on now so he could get the full effect.

“Whoa. This place is like a fairy tale come to life—if the fairy godmother was on acid,” he teased.

“You’re just jealous,” she teased back.

“I am,” he deadpanned. “I always wanted a bedroom straight out of a Disney movie.” He glanced around. “All it’s missing are the cartoon birds and butterflies.” He stepped closer to the bed, gripping one of the wooden bedposts. “Now, *these* I approve of. Perfect for wrist and ankle cuffs and plenty of rope. I’m surprised you hadn’t thought of that.”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

He glanced at his watch. “We have a little time before we head over to the university. Why don’t you get out of those clothes? I’ll grab my gear bag and we can test out my hypothesis right now.”

Lia swallowed, her hand coming up to her rope collar, butterflies swooping in her stomach. “I, um...” she hedged, not sure what was happening. Were things shifting from

trainer/trainee to something more? Was she ready for that? Was he?

The doorbell suddenly chimed, followed immediately by a loud, persistent knocking.

“Yoo hoo,” a familiar voice trilled through the cheap, plywood front door. “Are you in there, Magnolia?” More insistent knocking. “Let me in, dear. I don’t like standing on someone’s stoop like the hired help.”

“Fuck,” Lia swore in a whisper. “It’s my mom.”

Beau lifted his brows. “Magnolia?”

“Horrible, right? My sisters are Lily and Zinnia.”

The doorbell rang again, several times.

“Aren’t you going to let her in? Sounds like she’s pretty determined.”

“You have no idea.” Lia took a step and then said, “You should stay back here. It’ll be simpler.”

Without giving him a chance to reply, she hurried through the apartment to the front door and yanked it open. “Hi, Mom.”

Loretta held several *Bette Boutique* zippered dress bags draped over one arm. Without replying, Loretta stopped abruptly, looking eagerly around. “Where is your young man?”

“My what?”

What the hell?

“Your young man. I was just pulling into the lot when I saw the two of you going inside. It took me ages to find a parking spot. I don’t know *why* you felt you had to get this place when you have a perfectly good bedroom at home. Why didn’t you *tell* me you’re seeing someone? You *know* how your father and I worry. You’re not getting any younger, Magnolia.”

Instinctively, Lia moved in front of her mother, blocking her from coming any farther into the apartment. “Mom, please.

You can't just—”

But Loretta wasn't listening. Her face, twisted a moment before in a frown of disapproval, smoothed suddenly into a wide, welcoming smile. “Oh, my,” she breathed, her free hand fluttering to her chest.

“Hello, there,” Beau called from behind Lia. “You must be Mrs. Duvall. I'm Beau. Beauregard Jackson.”

Chapter 18

“Take these.” Lia’s mom dumped the dress bags into her daughter’s arms. Lia twisted back to look at Beau, a pleading expression on her face he couldn’t quite parse. He offered a minute shrug. He couldn’t very well have remained out of sight since Mrs. Duvall had obviously seen them entering Lia’s place.

Lia’s mother pushed past her, holding out her hands as she made a beeline for Beau. She was an attractive woman in her fifties, with blond hair pulled back in a large bow at the nape of her neck, a pair of tasteful drop pearl earrings dangling from her lobes. Taller than Lia, though not by much, she wore a tailored knee-length dress of navy blue with three-quarter sleeves, her waist cinched with a slim white belt, her feet shod in pointed-toe pumps of a matching navy.

“Beauregard Jackson.” She rolled the words like hard candies in her mouth. “I *do* declare, it’s an absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance.” She gripped both his hands in hers. “You simply *must* call me Loretta.”

“The pleasure is mine, Loretta,” he replied smoothly.

Dropping his hands, she took a step back and looked him up and down, as if appraising a cut of meat at the market. “Magnolia hasn’t said a *word* about you, that naughty girl. Wherever did the two of you meet?”

Beau glanced at Lia, who fairly vibrated with tension.

Don’t worry, he telegraphed with what he hoped was a reassuring smile. *I won’t give you away.*

“Lia and I met at a wedding we both attended recently.”

Loretta's face lit up with excitement. "The Baird-Mansfield wedding?"

At his nod, Loretta flashed a triumphant smile at her daughter. "I always *tell* Lia, weddings are a wonderful place to meet eligible young men."

Sidestepping the comment, Beau said, "Imagine my surprise to discover Lia is also joining the UNC staff as a research librarian. I'm a professor of history at the university, recently transferred from Charlotte."

"Well, bless your heart. What a *small* world." Loretta peered at him again. "Are your people the Montgomery Jacksons of Dilworth? Or the Robert Jacksons of Meyers Park?"

"Nothing so grand, I'm afraid. My mother is a pediatrician, and my father is a chemistry professor."

"Well, isn't that charming?" she replied, the rhetorical question no doubt hiding her disappointment that he wasn't descended from one of the scions of the Antebellum South.

She turned to Lia. "Darling, you simply *must* bring Beauregard with you to the dinner on Friday night."

"Dinner on Friday night?" Lia echoed, looking confused.

Loretta frowned. "Don't tell me that you *forgot*, young lady. Zinnia's in-laws are in town and we're having everyone to dinner. I *told* you only last week."

Beau offered Lia a mock bow, not quite able to keep the smirk off his face. "It would be my pleasure to escort you, Magnolia."

Loretta lifted her face to Beau, her frown morphing into a gracious smile. "Bless your heart, Beauregard. It is so unseemly to have an odd number of guests at the table."

She turned to Lia. "That's why I was calling, Magnolia, dear. I picked up a few things for you from Bette's." She nodded toward the dress bags Lia had tossed over the back of the couch. "Zinnia's in-laws are people of quality. Those lovely pumps I bought you from *Talloni's* should work well

with either dress.” She looked Lia up and down, her nose wrinkling as if she smelled something rotten. “Daddy and I can’t very well have our youngest daughter showing up in something like *that*.”

She glanced at her tiny gold watch. “Oh, my word. I simply *must* dash, darlings. I promised Lily I’d watch the baby while she does some shopping.” She flashed a dazzling smile in Beau’s direction. “I’ll see you two on Friday. Cocktails at seven. Dinner at eight. Don’t be late.”

Beau closed the door behind Loretta and turned back to Lia, who stood frozen, her expression stricken. He reached her in two strides. “Hey,” he said gently, cupping her chin to lift her face to his. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m mortified that you were subjected to that,” she blurted. She took a step back so his hand fell away and wrapped her arms protectively around her torso. “Loretta can be so overbearing. You totally do *not* have to come to that dinner.”

Beau smiled. “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t miss it. And, please, don’t apologize for your mother. She was quite entertaining.” He turned toward the dress bags. “Let’s see what she brought.”

He lifted the top bag and unzipped it to reveal the dress inside. The fabric was a deep magenta with a lace overlay, a high neckline and three-quarter sleeves. The second dress was a floral print wrap with a V-neck. It was hard to imagine Lia in either one. Though neither was anything special to Beau’s admittedly untrained eye, the hefty price tags still attached to each dress were more than he’d spend for a tailored suit.

“Oh, god,” Lia moaned. “They’re both hideous.”

“Let’s see how they fit.”

Lia frowned. “Seriously? You really want me to try on these old-lady dresses?”

Beau let a bit of steel enter his tone. “Seriously, sub girl.” It was time to get Lia back into the proper headspace. “First,

take off your clothing. Then you will stand at attention, feet shoulder width apart, hands on your head.”

She drew in a deep breath, some of the tension easing from her body. “Yes, Sir.”

Bending over, she unlaced her boots and tugged them off. She unzipped her tattered jeans and shimmied them, along with a pair of black panties, down her legs. Finally, she pulled her top over her head and undid the lacy bra that covered her pretty breasts.

She assumed the position, back arched, chin lifted, eyes straight ahead. Beau moved to stand directly in front of her. Reaching out, he caught her pink nipples between thumbs and forefingers. They stiffened and swelled beneath his touch. He gripped tighter, twisting until she winced in pain.

His cock hardened in response. Releasing one nipple, he cupped her cunt. It was hot to the touch, the smooth labia moist with her juices.

“Spread your legs wider,” he commanded.

When she did so, he released her cunt, created a paddle with his hand and smacked her hard between the legs. She cried out in surprise and pain but managed to hold her stance. The heady scent of her arousal tickled his nostrils and his balls tightened.

Satisfied he now had her full attention, Beau stepped back. He selected the floral print, unzipped it and handed it to her. “Put this on. Don’t worry about panties or bra.”

It actually looked a lot better than he’d expected, flattering her petite figure. But the fabric was too sheer for what he had in mind. “Now the other one.”

He moved behind her to zip the dress. It was looser fitting but still also looked surprisingly good. The deep pink of the fabric actually complemented her cotton-candy pink hair and brought out the amber and gold tones of her eyes.

“This one will do just fine,” he informed her. “The higher neckline and thicker fabric should cover the ropes you’ll be wearing underneath.”

“Oh,” she breathed, her pupils dilating.

“Yes,” he agreed with a wolfish smile. “That’s right, Lia. For the rest of this week, dressed or naked, with me or apart, you will wear my ropes as a constant reminder of your status as my trainee.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said softly, fully back in sub mode. “Thank you, Sir.”

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They were quiet for the short ride from Lia’s apartment.

After trying on the dresses, Beau had allowed Lia to put some fresh clothing into her overnight duffel, including another work outfit in case he brought her back to the university. He kept her naked as she walked around her tiny apartment with her watering can, giving her beloved plants their weekly drink.

Though she was completely at ease being naked at The Enclave, she felt more exposed and vulnerable in her own place, not to mention incredibly turned on. Beau had trailed along beside her, repeatedly distracting her with a smack on the ass, a tweak of the nipple or a hand on her throat.

Each time she yelped or moaned or melted into his touch, he would snap, “Pay attention to what you’re doing, sub girl. Show some discipline.” It was a sexy, exciting game, but when the watering was done, so was the game. She’d wanted to beg him to continue, preferably in her big, soft bed, but she hadn’t quite found the nerve.

Now she wore a heavy pink cotton blouse loosely tucked into dark blue trousers. He’d instructed her to remove the rope collar, noting he would never compromise her in public. Her hand rose to her neck now, feeling its lack. She thought about the beautiful hand-tooled collars all the slaves at The Enclave wore, each unique to its wearer, lovingly chosen by his or her Master.

Would she ever wear such a collar? Did she even want to?

She moved her hand from her bare throat to the lanyard she wore instead, her new employee ID card attached.

Beneath her conservative attire, Beau had cinched her waist with a fresh hank of linen *Kinbaku* rope, adding a second rope pulled tight between her labia and knotted to the rope around her waist. Each time she moved, the taut rope rubbed against her clit. Her bare breasts were snugged in a kind of rope bra, less elaborate than the harness he'd wrapped her in the morning before, but just as effective.

He pulled to a stop near the entrance of the Ramsey Library building. "I should only be an hour or two. I'll text you." They had exchanged contact information before leaving her apartment, and Lia had her phone tucked into her trousers pocket.

Now she climbed out of the car and breathed in the crisp autumn air. She almost forgot her rope trappings as she admired the clean architectural lines of the Ramsey Library Building. In one short week, she would take her place as a full-fledged research librarian, surrounded daily by a wealth of knowledge, from centuries-old manuscripts to cutting-edge research papers.

The responsibility of aiding researchers, locating obscure references, and mastering the library's intricate systems was definitely going to be a challenge, one she hoped she would be up to. She couldn't wait to explore the stacks, delve into the archives, and uncover the hidden gems within the collection.

Lia had always loved libraries from before she could even read. She still had fond memories of sitting in a reading circle with other toddlers in the children's room of her local library, listening with rapt attention to the volunteer holding a large picture book.

Now she used her new ID card to gain access into the building. As always happened when she entered any library, a sense of comfort and familiarity washed over her. The earthy scent of aged paper and ink was like an old friend that greeted her with every step. The sight of row upon row of books, neatly organized and waiting to be discovered, filled her as it always did with a feeling of wonder and anticipation.

She made her way past students seated at the study tables, piles of books stacked in front of them. She felt keenly aware both of her status as a librarian and of the ropes rubbing between her legs and cradling her breasts.

Her card granted her further access into the hallowed rooms of the special archives, which contained rare manuscripts, delicate parchments and historically significant documents. Several librarians were at work in front of computer terminals or seated at tables, bent over their work.

An older woman she recognized from the interview process as the head research librarian lifted her head as Lia entered. Carol—that was her name. She smiled in evident recognition over the rim of her reading glasses. “Lia, hello.” She furrowed her brow. “Wait. Aren’t you starting *next* Monday?”

Several heads lifted to look Lia over, a few offering nods or words of greeting. Lia smiled back, flushing a little under their scrutiny.

“Yes. Next Monday. I just came in to wander around for a while—get my bearings.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Carol said approvingly. “No better way to get familiar with the stacks than to restock the shelves. As I’m sure you know, we use the Library of Congress classification system.” She nodded toward a rolling cart piled high with books and documents. “You can start with these.”

Lia spent the next hour happily reshelving books and rare manuscripts, trying not to be overly distracted by the linen rope stroking her clit with every step. When she was done, she wandered through the stacks, further familiarizing herself with the library’s offerings.

She was just getting a drink of water at the fountain by the restrooms when her phone buzzed. She pulled it out, half expecting it to be Loretta, relieved to see it was Beau.

Are you at a stopping point?

Yes, Sir.

Lia experienced that same edgy, dangerous thrill she'd used to get when Master Pain would text out of the blue, no matter the time of day or night, with some increasingly audacious command. Like Pavlov's dog, just hearing the ding of his text could make her cunt wet and her breath catch in her throat.

But Master Pain hadn't been real.

Beau Jackson most definitely was.

Good. I should be there in fifteen minutes or so. Before you leave the building, you will go into the women's bathroom, enter a stall and lower your pants. You may use the toilet as needed, being careful to pull the rope aside to keep it clean. Then you will rub yourself until you are about to come. But you will *stop* before that happens. You will pull up your pants, wash your hands, leave the bathroom and exit the library. Is that clear?

Lia's heart quickened as she read his words, her breath catching in her throat.

Yes, Sir.

She took a moment to gather herself before returning to the archives to say goodbye to Carol and the others. Then she returned to the restrooms. Two of the stalls in the women's room were occupied, a third person at the mirror applying lipstick.

Lia entered an empty stall and locked the door. She lowered her trousers and pulled the rope aside as best as she could. It was awkward but she managed to avoid getting any

pee on the rope. When she was done, she wiped herself and flushed.

There was no lid, so she scooted forward on the rim of the toilet and spread her knees wider. In spite of being alone in a toilet stall, she could almost *feel* Master Beau's gaze upon her. She wet her fingers with saliva and put her hand between her legs.

Her clit ached from the constant erection of the past hour and change. It would take very little to make herself come. No. *Not* come. No more cheating. She was all in or she wasn't.

She pressed her lips together to keep from making any noise. The rope between her legs heightened the experience, rubbing her sex like another set of fingers. After less than a minute, she was breathing hard through her nostrils, her heart hammering. A few more strokes and then sweet release...

No.

Yanking her hand away, she rose and pulled up her pants. Exiting the stall, she made her way to the sinks. She looked at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling with her secret.

She moved slowly through the library, the rope still teasing her throbbing clit. As she stepped outside, she saw Beau's black Audi gliding toward her.

Chapter 19

“Did you play with yourself in the bathroom, Lia?” Beau asked, glancing at her from the corner of his eye as he drove.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied huskily.

“Did you come?”

“No, Sir.”

Was she lying? It was possible. But he didn't think so. Something in the set of her jaw and the slight lift of her chin told him she was telling the truth.

“Good girl. Would you like to pull down your pants right now and come for me, dirty girl?”

“Oh, yes,” she breathed. “Yes, please, Sir.”

He smiled to himself. Such a perfect little slut.

He pulled to a stop at a red light and turned to her. “I think not. Not yet. Maybe later today if you continue to behave well.”

A mutinous look washed over her face, but she wisely said nothing. As difficult as The Enclave trainers had warned him she could be, she was definitely trainable.

Beau noticed as he wove his way through the traffic that she was nibbling on a fingernail.

“Stop that,” he said, reaching over to pull her hand from her mouth. “It's a bad habit.”

Flushing, she curled both hands into fists and shoved them under her thighs. “I know,” she muttered.

They continued the drive in silence as Beau headed up the mountain. Once through the gates, he entered the large circular

driveway that fronted the mansion and put on the brakes. The sky had grown overcast while they drove up the mountain, the temperature dropping as they ascended. The thermometer on his dash claimed it was still sixty-eight degrees, but it would probably feel chillier than that for Lia as she knelt naked on the stone stoop waiting for her Master.

Not her Master, he corrected himself. *Her trainer.*

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out her rope collar. “Unbuckle your seatbelt and face me.”

As he tied the collar back into place, she sighed. Was that a sigh of irritation, relief or satisfaction? He couldn't quite tell.

When he was done, he said, “I'm going to park the car. You will wait for me at the front door, naked and on your knees, clothes folded neatly beside you.”

Lia's eyes widened, her collar bobbing as she swallowed. “Yes, Sir,” she said in that deliciously husky voice.

He left her standing in the drive and made his way to the parking area. Grabbing Lia's overnight duffel and his own bags, he entered The Enclave through the back door. It opened onto a mudroom that contained hung jackets and coats, boots of varying sizes and types neatly arranged below them.

As he came into the front hall, Lawrence emerged from the dungeon. Beau could hear the sound of whips cracking and breathy cries from inside. The trainee Juliette crawled on her hands and knees behind Lawrence, her short, dark hair hanging around her face like a curtain.

Lawrence held a leash that had been secured to Juliette's collar. “Hi, there,” he said when he noticed Beau. Glancing around, he asked, “Where's your trainee? Don't tell me she bolted again. Not that it would surprise me.” His lip curled slightly in anticipatory disapproval.

“No, nothing like that,” Beau said, feeling protective of his trainee. “She's waiting at the front door on her knees.”

Lawrence grunted his approval. He glanced down at the naked girl waiting beside him, eyes downcast, cheeks flushed. “This worthless slave disobeyed me,” he said, giving her leash

a sharp tug. “A stint in the punishment cage will give her some time to think about her transgressions.”

As Lawrence pulled the hapless girl along behind him, Beau thoughtfully watched them go. What would it be like to work as a full-time trainer here? To put these trainees through their rigorous paces, using them in whatever way amused or titillated, graduating them after a few weeks or a month, and then sending them along to whatever adventure next awaited them?

The idea held some appeal in the abstract. All the intensity of a D/s relationship without the strings or complications. Several of the resident Doms still had careers outside the compound, and they made it work. Perhaps he could find the perfect submissive in the process as Mark had—a loving partner who embraced the lifestyle with every fiber of her being.

Even as these thoughts flitted through his brain, he dismissed them. The idea of working with an ongoing stream of temporary trainees wasn't for him—not for the long term. He'd only agreed to train Lia because... Why *had* he agreed? Because of their intense connection that first night? Because Anthony was too compelling to refuse? Because of the challenge that he might succeed where others had failed? Because the gig was finite by definition?

All of the above.

Enough ruminating. Beau set the bags by the stairs and strode toward the double front doors.

As he pulled one open, he was greeted with the lovely sight of Lia kneeling up, back straight, hands behind her head, her slender torso still bound in his ropes. He couldn't help but feel a trainer's pride at how well she seemed to be progressing after just a few days in his care. Yes, she was still irreverent at times, even downright disobedient. But she seemed to be making a genuine effort.

Had Anthony been right? Was it really as simple as changing the approach—giving her one-on-one attention

versus multiple trainers in a more institutionalized setting? Or was there more at play here?

Something more...personal.

Careful, Jackson, he cautioned himself. *This isn't personal. Remember your role and stick to it.*

Yes, he would remain vigilant.

He held out a hand to pull her upright. "I'm pleased with you, Lia. Come inside so I can reward you."

Her face lit up at the praise. Or was she just excited by the prospect of a reward?

"First, let's get this rope harness off. I want to bind you a different way, something more challenging."

"Yum," she said so eagerly that he had to chuckle.

The rope between her legs was damp and scented with her spicy-sweet musk. A pleasing pattern of indentations remained on her fair skin. Resisting the urge to trace the shallow grooves with his fingers, he tucked the rope into the outer pocket of his gear bag for later cleaning.

Returning to her, he saw her skin was still goose-bumped with cold from waiting outside in the autumn air. Without thinking it through, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to warm her chilled body. She leaned into him, resting her cheek against his chest. When her arms snaked around his waist, he came to his senses and pulled away.

He'd left the door ajar and noticed her clothing still in a neat pile on the stoop. Bending down, he retrieved it and stepped back inside. Lia stood with her arms wrapped around herself, as if completing the hug he'd pulled away from. He held out the pile of clothing.

"Put these in your duffel. We'll take our stuff up later." Hoisting his gear bag over his shoulder, he said, "Let's go see what's happening inside."

As they entered the dungeon, two of the trainees, Madison and Kinsley, were straddling a punishment beam, legs trembling as they balanced on their toes. Facing one another,

they were tethered to each other by two long, thin chains, nipple clamps at either end. Brandon and his wife, Marjorie, moved slowly around them with flicking single tails.

At another station, Nick was locked into a ball crusher, his erect shaft bobbing. Katie was at his feet, poised with her mouth open. Mark stood behind him, speaking softly to the kneeling slave girl. He nodded toward Beau as they made eye contact, but quickly returned his attention to his task.

Beau had planned a *Kinbaku* session using those awesome suspension rings, only this time, he was going to suspend Lia upside down, perhaps with one leg bent. When he got to the station where Lia and he had scened the first time, he was annoyed to see it was already occupied by Anthony and Lucia.

Anthony held a coil of silver-white braided rope in his hands. Lucia stood nearby beneath the hanging rings, arms at her sides. Anthony looked up as they approached.

“Your timing is impeccable,” he said, as if he’d been expecting them.

“Oh?” Beau replied, curious.

“I was just about to try out our latest toy for the first time. As a *Kinbaku* Master, you may enjoy checking this out as well.” Anthony offered the coil to Beau.

Beau took it, running his fingers over the braided rope. It was stiffer than he’d expected but otherwise seemed unremarkable. He looked to Anthony for an explanation.

“You’re familiar with conductive rope, yes?”

Beau nodded. “Sure.” He examined the rope more closely. “But I can’t see any metal filaments there?” He made it a question.

Anthony smiled, as if in possession of a marvelous secret. “That’s right,” he said with evident satisfaction. “Because this isn’t your basic conductive rope. Rather than metallic fibers, this has continuous full-length steel strands twisted through the entire rope, making the conductive charge significantly stronger. When you zap the rope in one place, the current will

travel to other areas of the rope in unpredictable ways, which should add dimension to the experience.”

Beau glanced at Anthony’s submissive. Her large, dark eyes were trained on her Master. Though she stood perfectly still, Beau could sense her anticipation.

Lia, by contrast, was staring at the rope in Anthony’s hands. Her finger had found its way to her mouth again, and she gnawed at a cuticle.

“Lia,” Beau snapped, getting her attention. “What’re you doing? We talked about that.”

Flushing, Lia abruptly dropped her hand, hiding it behind her back.

Redirecting her, he said, “Are you familiar with electrostimulation?”

“I’ve experienced violet wands, Sir, but not conductive rope. It sounds pretty intense.”

“Think you’re up for the challenge?”

She lifted her chin. “Absolutely, Sir.”

He liked that about her. She rose to every challenge.

“Good girl.”

He looked to Anthony. “I’d be glad to enjoy a scene with you.”

“Excellent,” Anthony replied. “Why don’t you bind the girls while I get the violet wands set up?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Beau agreed.

He had Lia stand beside Lucia. The contrast between the two women was pleasing to the eye. Lucia had olive skin, dark eyes and hair. Her breasts were heavier than Lia’s, the nipples a coppery brown. Her stomach was softly rounded, with faint stretch marks probably from childbirth. Lia’s skin was peaches and cream, save for the colorful tattoos, her nipples rosy pink.

The subs exchanged meaningful glances, carrying on a brief telepathic conversation that included secret smiles and

sidelong glances at himself. *Girl talk*, he thought with an indulgent smile.

He bound Lucia first, wrapping the supple rope in a pleasing pattern around her torso and between her legs. She was quiet but compliant as he worked, shifting her body or leg just so without his need to guide her in any way. Finally, he selected a piece of *Kinbaku* rope from his gear bag, which he used to secure her wrists to a low hanging suspension ring. As he worked, he couldn't help but notice Lucia's peaceful stillness, in contrast to Lia, who fairly vibrated with barely contained energy beside her.

Beau grabbed a second coil of the conductive rope from the cabinet top. At first, Lia fidgeted as he worked. But after a while, she calmed, settling into the rope with a small, contented sigh.

Anthony, meanwhile, had plugged in two violet wands. Instead of the glass electrode attachments Beau was familiar with, he was fitting the wands with what looked like flattened aluminum knitting needles attached to metal handles.

"Those are different," Beau commented.

Anthony ran a finger along the attachment on one of the wands. "These are laser blades. They're made from anodized aluminum, the base a highly conductive carbon fiber. They deliver a stronger jolt than glass, both through the rope and directly on the skin. Still perfectly safe, of course," he added.

He handed the wand to Beau and picked up the second one for himself. Moving to stand in front of the women, he appraised them with apparent satisfaction.

"Nicely done," he said with an approving smile.

He flicked his wand through the air, as if calling his orchestra to attention.

"Shall we?"

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Lia's mouth was dry, her heart hammering with nervous excitement. From the way Master Anthony had described it,

Lucia and she were in for an intense experience. Hopefully, she could handle whatever they meted out without making a fool of herself.

She glanced at Lucia, who seemed as serene as always, calm radiating from her like a gentle aura.

“Eyes on me,” Beau directed. He flicked a switch at the base of the wand, and the thing sprang to life.

The metal attachment glowed purple and threw off sparks. Lia’s breath caught in her throat as she watched the crackling energy move closer. Her heart raced with anticipation.

Beau ran the edge of the blade along the conductive rope circling her breasts. The rope seemed to come alive against her skin. The sensation was electric—quite literally—hovering on a knife’s edge between pleasure and pain. Lia gasped, her body arching involuntarily against her restraints. The charge left her skin tingling and her nerves singing.

He alternated his touch, moving from the rope to her bare skin and back again. Sparks of violet light danced along her flesh, creating a mix of tingling and prickling sensations. The experience was at once deeply arousing and unsettling. Though she knew what was coming, each touch of the wand caused a surprising jolt of sensation that left her breathless and off-balance. Each pass of the blade made her shudder, her body reacting to the unpredictable path of the electricity. Having her wrists bound, arms pulled taut overhead, only added to the intensity.

Lucia and Master Anthony faded into the background as Lia focused solely on Master Beau. His gaze burned into hers with each sweep and tap of the wand’s charged tip, sparking a frenzy of sensation throughout Lia’s body.

He dragged the blade again over Lia’s bare skin, leaving a shower of electrified sensation in its wake that was almost too much to handle. Sweat tickled under her arms and at her hairline. She was on fire with lust, every sparking kiss of the wand a reminder of her vulnerability at the mercy of her erotic torturer.

Her body became slicked with sweat, her breath catching in her throat as Master Beau continued to trace the blade over the metallic rope and along the curves of her body. The electric pulses mingled with his breath, warm against her skin as he leaned close. There was a crackling energy between them, borne of more than mere electricity. Surely, he felt it too.

He flicked something on the side of the wand, making it hum louder as the current intensified. “Keep your eyes open and on me,” he instructed as he lowered the wand so the blade hovered between her legs.

She cried out in anguished pleasure as the electrified tip made contact with the rope pulled taut between her labia. Body trembling, she jerked at the touch, involuntarily twisting away from the blade. A whisper of panic tickled along her skin.

“Breathe,” Master Beau soothed. “Focus on submission and take what I give you. Embrace the pain. You can do this, my brave girl.”

His words both calmed and thrilled her. Yes, she would embrace the pain. She *was* brave. His brave girl.

She tried to keep her eyes open, steadied by his fiery gaze as the wand sparked and thrummed along the rope electrifying her cunt. With every touch of the wand, her nerve endings became more sensitized, the rope amplifying the experience.

“Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god,” she moaned. Master Beau continued to focus on the rope between her legs while she teetered precariously on the edge of a powerful, shock-induced climax. Her cunt throbbed with sizzling, intense sensation that was almost too much to bear.

“Not yet, little girl,” Master Beau growled, his smile cruel as he pulled the glittering blade from between her legs. He touched the tip to her right nipple, creating a spray of sparks, the shock far more intense and localized than the more widespread sensations produced by the rope.

“Fuck,” she cried at the focused burst of erotic pain.

He touched the left nipple, another zap of electric current sparking painfully over the engorged nubbin and shooting directly to her aching, throbbing cunt. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she twisted in her bonds.

Let me come. Just let me come. Please, please, please, please...

“Enough,” Master Beau murmured gently, clicking off his wand. “You’ve had enough, sub girl.” Leaning closer, he thumbed away her tears.

Lia very nearly wailed aloud with sexual frustration. She might even have given in to the impulse to beg, but her sudden awareness of Master Anthony and Lucia beside her kept her quiet.

As the ropes slid away, her erotic tension ebbed, replaced by a creeping exhaustion. She glanced around, surprised to see that Lucia was already free of her bonds and wrapped in a light cotton blanket, cocooned like a child in her Master’s arms.

Master Anthony smiled approvingly as he regarded them. “I’d say our new toys are a resounding success. Would you agree, Master Beau?”

“I would indeed,” Beau replied with an answering grin.

“I’m going to take Lucia upstairs for a little more intensive aftercare,” Master Anthony said, gathering her closer against his chest. “We’ll see you at dinner.”

Once they were gone, Beau reached up to release Lia’s wrists from the overhead ring. Before she could sag to the ground, he caught her in his arms. But instead of gathering her close as Master Anthony had done, he only helped her lower herself to a seated position on the mat.

Turning from her, he opened the mini fridge and removed a bottle of chilled water. Twisting off the cap, he crouched beside her and gave her the bottle.

“Thank you, Sir,” she murmured gratefully.

She held her breath as his fingers traced feather-light patterns over her thigh. He was so close she could smell the enticing scent of his clean sweat and masculine musk. Catching her eye, he smiled, his lips softening into a warm, inviting curve that made her heart race. His fingers still dancing over her skin, he dipped his head toward hers.

Her previous irritation with her trainer for withholding orgasm for the second time that day vanished, replaced by a jittery, thrilling anticipation.

Oh my god! He's going to kiss me! Oh, oh, oh!

She lifted her face to his, the butterflies in her stomach circling in a swarm and taking off en masse, her entire body buzzing with excitement.

She could feel his warm breath on her cheek. Her eyes fluttered shut as her lips parted.

He planted a perfunctory peck on her cheek.

Her eyes flew open. A tumult of emotions—confusion, fury, embarrassment, longing—swept through her like a tide, nearly carrying her away with it.

Beau was already on his feet. He held out a hand to her. “You need a shower,” he said in a brisk, no-nonsense tone. “Let’s go get you cleaned up.”

He turned away, but not before she noticed the very clear outline of a full erection pressing against his black jeans.

Ha, she thought with bitter satisfaction. So, the bastard's not totally immune after all.

Chapter 20

Beau remained in the bedroom while Lia showered. His damn cock ached. He thought about Anthony and Lucia, who were ensconced in their suite just down the hall. No doubt, Anthony was making love to his slave girl—a natural and fitting end to an intense scene.

If nothing else, these few days of training Lia in a place filled with loving, committed M/s relationships had really brought home how long he'd been alone.

Renee and he had been together for over two years and he'd genuinely believed she was the woman he would marry. Their physical attraction had been powerful and immediate. She was stunningly beautiful and as heavily into BDSM as he was. The intensity of their D/s connection had allowed him to overlook warning signs that had probably been there all along.

The pain of losing her had been compounded by the humiliation of being cuckolded. The out-of-town conference he'd been attending had ended a day earlier than scheduled. He'd caught an early flight back to Charlotte, thinking to surprise Renee, who worked from home. He'd surprised her, all right, along with her personal trainer, the pair of them in bed. Talk about a cliché.

Apparently overcome with remorse, she'd begged Beau for another chance. It had been an impromptu, stupid thing, she'd assured him tearfully. A one-time lapse in judgment. He was her true Master, she'd sobbed, prostrate with apparent grief as she begged him for forgiveness. She would suffer any punishment he decreed, if only he'd give her another chance.

While it didn't sit right with him to exact some kind of penance in a BDSM context, he'd believed she was sincere in

her remorse. Still in love, he'd been willing to try and patch things up.

Until he'd caught her again a few months later, this time with a guy she'd apparently met online through a BDSM hookup site. Fool me once...

The breakup had shaken him to his core and made him doubt himself. What had been lacking in him that had led her astray? If he'd been a more attentive lover, a sterner Master, a better man, would she have stayed true?

The passage of time blunted the worst of his pain, though a part of him had continued to hope she'd come back to him. Eventually, he heard from a mutual friend that she'd hooked up with some billionaire movie producer and had moved to California. It was only then that he accepted she was gone for good.

Eventually, he'd returned to the BDSM clubs, ready at last to move on. But the scar tissue that had built up around his wounded heart made it hard for him to trust again.

He had met attractive, sexy women in the scene, and even brought one or two of them home. But nothing had lasted. Even Sakura, as enchanting and utterly submissive as she'd been, had only been a rebound relationship, one with a built-in expiration date when he returned to the States.

Instead, he'd focused on his career, losing himself in his PhD work, telling himself he had plenty of time to find love again, or let it find him. Somehow three years had slipped by. He was thirty-five and, to quote Lia's mother, "Not getting any younger."

He resolved to change that aspect of his life going forward. He was in a new town with a new job and new possibilities. Thoughts of Renee, when he thought of her at all, no longer made him sad or angry. Yes, there remained a certain wistfulness, but he was relieved to realize he'd finally well and truly moved on.

He was ready to open his heart again. He would find a new submissive for his own. Someone strong and feisty, but

completely submissive to her Dom. Someone like Lia, perhaps, though a decade older. The Garden, the BDSM club Anthony owned in town, would be an excellent place to start.

He heard the shower water turn off. His cock, he was relieved to see, had deflated sufficiently so as not to be embarrassing. Lia appeared in the bathroom doorway, toweling her cotton-candy mop, looking sexier than she had a right to. Damn if his balls weren't tightening again.

"You can go down to the quarters until dinner. I need to handle a few things on my laptop," he lied.

She furrowed her brows at this, but then nodded. "Yes, Sir."

It was going to be a long week.

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Lia sprawled on one of the comfy couches in the slave quarters, holding a pillow to her body. Lucia, along with Juliette and Kinsley, had joined her and sat listening with rapt attention as she vented about Beau's mixed messages.

"One minute he's all business—as much of a hard ass as Lawrence, and the next I swear to god he's about to make love to me. I don't know if I'm reading more into this situation than there is or if he's just jerking my chain because he can." She hugged her pillow. "Or maybe I've somehow landed in a romance novel, and he's fallen madly in love with me but has to wait until our training contract is up before he can confess his true feelings."

She barked a laugh to show she was kidding, though she wasn't—not entirely.

"One-on-one training can be super intense," Lucia said with maddening gentleness. "It's easy to get confused about feelings on both sides when you're right in the middle of it. Don't get me wrong. I think Beau is a terrific guy and a good fit for you as a trainer. There's a definite connection between you, and I could totally see the two of you together. I just would hate to see you get hurt because you have expectations that he's not able to meet."

“Cut it out,” Lia said, making a face. “You’re messing up my nice fantasy with annoying doses of reality. Don’t you know hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul?”

“Oh, I like that,” Lucia exclaimed. “It’s so poetic.”

Lia laughed. “Wish I could take credit. But that’s Emily Dickinson.”

“Hope is the courage to keep going when the path is unclear,” Juliette offered.

“Ha,” Lia retorted, feeling suddenly contrarian. “Hope is the crutch of the naïve.”

“Hope is the lifeline we hold onto in turbulent waters,” Kinsley piped up.

“Hope is the carrot dangled in front of the donkey of reality,” Lia said with a snort.

Lucia reached out from the adjacent couch and touched Lia’s foot. “All kidding aside, you’re right. I shouldn’t be so negative. Look at Master Anthony and me. He was my late husband’s mentor. He only let me stay on at The Enclave out of charity. Talk about an unlikely pairing.”

“There’s a story here,” Juliette exclaimed. “Tell us everything.”

“Yes, tell us,” Lia urged, though she knew the story well. Despite their ensuing silliness, Lucia’s warnings had unsettled her. She was more than ready for a change of topic.

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When Beau woke the next morning, he sat up and pulled away the covers. Lia, still fast asleep, was curled into a fetal ball at his feet. He enjoyed a brief fantasy of waking her with a prod of the toe and commanding her to slide up and suck his cock like her life depended on it.

Before he gave in to the enticing idea, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and strode into the bathroom.

After dinner the night before, he’d allowed Aubrey and her slave, Gene, to involve Lia in a dungeon scene. He’d watched

from the sidelines, giving her direction and encouragement as needed. He'd liked the way she continually glanced his way, as if to say she was in the scene with others, but understood she was still his to command.

He'd showered before bed and had made the mistake of allowing Lia to dry him afterward. As she toweled his rapidly lengthening shaft, that knowing half smile subs get when they know the power has shifted to them appeared on her pretty face.

He'd sent her abruptly to bed, remaining in the bathroom to unsatisfactorily jerk himself off. For whatever reason, it was getting harder and harder to keep things professional between them, and it was taking its emotional toll.

He needed to keep things on the straight and narrow until Friday. He would have to remain vigilant, honoring the implied contract between them to keep things from getting too personal. He would keep the focus on giving her a safe place to truly engage in a genuine exchange of power. He was convinced if he could get her there, she would at least be on the right path toward her goal of submissive serenity.

Then he'd thank everyone at The Enclave for the opportunity and return to his real life. He'd still be happy to offer *Kinbaku* training at The Enclave in whatever capacity worked for them, but this would be his single foray into one-on-one training with someone who was not his lover.

It was just too damn hard.

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The days passed quickly as Master Beau put Lia through an increasingly intensive training regime. Each morning, he used the snake whip to paint a single, stinging welt on her ass, which would be faded by evening. She loved the solemn, sexy ritual, and the fire in his green eyes when he pulled her to her feet.

He tested her repeatedly, challenging her to submit with grace to a series of sessions that left her both exhausted and breathless with desire.

But something had changed, and not for the better. So much for hope springing eternal. The intimacy she'd thought had been developing between them during the first part of the week had dissipated, to her increasing frustration.

Each night she was sure he would finally let his trainer mask slip, if only a little. He would pull her from her spot at his feet up into his arms. He would kiss her, gently at first, and then with increasing passion.

"I've tried," he would murmur into her neck as he pulled her close. *"I tried to keep my heart under wraps, but it's just no good. I've fallen in love with you, Lia. Will you be mine?"*

She'd had to laugh at herself. This constant focus on one Master was turning her into one of those goo-goo-eyed lovestruck idiots, pining after an unattainable man. She knew better than to hope. Hope was just an illusion that made reality all the harder to bear.

Fuck that.

If he was determined to keep things between them at arm's length, that was just fine with her. After all, she hadn't entered into this temporary arrangement in order to hook up. She needed to focus on the positives. The training was awesome, all-encompassing, challenging and thrilling. Even better, she'd started experiencing flashes of the kind of serenity she'd so envied in Enclave slaves. Whatever Master Beau was doing, it seemed to be working. She would keep her focus on finding her own submissive groove and put childish fantasies aside.

Every day of Lia's training had included some kind of bondage. Each rope session was more intense than the previous, by design. Friday morning—their last official morning as trainer and trainee—Beau took Lia into the dungeon for their final *Kinbaku* session.

When he led her back to his favorite station with the swiveling suspension rings, she was surprised to see several people already there, as if waiting for their arrival. Chairs had been set up along one side of the station, in which sat Master Anthony, Lawrence and Mark. Their slave girls, Lucia,

Danielle and Jaime, knelt on floor cushions beside them. Not only that, a large, full-length mirror had been set up on the edge of the scene station perpendicular to the seating.

“Oh,” Lia exclaimed, the word popping out of her mouth in her surprise as she stared at the unexpected guests. All of the Doms were smiling, though Lawrence’s grin looked more like a sneer to Lia, as it always did. The subs were smiling too. Lucia gave Lia a small nod of encouragement while Jaime held up one hand in a thumb’s up gesture.

“It’s your last day of training,” Master Anthony said, as if she could have possibly forgotten that fact. “Master Beau has invited us to see how far you’ve progressed in your brief time together.”

Working with Beau one-on-one was one thing. Having the exacting Enclave Masters observe was quite another. Lia very nearly brought her hand reflexively to her lips, her fledgling fingernails suddenly whispering her name. To resist the sudden urge, she clasped her hands together and managed a lopsided smile of her own.

“Today,” Beau began, “I’m going to bind Lia in an especially challenging position. She will demonstrate for me and for all of you her newfound grace and self-control.”

A pleasant warmth moved through Lia at Master Beau’s implied confidence in her. At the same time, her stomach swooped unpleasantly at the realization she might not be up to the challenge.

She glanced again at Lucia, who telegraphed, “*Just obey your trainer and do your best.*”

“Stand in the center of the mat facing the mirror,” Beau instructed.

Lia did as she was told, glad that by doing so she wouldn’t have to look directly at the panel of critics.

He proceeded to set out his ropes on the mat, his movements deliberate and graceful. When he had them arranged to his satisfaction, he stood in front of her and placed his hands lightly on her shoulders.

“I want you to focus solely on the ropes. I’m going to bind you and suspend you upside down, one leg bent. It is a challenging and physically demanding position, but I believe you can handle it. Would you agree?”

“I-I think so, Sir,” she said, not entirely sure.

He smiled. “Well, that’s an honest response. I get it that you might have some trepidation. I’ll check in with you often during the scene, and you should feel free to speak up if anything is too difficult or is hurting you in a way that goes beyond erotic pain.”

Lia nodded her understanding. She felt prickly with nerves and excitement. While she would rather not have had anyone watching (and no doubt judging), she was thrilled that Master Beau believed her up to the challenge. She would do her best not to let him down.

“I want you to focus on your breathing and on the sensations in your body as I bind you. Breathing deeply and slowly will help you manage any physical or emotional tension.”

Beau dropped his hands from her shoulders and took a step to the side. “I encourage you to watch what is happening in the mirror. Not only will it help you appreciate the artistry of *Kinbaku*, but seeing your body and the ropes from different angles adds a visual dimension to the sensations you’ll be feeling. You’ll be able to see how the ropes influence your posture and movements. It will remind you that you’re an active participant in this process and help keep you centered.”

All of that made sense to Lia. There was an additional benefit Beau hadn’t mentioned. By watching herself in the mirror, she would be better able to block out their audience.

The binding began with her standing upright beneath one of the suspension rings, her body relaxed but alert. She watched in the mirror as Beau tied several anchor ropes to the ring.

When he was satisfied, he turned his attention to her. She observed with fascination how he meticulously wove a

complex and mesmerizing pattern of colorful rope around her body. As he worked, his hands repeatedly brushed her skin, sending shivers of pleasure and desire through her core.

Far from feeling antsy, bored or irritated, as she often had during bondage scenes in the past, she felt very calm. Unlike the intensity of impact play, there wasn't much for her to do other than remain still and compliant and pay attention to her body. The ropes were definitely restrictive, but not in a way that made her want to wriggle out of them.

It became more challenging when he bound her arms behind her back in a box pattern, wrists to elbows. The position was painful, but not the loud pain of impact play. It was more of a quiet pain—a constant presence that she could analyze and enjoy slowly. Her body sank into the sensations as she let the feelings open and flow through her. She experienced a kind of heightened awareness of each tiny change in how the rope pressed against her flesh and immobilized her limbs.

As Master Beau worked, he kept up a murmuring patter, explaining what he was doing and checking in with her regarding rope tension and comfort level. He added additional support ropes at various places along her body, some of which he tied to the suspension ring.

Eventually, he said, “Now I want you to bend your right leg back so your heel is touching your ass. Don't worry about falling. The support ropes will hold you in place.”

Lia bent her leg as directed. Working swiftly now, Beau wrapped a rope deftly around her leg, binding it so she was forced to balance on only one leg.

The difficulty and unfamiliarity of the position pulled her a little out of her rope-induced subspace.

“You're doing beautifully,” Master Beau assured her, pausing a moment in his work to stroke the hair from her face. “You've got this.”

Their eyes locked, and Lia felt herself tumbling into the dark, secret forest of his gaze. “Beautiful,” Master Anthony

said, startling Lia. She'd actually forgotten they weren't alone, so focused on her Master and what he was doing. "You truly are a *Kinbaku* Master. We can learn a lot from you."

Beau turned from Lia to Master Anthony. "Thank you. But we're not done yet." He nodded toward Mark. "Would you assist me with the suspension?"

"You bet." Mark jumped to his feet and joined them on the mat.

As if they'd practiced it beforehand, the two Masters worked together, adjusting the support ropes and anchor ropes in such a way that Lia was slowly but surely lifted upward from the mat. The feeling of leaving the ground was both surprising and exhilarating.

As the ropes took the weight of her body, she experienced a sensation of weightlessness. As she was lifted higher, the bondage ropes pressed and tugged against her skin, the sensation both intense and uniquely tactile.

Though she couldn't move a muscle, Lia paradoxically felt even more active than when she was involved in impact play. Every part of her body and mind was fully engaged in the experience of her total bondage.

Slowly but surely, she was turned from upright to horizontal to upside down, all while suspended above the ground. Each change of position made her heart race. The mixture of vulnerability, excitement and the unusual sensations of being suspended upside down felt almost alchemical in nature—transmuting all the discord in her life into a harmony born of complete surrender. She was vaguely aware of murmured conversation but was unable to focus on the words, too caught up in her own physical and emotional sensations. Master Beau turned her body gently until she was able to see herself in the mirror.

She gasped as she took it all in. He had used a rainbow of colorful rope, creating a breathtaking visual spectacle of texture and color against the backdrop of her bare skin.

She felt at once exhilarated and serene as she surrendered fully to the sensation of being embraced so securely in Master Beau's ropes. She lost track of time as she swayed there, her eyes closing as she drifted in a place of utter peace and tranquility. If she could have stayed just that way forever, she would have done so.

Eventually, however, she felt her equilibrium shift, pulling her from her trance. The ropes holding her aloft were slowly lowered until she was lying on her side on the mat.

Master Beau worked quickly, plucking free the intricate knots he'd so lovingly created until she lay naked. When he gathered her into his arms, the sudden burst of applause around them startled Lia from her erotic lethargy.

Beau was looking down at her, a smile hovering on his lips. She had thought his eyes were green, but now she realized they were more than that. All the colors of a forest were there—flecks of umber, bronze and gold.

“You did good, Lia. I'm very proud of you.”

Words she hadn't anticipated and which had no place in this scene—however amazing and intense it had been—rose suddenly in her throat.

I love you, Master Beau.

Praise to all the gods in the heavens, she came to her senses before they tumbled out.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said aloud.

Chapter 21

“Bravo,” Lawrence said after the girls had spirited Lia away for some aftercare in the slave quarters. “You actually did it. You managed to awaken the inner submissive hidden beneath all that posturing tough girl bullshit she put us through.”

“You’ve made an excellent start.” Anthony clapped Beau on the back. “Lia still has a way to go, of course. But your methods have unlocked something Lucia and I were sure was there. I know your informal contract was just through today, but you’re welcome to stay and continue working with her, your schedules permitting, of course. While Julian will be reclaiming his suite tonight, we do have a guest bedroom you could use for as long as you like.”

“That’s very generous of you, Anthony,” Beau replied sincerely. “This has been an amazing week and your hospitality is through the roof. Unfortunately, I have to get back to my real life. I’ll still be available for ongoing *Kinbaku* training as we’ve discussed. But I need to buckle down on a paper I want to get completed and submitted to the *Journal of Asian Studies* before the new semester starts.”

“Understood,” Anthony replied. “I sometimes forget there’s a ‘real life’ out there beyond our private Shangri la here. But consider it an open invitation.”

After Anthony and Lawrence took their leave, Mark stayed behind to help Beau put his rope away and tidy the scene station.

“I think you might have performed a miracle,” Mark said with a grin. “I know Anthony and Lawrence believed she could be redeemed, but between you and me, I wasn’t at all

sure there actually was a submissive lurking in that hardcore masochist soul of hers.”

“Gee, thanks,” Beau said with a laugh. “So, you gave me what you thought was an impossible task?”

Mark shrugged, still grinning. “I was quietly skeptical, but Anthony was right, as usual. She just needed a different approach. I don’t see her as a good fit as an Enclave slave, though. She wouldn’t be happy serving all and sundry. But one-on-one, she’s starting to exhibit the serene grace of a true BDSM slave.”

“She’s definitely made progress,” Beau agreed.

In spite of himself, he couldn’t help but feel proprietary pride in Lia’s graceful handling of the physically and mentally challenging *Kinbaku* session. She hadn’t powered her way through it as she might have only the week before. Instead, she’d embraced the situation, surrendering with as much grace as any subject he’d worked with before.

“So, what’s next?” Mark asked.

While Beau understood Mark was asking a broader question, he answered in a narrower context. “I’m actually going to her parents’ house tonight with her for dinner. Since our informal contract extends through the evening, I plan to give her a few challenges to see how she handles submission outside the confines of a training session.”

“Her parents’ house,” Mark exclaimed. “How the heck did you manage that?”

Beau told Mark about the meeting with Lia’s mom. “I couldn’t have refused that invitation even if I’d wanted to. Loretta Duvall is a force of nature.” He paused, thinking about the first time he’d met Lia. “Remember, I mentioned I met Lia at a big society wedding?”

Mark nodded.

“She was with my baby cousin. He’s totally into the whole *Who’s Who* of Asheville society. And there was Lia beside him, all decked out in a silk gown and pearls. Now, I realize her mom probably had a hand in that. While I was at her place,

Loretta showed up with a bunch of dresses and basically instructed Lia as to what she would wear for this dinner.”

“No kidding,” Mark mused. “Now I’m getting a better understanding of the pink hair and the tats and the kickass persona Lia projects. She’s trying to distinguish and maybe even separate herself from the whole Southern high society vibe.”

“Probably,” Beau agreed. “It just highlights how young she is. Still trying to separate from Mommy and Daddy.”

“Whoa,” Mark said. “That’s kind of harsh.”

Beau shrugged a little sheepishly. “Maybe you’re right.”

“So,” Mark said. “I repeat my question. What’s next? Maybe it’s time to move from a pure trainer/trainee relationship to something more...personal?”

Beau shook his head. “Not in the cards.”

“No?” Mark said, sounding genuinely surprised. “Maybe I’ve got it all wrong, but I could swear there’s a definite spark between the two of you. Jaime thinks so, too.”

“Maybe,” Beau grudgingly admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to do anything about it. I mean, let’s get real here. Lia’s over a decade younger than I am. She’s basically still a kid.”

“You keep harping on this age thing,” Mark replied, frowning. “I didn’t see a kid today during that awesome *Kinbaku* demonstration. I saw a woman who responded with passion and grace. I also saw the way she was looking at you, bro. She’s into you. I guarantee it.”

“Nah,” Beau said dismissively, ignoring the sudden, bright flare of hope Mark’s words had ignited. “She’s into the experience I gave her. I’m sure you’ve seen it a lot as a trainer. It’s not *me* she’s into, even if she might think it is. It’s having someone connect with a core need and help her bring it into focus. I’m more of a mirror or a conduit. It’s not personal.”

“So, make it personal,” Mark persisted. “Take it to the next level.”

Beau snorted. “Since when did you become such a matchmaker?” He barked a laugh. “You and Loretta ought to get together. I spent less than a week with this girl and you’re ready to marry us off. I’m telling you—there’s nothing between us except the temporary connection between scene partners. End of story.”

Mark shook his head, his grin wry. “Yeah, sure, buddy. Keep telling yourself that.”

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He would be there any minute now. Lia tapped on her phone’s screen to read the text for the final time, on the off chance she’d missed any of the instructions.

I will arrive at your apartment at 6:30 this evening. You will leave the door unlocked. I will expect to find you on your knees by the front door, forehead touching the floor, arms crossed behind your back. You will have laid out the magenta dress and the shoes your mother bought for you. You will be wearing only the ropes I designed for you for this evening. You will wear the breast harness in place of a bra. Instead of panties, you will wear the rope belt, being sure to pull the crotch piece tight between your labia before tying it off at the waist. See you soon.

Lia rushed back to the bathroom for one last look at her ropes. Turning this way and that, she admired the simple breast harness Beau had designed for her using the soft linen *Kinbaku* rope. It fit like a bra, with shoulder straps and circles of rope around each breast like underwire, leaving her breasts bare. All she’d had to do was slip it over her head, fit herself into the rope cups and tie a simple square knot between her breasts to hold it in place.

The rope panties were even simpler—just a belt of rope around her waist with a second piece that went between her legs. This, too, she tied into place with a knot just above her tattooed mons.

Hurrying back into the living room, she shivered with anticipatory excitement as she assumed the position in front of the door. She got a kick out of the idea of showing up at her parents' place in the matronly dress and sensible pumps, while secretly trussed in her Master's rope beneath.

Something had shifted in her psyche during that amazing final *Kinbaku* session with Master Beau. It was as if there was a gear inside of her that had always been out of sync. Over the course of the week, Beau's training had been slowly but surely shifting it into alignment. During that scene it had finally snapped into place with a subtle click. She felt, not so much different, as corrected, her inner submissive gears finally turning smoothly, perhaps for the first time in her life.

Beau had taken pains to remind her that their training contract was at an end after this evening, as if she needed reminding. He hadn't said as much, and she hadn't quite mustered the nerve yet to bring it up herself, but she was pretty sure he was going to take things to the next level between them.

In that regard, it was good that the official Enclave training was ending. Things would be a lot more intimate now that they were both back on their own turf. She'd changed the sheets, fluffed the pillows and even attached wrist and ankle cuffs to the bedposts.

Maybe it was topping from the bottom, but she preferred to think of it as being prepared. After all, as they'd drummed into her head at The Enclave, proper slaves anticipated their Master's needs and desires.

She caught her breath as she heard the sound of the doorknob turning and the door slowly opening. She resisted the very strong urge to lift her head, instead remaining in her prostrate position. Her clit pulsed against the rope wedged between her labia as his footsteps clicked toward her.

"Stand up at attention, arms behind your head, feet shoulder width apart," Master Beau directed.

Lia rose to her feet. The rope harness tugged at her breasts as she assumed the position. The rope between her legs was

already damp with her juices.

Beau looked even more gorgeous than usual. His dark glossy hair was brushed back, save for that single, errant curl that fell over his forehead. He wore an impeccably tailored charcoal gray suit jacket with a slim lapel. Beneath the jacket he had on a midnight blue silk dress shirt, its subtle sheen highlighting his toned physique. The first several buttons were undone, revealing a glimpse of tan, smooth flesh. His feet were shod in black suede loafers. He would have been perfectly at home in the pages of *GQ*. No—make that the cover of *People's Sexiest Man Alive* issue.

A sensual half smile lifted one side of his mouth as he approached her. Reaching out, he adjusted the right shoulder strap of the rope harness bra. Then he took a step back, his gaze sweeping over her like a laser beam.

“Good,” he said simply.

As he walked slowly around her, she resisted the urge to turn and watch him. Instead, she maintained her position, arms behind her head, feet planted. When he stopped just behind her, her skin prickled with his nearness, her nipples stiffening.

She drew in a sharp, anticipatory breath as he reached around her and cupped one breast. His fingers found her nipple. He rolled it until it was engorged and tingling. Then he squeezed hard, making her gasp with pleasure and pain.

“Tonight,” he murmured, his fingers still tight on her throbbing nipple, “you will be the model of filial piety on the outside, no sign of the dirty little slut we both know you are on the inside.” His voice was warm and rich, like melted butter, his words sending a shiver of dark lust through her loins.

“Yes, Sir,” she answered throatily.

He brought his other arm around her, his large hand moving between her legs. She shuddered as his fingers grazed the rope wedged there. “Periodically over the course of the evening, I will give you a signal by touching the side of my nose with my left index finger. When I do that, you will excuse yourself as soon as politely possible and go to the

bathroom. There, you will lift your dress to your waist and, while looking at yourself in the mirror, you will rub your cunt for exactly thirty seconds.”

He slapped her cunt with a sudden, sharp smack that made her yelp. “You *will not* come. You understand? You will lower your dress and return to the table.”

“Yes, Sir,” she managed, her voice breathless, her cunt stinging from the blow.

“Good girl. Now, let’s get you dressed.”

She liked the way he zipped the back of the dress for her, as if they were any couple going out for the evening. She slipped her feet into the pumps and stood still as he walked slowly around her.

“Good,” he said, returning to stand in front of her. “Nothing shows underneath.” He flashed a grin, adding, “I guess we better remove your trainee collar, though. It doesn’t exactly go with the outfit.”

Lia’s hand immediately fluttered to her rope collar. Of course, he was right. She couldn’t very well show up to dinner with that thing around her neck. With some reluctance, she released the knot at her throat. Beau held out his hand for the red linen rope. He slipped it into an inner pocket of his jacket and then held out his arm.

“Shall we?”

They arrived at her parents’ house a little after seven. Lily and Zinnia were already there, along with their husbands, Hayne and Johnny. Lily’s kids, two-year-old Emma and four-year-old Noah, were no doubt at home with their live-in nanny. Zinnia, looking like a radiant beachball in her designer maternity dress, was flanked by her in-laws, whose names momentarily escaped Lia.

As she’d expected, everyone fawned around Beau, most especially Loretta. Clayton, her dad, gave Beau a hearty handshake, slapping him on the back as if they were old

friends. Lia worried Beau might be overwhelmed with the attention, but he seemed to take it in his stride.

“He’s as good looking as Mom said he was,” Lily said. Loretta had sent them into the kitchen to retrieve more prepared platters of the fussy hors d’oeuvres she liked to serve. “When’s the wedding?”

Lia laughed. “I’ve known him for literally one week. She’s getting a little ahead of herself, as usual.”

Lily shook her head. “To hear her go on about it, I thought he’d already popped the question. After all, Magnolia,” Lily started in the singsong voice they used when parroting Loretta.

“I’m not getting any younger,” Lia finished for her with a laugh.

“Seriously though,” Lily persisted, her eyes twinkling. “He’s terrific looking and knows how to dress. Definitely a step up from your usual ripped jeans and leather-jacketed dinner date. He’s a tenured professor and easily a decade your senior.” She wrinkled her nose in mock confusion. “What the *hell* does he see in *you*?”

“Gee, thanks,” Lia said, grinning. But the question, even delivered with good-humored teasing, gave Lia pause. What *did* he see in her?

Then she remembered the look in his eyes as he’d held her in his arms after the amazing *Kinbaku* session earlier that day. And the way his breath had warmed the back of her neck at her place while he played with her nipple and murmured his sexy instructions in that deep, silky voice of his.

While it was true she’d only known him for a week, it had been the most intense, powerful experience of her life. Surely, her feelings couldn’t all be one-sided. Maybe it wasn’t love. Not yet. But something was happening between them. Something that went beyond the confines of a simple trainer/trainee dynamic.

She was sure of it.

The rest of the evening passed in something of a blur, Lia's focus primarily on the sexy man seated across from her at the table. She'd been initially annoyed by Loretta's seating arrangement, which she'd learned from experience was immutable.

Instead of placing Beau beside her, Loretta had put him across the table and to her own right, no doubt so she could grill him as to his intentions regarding her daughter.

But the arrangement had given Lia a chance to observe Beau from something of a remove. She liked the way his Adam's apple bobbed when he drank from his water glass or sipped his wine. She loved the way he threw his head back when he laughed, the sound full-throated and sincere. And each time their eyes met, he offered a secret smile that was just for her.

Several times over the course of the evening his left index finger had brushed the side of his nose as he fixed Lia with a meaningful gaze. Heart skipping a beat, she'd excused herself from the table and made her way to the powder room. She'd enjoyed the edgy thrill of playing with herself in front of the gilded mirror while counting softly out loud, and the dark, submissive pleasure she'd derived from stopping the moment she'd mouthed, "Thirty."

Though her sexual frustration made it almost impossible to sit still at the table without fidgeting, she consoled herself with the hope that he'd alleviate that frustration for her later that night.

Finally, the meal over, after-dinner drinks sipped and manly cigars smoked, she and Beau were able to make their getaway. On the drive back to her place, Beau made her laugh with his kind but spot-on assessments of her sisters' good ol' boy husbands and her parents' less than subtle efforts to learn everything they could about his background and prospects. He didn't ask her anything about how the bathroom masturbatory sessions had gone or inquire about the rope she wore beneath her dress.

Probably, he was just waiting until they got inside to reassert his masterful control.

Miraculously, he found a parking spot close to the building. He placed an arm lightly around her shoulders as they walked to her door. Once there, he dropped his arm and instead reached for her shoulders.

“Lia,” he said, staring down into her eyes.

Her heart began to pound.

“It’s been a privilege to work with you,” he continued. “And an honor to help you in your journey to connect with your inner submissive.” He grinned, adding, “And tonight was a hoot. Your parents had me half-believing we were already engaged before the appetizer course was over. We’d already tied the knot by dessert.”

Lia half laughed, half groaned. “Welcome to my world.”

This wasn’t going the way she envisioned it. She needed to get him inside. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out her key and slipped it into the lock. “The night’s still young and there are some cuffs hanging on my bedposts with my name on them, not to mention a box of toys under the bed.”

Oh, shit. Had she really just said that? *Not exactly subtle, Lia.* Oh, well. She’d never been good at subtle.

Beau smiled, but it didn’t quite meet his eyes. “Not tonight, Lia. I think we both need some time to process. Things can feel very intense when you’re in this kind of 24/7 training relationship. It’s good to take a step back to figure out what you’re actually feeling.”

She must have been making a face, because he reached out and stroked her cheek, his expression softening with...what exactly? *Pity?* What the hell?

“I know sometimes a strong BDSM connection can feel like more than it is,” he continued, his tone annoyingly patronizing. “We both knew going into this that it was finite. And make no mistake. You were amazing. You really rose to the challenge and revealed a genuine submissive streak that took courage and grace to uncover. I look forward to our

continuing friendship, both on campus and at The Garden BDSM club. I wish you the very best.”

He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

The fucking bastard *kissed her on the cheek*.

Then, while she stared after him, too stunned and outraged to breathe, he walked away.

Chapter 22

Beau lay on his bed, his hands behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling. It was late—past midnight—but his eyes were wide open, his brain churning, his body stiff with tension.

I wish you the very best.

Seriously?

Jesus, Jackson. Couldn't you have come up with a better parting line than that?

But this was about more than his lame-ass parting line. They'd just spent six days together in a very intensive one-on-one situation. Lia had risen beautifully to every challenge. Instead of rewarding her in some way—a scene at The Garden perhaps—or at the very least providing some kind of closure, he basically dumped her like a sack of potatoes at her door and ran off like a teenager with a curfew.

The hurt in her face had cut through him like a knife. But what choice had he had? Her invitation into her bed had made it very clear she had the wrong idea about the direction of their relationship. If the word relationship could even be employed.

The irresponsible truth was, he'd come very close to giving in to his own inappropriate desires. Spending a week in the sex-drenched D/s environment of The Enclave with a willing, naked slave girl had been a challenge in itself. The thought of binding her spreadeagle to her bed and fucking her silly had been very tempting. It had taken all his willpower to keep his dick in his pants.

And then he'd only made matters worse by giving her that erotic assignment of touching herself in the bathroom during dinner. Naturally, she'd expected some kind of resolution—

sexual or otherwise. And he'd denied her. Not because she didn't deserve one, but because he was a coward.

But what else could he have done? It wasn't fair to lead her on. It was pretty clear from her behavior that evening that she was still caught in the throes of the intense dynamic that could develop between a trainer and trainee. It was like therapy patients who transferred their feelings onto their therapist. The patient might believe they were falling in love, when in fact they were just grateful to be seen and understood.

Yes. He'd been right to set clear boundaries when he'd dropped her off.

But that stricken look on her face... Had those been tears in her eyes?

Surely, he could have handled it a little less clumsily.

"God, you're an asshole, Jackson."

As uncomfortable as it was to admit, there was a definite pattern in his behavior with women. More specifically, in the way he left them. Ever since Renee had shattered his heart, he'd been careful to keep the women in his life at arm's length. At the BDSM clubs, he was the one who routinely ended a scene. He always held something back, even when his chosen partner for the night gave her all.

He'd downplayed his relationship with Sakura, telling her and himself that they'd known going into it that it had a built-in expiration date. When she'd professed her love, and even her willingness to relocate across the world to stay with him, he'd refused to allow her to consider uprooting her life for him. The sacrifice was too great, their cultures too different. She would end up regretting it.

But had he done that to protect her? Or himself?

The situation with Lia was different, he reminded himself for the tenth time in as many minutes. Theirs had not been a romantic relationship, or even equals hooking up at a BDSM club for some negotiated play. It was a finite training situation and the term had ended. It was as simple as that. She'd comported herself well, and he'd told her as much. If he'd

come inside her place with her, things would have gotten... complicated.

Yeah, he could have handled it better. But at least he'd gotten the message across. And he'd meant what he said about their remaining friends. They would no doubt run into each other at The Garden, and perhaps they'd enjoy a scene without the constraints of the trainer/trainee dynamic. But there needed to be a cooling off period before anything like that took place. Not only for her, but for himself as well.

With a heavy sigh, he rolled over and closed his eyes. But it would be a long time before sleep finally found him.

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Something was buzzing. Big lazy bumblebees were bumping into each other. *Bzzz. Bzzz.* The sun was shining, the grass soft beneath their naked bodies... *Bzzz. Bzzz...*

Lia opened her eyes to blinding sun slanting annoyingly through the window.

She wasn't in a meadow with a gorgeous naked man holding her in his arms. And the buzzing wasn't from the bees in her dream. It was her phone. Her heart dropped suddenly and then rose again, as if on the end of an elastic string. Beau had come to his senses!

As she hurriedly fumbled for her cell, she knocked the damn thing to the floor. Fully awake now, she tumbled out of the bed and landed on the rug with a hard thump. She grabbed the vibrating phone and clicked *accept*.

"Hello?" she said breathlessly.

"Hey there, girlfriend. Sorry I missed your call last night. You didn't leave a message. What's up? Is everything okay?"

"Oh," she said heavily. "It's you."

Lucia laughed. "Gee, thanks."

"Sorry," Lia said. "I thought it was Beau."

"What's going on? How was dinner with your parents?"

“Dinner was fine. It’s what happened afterward that wasn’t,” Lia said bitterly.

“Oh, no. What happened?”

Lia sighed. “You want the short version or the whole sorry mess?”

“Tell me everything.”

Lia had stood there, mouth hanging open in shocked surprise as Beau had walked away. She kept waiting for him to turn around, to rush back and take her into his arms. But he just kept moving. She heard the chirping sound of his car unlocking and then the slam of his door. It wasn’t until he’d driven away that she found the wherewithal to let herself into her apartment.

Once inside, she tore off her dress and tossed it aside. With trembling fingers, she released the knots at her waist and between her breasts. The ropes dropped to the ground, and she left them where they fell.

She’d lain awake half the night, alternating between confusion, self-doubt, longing and rage. She’d texted Beau a dozen times and deleted every one without sending it. Now, tears streaming down her cheeks, she poured out her tale of woe. Lucia listened quietly, clucking sympathetically in all the right places. She never once said, “I told you so.”

When Lia eventually spluttered to a stop, Lucia said gently, “I’m so sorry he’s hurt you, Lia. You want to come up to the compound and hang out? You know you’re always welcome.”

Lia considered. The idea was tempting. But she dismissed it. “Thanks, Lucia. You’re the best. But I’m afraid if I head back to The Enclave right now, I’ll just sit around licking my wounds. I think I need some time to myself.”

“Okay, *querida*. If you change your mind, you know where we are.”

“Thanks. And please thank Master Anthony and everyone for giving me another chance. I really appreciate that.”

They talked a while longer and then said their goodbyes. Lia promised not to be a stranger. After they hung up, she stayed on the floor, the phone cradled in her hand, staring at nothing.

Maybe she *should* take a ride up the mountain and hang out at The Enclave for a while. At least it would keep her from heading straight to Beau's place. But, no. She didn't have the heart or the energy to return to The Enclave right now. Beau's ghost would be in every room, the memories too recent and too sharp to bear.

Plus, what if Beau had a change of heart? What if even now he was on his way to her, a bouquet of flowers in his hand, his gear bag over his shoulder?

"Ha," she said aloud. "Hope is the thing with feathers that poops on your head the minute you step outside."

After a long, hot shower, Lia dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans and threw on her leather jacket. As she walked through the parking lot to her motorcycle she kept looking around, as if Beau's Audi might appear at any moment.

It didn't.

"Hope is the thing with feathers that laughs when you fall out of the nest," she muttered.

Pulling on her helmet, she hopped on her cycle and rode over to *Duck Donuts*. She bought a baker's dozen and a large cup of coffee to go. Back in her complex, she held her breath as she approached her apartment. He might be there right now waiting at the door, his face creased in apology.

"Hope is the thing with feathers that crashes into a plate glass window," she snarled.

Balancing her coffee and donut box, she let herself back into her empty apartment. Setting down the box and cup near a beanbag chair, she retrieved her laptop from the kitchen counter where it had lain untouched since her week at The Enclave.

Flopping into the oversized bean bag, she grabbed a caramel nut crunch donut and turned on her computer. There

were several work emails already in her box, including one from her new boss regarding the staff meeting that would be held at eight o'clock sharp Monday morning.

The timing was good. She would throw herself into her new job. She would go in early and stay late. She'd be so busy learning her new job that she'd barely think about Beau. At night, she'd head over to The Garden and find someone to scene with. After all, Beau certainly wasn't the only Dom out there. Hell, maybe she'd even sign up for the auction they were holding at The Enclave next month. Lucia would have the inside scoop on the participants. Maybe the Dom of her dreams was already waiting for her. All she had to do was find him.

She hadn't been looking for a Master or even a lover when she'd agreed to this past week of training. But being with Beau had reopened something inside her. And, despite the fact he'd been such a dick last night, she really had learned a lot from him.

Maybe it wouldn't last, but she felt like a different person now. She had genuine flashes of calmness and serenity. Admittedly, she still had a way to go to approach anything like Lucia's contented self-actualization. But the old Lia—the Lia before Master Beau—wouldn't have hesitated to shoot off a series of scathing texts after Beau pulled his vanishing stunt. She would have stormed around her apartment, hurling things to the ground and screaming in her fury.

While she remained hurt and confused by his abrupt break with her, that kernel of inner calm he had helped her to uncover remained. She would focus on nurturing her fledgling feelings of submissive serenity, with or without him.

Hell, she'd even stopped biting her nails. True, there wasn't yet enough to actually file or polish, but at least her cuticles were healing, no bloody, ragged edges begging to be chewed.

She reached for a second donut, this one maple bacon. As she bit into the salty sweet confection, she opened her personal email account. Hidden among the spam and bill reminders was

an email from none other than Master Pain, the last asshole to break her heart.

No. Not her heart. Her ego.

The subject line of this new email read: *Meet me at Alt.com. I'm a free man now, and ready to claim you properly.*

Three months of her life she'd wasted on that bastard. Three months of being his online slave, given real life assignments until she "earned the right" to meet her Master in person. He'd been so darkly sexy, so utterly masterful online that she'd fallen for him, hook, line and sinker.

Finally, he'd decreed it was time for them to meet. She'd nearly died with anticipation, so happy to finally connect with the man who'd created such a compelling Master/slave world for her online. But each time they'd scheduled it, some crisis on his end had forced him to cancel—a sudden out of town business trip, an ill parent in need of his attention, a family function he couldn't get out of.

She'd decided to take things into her own hands. They didn't have to plan some fancy meeting. She would just show up at his place and fall into his waiting arms. On a whim, she punched his cell phone number into Google and, lo and behold—it listed the owner as Daniel Williams. A scroll through the tax rolls gave her his exact address, not ten miles from hers!

It took a while, but eventually she gathered her courage and drove to his house, the slave collar he'd sent her around her neck, her heart beating high in her throat. Parking in front of the house, she'd hooked her helmet over the handlebars and made her way up a neat path to his front door.

She rang the bell and then quickly lowered herself to a kneeling position, heart thumping, panties moistening in anticipation.

At the sound of the lock turning, she forgot how to breathe. After months of intensive online interaction, she was finally going to meet her Master in the flesh.

Then the door had opened, revealing a woman with a baby on her hip, a toddler clinging to her leg. She stared down in

confusion at Lia, still kneeling like an idiot on the stoop.

“Can I help you?” she asked. “Are you hurt?”

Lia had leaped to her feet, heat flaming into her face as she tried to understand what was happening. Was this a relative? A roommate? Had Google been misinformed?

“No,” she stammered, trying to gather her wits. “I was looking for Daniel? Daniel Williams?”

“I’m Jenna Williams, his wife.” She’d frowned, her face darkening with sudden suspicion. “And *you* are?”

She’d been too stunned at the time to think of anything clever to say. “I’m, uh, just a friend. An online friend.”

Then the import of what Daniel had done hit her like a punch in the gut. All this time, she’d believed he was genuine, when he’d been lying through his teeth. He wasn’t just with someone else, he was married with children! Why the hell should she cover for the bastard? Let him pay for what he’d done to her, and to his wife.

“You might want to check out his *Alt.com* profile online. His moniker is *Master Pain* and he’s a lying sack of shit.”

Now, with a flick of her finger, she deleted the asshole’s message unread.

She had a real Master to pine over.

“No,” she said aloud, pushing the laptop from her knees and getting to her feet. “You will *not* moon over someone who’s made it clear he wants nothing to do with you. You will take the good stuff you learned from him and leave the rest. Who needs him? Not me.”

Then, to her horror, she burst into tears.

Chapter 23

Beau busied himself over the weekend with errands and tasks he'd neglected the past week, having been fully occupied with training Lia. Saturday evening, he considered going over to The Garden to check out the action but decided it was too risky. He might run into Lia and, until some time had passed, that might be awkward. Instead, he met up with some vanilla friends for pizza and a movie. He spent most of Sunday binge-watching the old series *Justified*.

Monday morning Beau entered the Whitesides Hall Building on the Asheville campus and took the stairs two at a time to the second floor, his messenger bag over his shoulder. He loitered for a few minutes near the reception desk, making small talk with some of the support staff and a couple of grad students.

Eventually, he made his way to his office. As he was hanging his jacket on the hat rack in the corner of the small space, he noticed something sticking up from an inner pocket. He plucked it out and stared at it. It was the piece of rope he'd used as Lia's temporary training collar.

He stared at it for a long while, image after image of Lia flashing through his mind.

Enough.

He tossed the rope into the trash and took his seat behind the desk.

Since he wouldn't have a course load until January, he didn't yet have any student office hours. He could finally dive into his chosen research topic for the next edition of *Journal of Asian Studies*.

His topic was symbolism and imagery embedded in Shibari patterns, knots and techniques, with a focus on Japanese cultural symbols, mythology and spirituality.

To that end, he opened his messenger bag and pulled out the copies of records pertaining to the subject that he'd obtained from the Japanese National Archives, along with his notes from various academic conferences he'd attended while overseas.

He organized the pages into some semblance of order and then booted up his computer. He began to work on the outline of the article, fleshing it out in his mind as he typed. He would include discussion on various knots, including the diamond pattern, the butterfly, the cherry blossom, the dragonfly, the lotus and the heart.

Lia's lithe, limber body had been an excellent canvas for his ropes. Once she'd stopped fidgeting and had settled into herself, their sessions had taken on more depth. While he'd worked with her, he'd sometimes described the symbolism of the knots he was making.

The dragonfly, which featured loops and knots that resemble the insect's wings, symbolized the idea of adaptability and the ability to move gracefully within the confines of the rope. The classic lotus knot was a symbol of purity and enlightenment in Japanese Buddhism. The lotus could be used to represent the idea of inner peace and spiritual awakening—that elusive serenity Lia had so admired in Lucia and the other resident slaves at The Enclave.

One knot he'd purposely avoided during their time together had been the heart knot. The heart-shaped knot symbolized love, connection and intimacy between the rope master and his subject. It conveyed a sense of vulnerability and emotional closeness that might have been misconstrued.

Okay. What the hell was he doing? Why was he considering *Shibari* knots in terms of his ex-trainee? Why did Lia keep insinuating herself in his every thought and action? Was it guilt?

Because he still felt bad for how he'd left her Friday night, though for the life of him, he didn't see what else he could have done. Would it have been better to go inside with her? To sit her down and explain exactly why he had no business being there? It would have just made things even more awkward than they already were. He'd done the right thing.

So why did it feel wrong?

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Lia spent the rest of the weekend focusing on self-care. The idea of heading to The Garden hadn't appealed. Maybe she'd go later in the week for distraction, but for now she just wanted to keep to herself.

She went for long walks. She pruned and watered her many plants. She took baths in water scented with soothing oils. She watched old romcoms on Netflix, armed with a huge bowl of buttered popcorn and a bottle of crisp white wine. If she cried all the way through them, it was only because she was a sucker for romance.

She managed to field phone calls from her mother and both her sisters, all of whom raved about Beau and what a catch he was. Not wanting to get into any of the details, especially with her mother, she'd basically allowed them to gush without revealing the horrible end to the evening, and the probability they'd met him for the last time.

Happily, her new job kept her thoroughly occupied. As she'd promised herself, she went in early and stayed late. The work was engrossing and soon she lost herself in identifying relevant research materials, articles, books and data sets for the various project assistant requests sent in by professors and PhD candidates.

She would forget for hours at a time that Beau hadn't found her worthy of pursuing outside the terms of their very limited training contract. She refused to wonder if he was also on campus at the moment. She didn't obsessively check her cell just in case he'd had a change of heart. She didn't send long, agonized texts to Lucia or anyone else about how

difficult it was to keep the shattered bits of her heart from piercing her resolve to stay strong.

Lucia, good friend that she was, did check in with her several times over the course of the week. Each time, Lia assured her she was fine. It was Beau's loss if he couldn't see past their training relationship to something bigger. Who needed him? Not her.

So what if she burst into tears after ending each call? It was just a release valve, nothing more.

She returned to The Garden on Wednesday, eager for the distraction to get her through another evening. She stopped by her hair stylist for a touch up on her cotton-candy pink hair and groomed herself carefully before dressing for the evening.

After trying and discarding all her scene wear at least once, she finally settled on her favorite black leather bustier and miniskirt. She texted Beau a dozen times, wisely deleting each text before she could hit *send*.

What if he was there?

What if he wasn't?

Her heart pounded as she entered the familiar club. Unable to help herself, she immediately scanned the space for any sign of a tall, handsome Rhett Butler Dom with *Kinbaku* ropes in his hands.

No sign of him.

Yet.

Hope is the lottery ticket with "better luck next time" printed on it.

She did run into Kevin, a forty-something scene partner she'd enjoyed intensive impact play with a time or two in the past. Eager for the release and distraction of erotic pain, she agreed to a caning.

They found an empty station with a St. Andrew's cross. While Lia unzipped and slipped off her miniskirt, Kevin took out a long, strappy cane from his gear bag. She leaned into the cross with a sigh as he strapped her wrists and ankles in place.

He started slowly, lightly tapping her ass with the side of the cane. “You need a good caning, don’t you, naughty girl? You’ve been a very, very bad girl.”

Fuck. She’d forgotten his tendency to prattle.

“Yeah. I need it.”

“Say please.”

She bit back a sigh. “Please.”

A welcome sear of white-hot pain ignited over both ass cheeks.

Yes. More.

“How was that? Good, huh? Daddy Kevin knows just what his naughty girl needs.”

Don’t talk. Just do it.

“More, please,” she managed.

But instead of obliging her with the biting kiss of the cane, his fingers, rough and calloused, moved over her ass. He cupped her ass cheeks as he leaned close, his breath hot on the back of her neck.

“Ask me properly, little girl. Say, ‘Please, Daddy. May I have another?’”

Oh, for god’s sake. She didn’t recall this guy as having a Daddy fixation. All she wanted was a good, hard caning—something to take her totally out of herself.

She twisted back to regard her scene partner. “Look, Kevin. Er, Daddy. Please. Just give me a good, hard caning. I’m begging you.”

“Now, that’s what I like to hear,” he replied. “My little girl is begging her big Daddy for what she needs.”

He moved closer and reached for her hair. Grabbing a handful, he used it to yank her head back. “You want it hard, huh? Say, ‘I want it hard, Daddy. Please spank me, Daddy. Give it to me good.’”

It felt like he was yanking her hair out by the roots. As much to make him let go as to get what she needed, she parroted the stilted words.

With a triumphant smile, he let her go. Finally, he delivered a series of sharp, stinging blows that allowed her to forget, for a precious few minutes, what, or rather who, she really wanted.

The Daddy/little girl scenario notwithstanding, Kevin did know his way around a cane. Once upon a time, what he'd given her would have been enough. Now, it only highlighted Master Beau's missing *Kinbaku* ropes, the feel of his hands moving over her skin, the fiery gaze of those forest-green eyes.

Shit. Had Beau ruined her for other Doms?

Friday evening, Lucia called to invite Lia to a dungeon play party. Several friends of Julian's from London were visiting, and two of them were single Doms, both easy on the eyes and heavily into the scene. Not to mention, it would be a great chance for Lia to unwind after her first week at her new job.

Lia knew she should accept the invitation. What better way to put Beau out of her heart and mind than spending an evening in the fabulous dungeon at The Enclave? And who knew? Maybe one of Julian's friends would turn out to be her Master Right, and Beau would just end up a tiny footnote in the story of her life.

Annoyingly, she burst into tears yet again, this time before she could get off the phone with Lucia. "I'm afraid he's ruined me, Lucia," she managed between sobs. "I'm doing my best to put him out of my head, but the bastard refuses to budge. If I returned to The Enclave right now, I'd see him at every station and compare every scene to one we'd shared."

"Oh, honey," Lucia soothed. "I get it. I do. Clearly, there's unfinished business between the two of you. You're a courageous submissive, Lia. You proved that by giving the

training process another chance. Don't let fear keep you from acting. You know what I always say..."

Lia laughed through her tears as she supplied the answer. "Don't quit before the miracle. Yeah, I know. The problem is, Beau's the one who needs enlightening. He's the one who left me at my doorstep like he was delivering a fucking package. I've spent a week waiting and hoping he might text or call, but I think I've been ghosted."

"Maybe it's time you took things into your own hands. Sometimes men, even Masters, can be so dense it makes you want to scream." Lucia chuckled. "It's funny. Whether you realize it or not, your story parallels mine with Master Anthony in a lot of ways."

Lia tried to imagine how her pathetic story had anything in common with the passion and devotion between those two. "Oh, yeah?" she said with a disbelieving laugh. "How so?"

"How much do you know about how Master Anthony and I finally got together?"

Lia thought back to what Lucia had shared previously, and the little she'd gleaned during her first aborted training at The Enclave. "I know that you were widowed and that your late husband was friends with Anthony. You had kids young and they were grown and you were at loose ends, and Anthony took you on as a staff slave at The Enclave. And I know it was a while before you connected romantically."

She couldn't help but sigh as she added, "But now you two are more in love than anyone I've ever known. Definitely no parallel *there*."

"That's where you're wrong," Lucia said decisively. "The fact is, Master Anthony was just as thickheaded as Beau when it came to matters of the heart. Even when there was some definite chemistry developing between us, so much so that others noticed, he treated me with kid gloves. I was off limits because I was the wife of his friend who had died."

"And here's the thing, Lia—the thing I want you to understand. I was in love with him for a long time, over a

year, before I finally worked up the courage to let him know. What I'm saying is sometimes we submissives have to take matters into our own hands, even when it goes against our nature. Visualize the change you seek and you'll find the strength to make it real. If you want Beau to know how you feel—tell him. What he does with it is up to him. But at least you'll have tried.”

Lucia's words were like a splash of cold water that jolted Lia out of the waking nightmare of the past week. Since when had she become someone who forgot how to take matters into her own capable hands?

“Oh, my god, Lucia. You're so right.” She jumped to her feet. “It's time I pull up my big girl panties and stop acting like a passive, lovesick teenage girl.” She laughed, feeling suddenly giddy with possibilities. “Maybe Emily Dickinson was right after all. ‘Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.’”

“That's the spirit,” Lucia said with a laugh. “It's time for you to fly.”

Chapter 24

Should she text first? Should she call?

Better to just show up and confront him, face to face. It would be harder for him to deny what was between them if he didn't have the buffer of cell phones and distance. If he blew her off, at least she would have tried. As painful as it would be, she would know for sure that her feelings weren't reciprocated. Then she could begin the process of moving on.

“Visualize the change you seek and you'll find the strength to make it real.”

Thank goodness for Lucia. Lia felt energized for the first time that week, empowered by the decision to act, whatever the results.

First, what to wear. As she had Tuesday evening, she tried on every scene outfit she owned. She tossed them aside with increasing frustration. Nothing seemed quite right. Maybe she should just show up in a raincoat with nothing underneath. When she got to his apartment, she would drop the coat and kneel naked at his door.

No. Too dramatic. Too risky, too, in a public place. Not to mention, riding her motorcycle wearing nothing but a raincoat wasn't the wisest decision. She would just wear her usual jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. She'd leave off her bra, though. And when she got to his door, she would tweak her nipples to attention beneath the thin cotton of her T-shirt.

She dressed and then regarded herself critically in the full-length mirror. Something was missing...

With sudden inspiration, she thought about the *Kinbaku* rope harness she'd discarded when Beau had so unceremoniously dumped her back at her place Friday night.

She'd meant to throw it out in her hurt and anger but hadn't quite been able to bring herself to do so. Instead, she'd shoved the rope into the junk drawer in her kitchenette. Now she retrieved it, along with a pair of scissors.

She laid the soft strips on the counter that separated the kitchen from the rest of the studio, smoothing them flat against the Formica. Made from undyed linen, this rope wasn't the rich red of her training collar, but it would have to do.

Selecting a longish piece, she cut it to what she thought was the proper length and took it into the bathroom. It took her several fumbling tries, but she finally got it tied into a knot at her throat that satisfied her.

"Yes," she said softly to her reflection, her body relaxing with satisfaction at the rightness of the collar she had missed so much. "Let's do this thing now, before you lose your nerve." Grabbing her jacket and helmet, she headed out the door.

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Somehow, Beau made it through the week. His latest research paper kept him busy during the day and by the time Friday finally rolled around, he'd made good headway on the project. He'd spent his evenings quietly, working out, reading and watching the rest of the *Justified* series.

He hadn't yet returned to The Garden, not wanting to run into Lia. It wasn't that he didn't want to see her. It was that he wanted to see her too much.

His microwave dinner had just dinged when a text came in from Mark.

Hey, there. I know it's last minute, but why don't you pop up to The Enclave tonight around 10? Julian's got some buddies in from London and we're having a dungeon party to celebrate. Bring Lia.

Beau sank into a chair as he thumbed back a response.

I haven't been in touch with Lia since last Friday. The training contract ended and I thought it was best to set some boundaries.

Even to himself, he sounded like a pompous ass. But Mark, being a guy, took him at face value.

No kidding? Okay, then. Bring anyone you want. Or just come solo.

Having his pick of trained slave girls and the use of their awesome dungeon facilities should have been a no-brainer. If nothing else, it would be an excellent distraction from his looping thoughts. So, why was he even hesitating?

He still hadn't replied to the text when Mark sent another.

And be sure to bring your ropes, man. That kinbaku scene you did with Lia for us was so hot I thought the dungeon was going to burn down.

Beau had almost forgotten there had been anyone there witnessing their final, intense session together. He'd been so utterly focused on Lia as he lovingly wrapped her like a gift in his ropes. Her delicate beauty, her vulnerability and her trust had taken his breath away. With each added loop and knot, the bond between them had deepened.

That was the problem in a nutshell. As ridiculous as it was to admit, he didn't want to scene unless it was with Lia. Christ, what was happening to him?

Thanks for the invite, but I think I'll take a raincheck.

What's going on, dude? You sure you're okay?

Sidestepping the question, Beau thumbed back:

I have no idea how you guys do what you do and stay sane. How do you avoid getting emotionally involved with your trainees? How does that kind of intensity not fuck with your head, not to mention with your personal relationships? Do you have some kind of emotional switch you can just turn off at will? Because try as I might, I wouldn't be able to manage that, and especially not week in and week out.

Instead of an answering text, a call came in from Mark.

Before Beau could even say hello, his friend blurted, "What's really going on here, Beau? If I read between the lines of what you just wrote and factor in your comment about boundaries, I'm getting the strong vibe that you're not really asking a generic question about training. I think what I'm actually hearing here is that you're falling in love and it's freaking you out."

Beau barked a harsh laugh. At the same time, he couldn't deny the jolt of truth in Mark's words. But, no. That was crazy. Impossible.

"In love?" he exclaimed. "*That's* what you got from my texts? You're nuts. I worked with her for six days. End of story."

"No," Mark asserted with a chuckle. "It's actually just the beginning, assuming you can get your head out of your ass. But I think I just figured out what the hell your issue is."

"Oh, great," Beau replied sarcastically. "I can't wait to hear this."

"You've never trained objectively before."

"Meaning?"

"Before Lia, your past experience with slave training was within the context of a personal relationship. Am I right?"

“Yeah, but—”

“You haven’t had the chance to train people with whom you have no emotional connection. Because that’s how we do it here at The Enclave, Beau. We work with dozens of trainees every year, and while we always strive to bring out the best in them, we’re not emotionally invested. Except when we are,” he added with a guffaw.

Beau blew out a frustrated breath. “Okay. I have no fucking idea what you’re saying, Mark.”

“Sorry,” Mark said, still chuckling. “You think you’re unique, falling for a trainee.”

“I never said I fell for Lia.” Even Beau could hear the defensiveness in his tone.

“Spare me, bro. We all saw it. So, just shut up and listen. If you had the opportunity as we do at The Enclave to train any number of would-be slaves, the odds are you wouldn’t fall in love with each one, or even have any particular attraction other than the basic attraction of boy versus girl and Dom versus sub. That’s our usual experience as well. Except when we meet *the one*.”

“The one?”

“You know, the yin to your yang, the missing puzzle piece to your soul, the match made in heaven, call it what you will. It happened to me with Jaime. It happened to Anthony with Lucia. As weird as it still is to me, it happened to Lawrence with Danielle. It’s not that we fall for every trainee. Far from it. But if your trainee just happens to also be your *one*, all bets are off. Objectivity flies right out the old window.”

“Okay,” Beau said slowly.

“So, with you, it was different,” Mark continued. “You haven’t had the advantage of lots of experience with multiple trainees with whom you had no previous personal connection. Then your first one out of the gate also happens to be your yin, your puzzle piece, etc. So it’s not that you *can’t* train objectively. It’s that you lucked out right out of the gate. Now, the only thing I can’t for the life of me figure out is why the

hell you'd call it quits with someone you were so clearly falling in love with."

Beau's knee-jerk response was to deny, to refute, to explain why what Mark was saying was simply impossible. But something deep inside him, something that had been dormant for far too long, suddenly opened itself like a desert plant when the rain finally came.

Was he in love with Lia?

Not quite ready to come to terms with what his heart already knew to be true, he blurted the first thing that came into his mind.

"I can't be in love with her. She's barely into her twenties. I'm closer to forty than thirty."

Mark snorted. "Why are you so hung up on the numbers, man? If she's the one, she's the one."

"She was still in primary school when I graduated from college."

"So? Lucia wasn't even born when Anthony graduated from high school. Who gives a shit? Look. Whatever else she is, Lia's not a kid. She's a woman. Not only that, she's a strong, brave woman who overcame her own demons to give training another chance."

Mark's tone gentled. "Come on, Beau. It's me you're talking to. Can you honestly tell me there wasn't something happening between you two? Something way more than a trainer/trainee connection?"

A sudden burst of longing nearly overwhelmed Beau. Refusing to give in to it, he huffed, "We spent less than a week together, and in very controlled circumstances. Now you've got us falling in love?"

A sudden memory flashed in his mind, so real it was as if he were right there in the moment.

It was just after the session with the conductive rope and the violet wands. They were sitting side-by-side on the mat. Unable to resist, Beau had allowed his fingers to move over

the silky soft skin of her thigh. Their eyes had locked as something arced between them, like a spark jumping to bridge the gap between two bodies. She'd lifted her chin, her lips parting, her eyes fluttering closed as if waiting for his kiss.

Oh, how he'd wanted to give in to his selfish impulses and oblige her. But his sense of honor or duty or whatever the fuck it had been had made him pull away.

He could still see the sudden, shocked hurt in her eyes as he pretended nothing had just happened. Had he done the right thing—the responsible thing, as he'd told himself?

Or had he just been a coward?

“You might still be in denial, but Lia's not. She's in love with you, you idiot,” Mark asserted through the phone.

The words jolted Beau back to the moment. As he took them in, a sudden rush of absurd joy ballooned inside his soul, actually lifting him to his feet. “Oh, yeah? Says who?”

“Says Lia, that's who.” Mark laughed. “Do you forget where I live? There are no secrets in this little commune of ours. Lia talks to Lucia. Lucia talks to Jaime. Jaime talks to me, and there you have it. Lia's head over heels crazy about you, bro.”

Beau's face hurt, and he realized it had split into a huge grin. In his excitement, he began to pace the floor. “You think?” he said, unable to keep the stark, raw hope from his voice.

“I know. And I don't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out that you feel the same way about her. So, the only real question is, what the hell are you going to do about it?”

Beau was distracted by the sudden sound of his doorbell.

“Listen, someone's at the door,” he said hurriedly. “I'll catch ya' later, okay? And thank you, Mark. Thank you so, so much.” Without waiting for a response, he ended the call.

Had the universe, sensing Beau's desperate desire to reconnect, somehow decided to intervene in such a direct way

as to make Mark's words come true? Was Lia even now at his door?

The doorbell rang a second time, followed by loud knocking. Beau chuckled with indulgent delight. Lia was still as impatient as ever. He raced to answer, his feet barely touching the ground.

He pulled open the door, an anticipatory smile wide on his face.

Except it wasn't Lia standing there.

It was Renee.

Chapter 25

Beau had forgotten just how beautiful Renee was. Her honey-blond hair fell in a rich cascade over her shoulders. Her large blue eyes met his as they stared at one another. She was dressed in a low-cut black dress that draped her voluptuous figure.

It was jarring to see she was wearing the slave collar he'd made for her during their first year together. It was like showing up wearing a wedding ring years after an acrimonious divorce. What game was she playing?

"Hello, Beau," she said, her lips lifting with that hint of Lauren Bacall-like sensuality that had been one of the first things that had drawn him to her. "It's been too long."

"What are you doing here?" he said stupidly. "How did you know where I live?"

She lifted a perfectly sculpted brow. "You weren't that hard to find, Professor. I'm still Facebook friends with your sister. You know how determined I can be once I put my mind to something." She smiled coquettishly. "Aren't you glad to see me, baby? I've missed you so, so much."

Beau didn't answer. He was still trying to get his head around the fact that she wasn't Lia.

Renee moved closer, leading with her plump, perfect breasts. "I made a terrible mistake, Beau Bear." Her use of that pet name, which he'd never particularly liked in the first place, was jarring.

She leaned so close he could smell her perfume, floral and cloying. "I left the only man who ever really understood me," she continued with a pretty pout. "The only Master who knows what I *need*."

She sank gracefully to her knees before him, her golden hair falling in a shimmering curtain around her face. She lifted her head to stare up at him with a beseeching gaze as she fingered the slave collar she no longer had a right to wear. Beau couldn't help but think she was going through the motions of a carefully choreographed performance.

"This humble submissive begs your forgiveness. Punish me as you will, but please take me back, my darling." She extended her hand to him, though she remained on her knees. An actual tear slipped prettily down one smooth cheek.

It was an Oscar-worthy performance, but Beau found himself curiously disinterested, even annoyed. "There's nothing to forgive. It's over between us. It has been for a very long time."

The veracity of his words resonated within him. To forgive was to release feelings of resentment or anger toward someone who had harmed you. He no longer harbored those emotions toward Renee. They were gone, along with the passion and the love.

Instead, he felt...nothing. Nothing at all.

He took her offered hand, but only to pull her to her feet.

"What's this really about, Renee? We haven't been in touch for years and now you just show up out of the blue? Did your sugar daddy dump you?"

He regretted the snarky remark the instant it was out of his mouth. But apparently it hit the mark, because her beautiful face twisted into an ugly scowl. Just as quickly, the expression slid away.

"Don't be silly," she purred. "And don't say it's over between us, baby. We just took a... a little break is all."

"A little break?" Beau blurted, not bothering to keep the incredulity from his tone. "It's been over three years. That's longer than we were even together in the first place. There is no 'us,' Renee. There hasn't been for a very long time."

"No," Renee said, her voice rising in whine. "You're just hurt, and I get that. I was a foolish, foolish girl. You were the

best thing that ever happened to me, and I threw it away to chase my own silly dreams. But now I've come back to you, my darling."

Before he could react, she took his face in both hands and pulled him down for a kiss, parting her lips as she pressed them against his. He was so shocked by the action that for several seconds he just stood there, letting her lap at his mouth with her tongue.

Finally finding the wherewithal to move, Beau took a step back in an effort to extricate himself from Renee's unwelcome embrace. Not only did he feel absolutely nothing for her, he found her crude attempts at seduction insulting to them both. But she only clung harder, wrapping her arms around his waist as she kept her mouth locked on his.

At that moment, Beau heard someone clomping determinedly along the cement walk that fronted the complex. Over Renee's head, a small, pink-haired girl came into view. She was dressed in leather and torn jeans, a look of sweet, nervous determination on her lovely face.

As their eyes met, her mouth fell open, her expression one of pure horror.

Feeling as if he were caught in the grip of a hideous nightmare, Beau grabbed Renee's arms and yanked them from his waist. Pushing her aside, he took a step toward Lia.

Lia, meanwhile, took a step back, and then another. Her face was etched with shock and hurt. Before he could speak, she turned on her heel and ran.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

As Beau turned to run after her, Renee grabbed his arm with surprising strength, tugging at him like a child demanding attention.

"Beau," she whined, dragging out the word. "What is *wrong* with you? How dare you push me away? I've come back to you. Don't you get it? Your baby girl has come back to you."

Barely processing what Renee said, he shrugged her off. “Wait,” he shouted as he sprinted after Lia. “Come back. Please, it’s not what you think.”

But Lia was out of sight now, her footsteps rapidly receding. A moment later, he heard the roar of a motorcycle.

She was gone.

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Lia was numb with shock as she tore out of Beau’s parking lot. She felt literally sick with humiliation, her gut heaving, her hands clenched in a death grip on the handlebars of her motorcycle.

The sound of screeching tires and the angry blare of a horn startled her so badly she swerved sharply to the right and rode over a curb into the parking lot of a liquor store. The car streaked past her, the driver shooting the finger at her in his rearview mirror.

Deeply shaken, heart pounding, Lia turned off her engine and dismounted. She walked the bike into a space and put down the kickstand. She unbuckled her helmet and set it on the seat of the bike. Reaching into her jacket, she pulled out her phone and texted the one person who would understand.

So much for telling Beau how I feel. When I got to his place, he was in the arms of another woman. I feel like such a total idiot.

Lia stared down at the screen, tears coursing down her cheeks. The message remained unread. Maybe Lucia was already busy entertaining Julian’s guests and Lia’s text would remain unseen until the morning.

She was about to shove her phone back into her jacket when it vibrated in her hand. Glancing down, she saw it was an incoming call from Lucia.

“Hey,” she said, her voice cracking on the word.

“Oh, my god. What happened?”

The floodgates burst open at the sound of Lucia’s sweet, sympathetic voice. Between sobs, Lia choked out the story.

“So, wait,” Lucia said. “He was just standing outside his apartment door making out with some woman? Did he see you?”

“He saw me, yeah. He *clearly* wasn’t expecting me,” she added bitterly.

“So, he saw you and he just kept on kissing this other woman?”

“Well, no,” Lia admitted. “He had enough grace to act embarrassed at being caught in the act. He kind of pushed her away.”

“Hmm. And did he say anything?”

The burning humiliation and chagrin still churned in Lia’s gut. “I hightailed it out of there so fast I’m not even sure.” She replayed the hideous scene in her head. “He might have said something but I sure wasn’t sticking around to find out.”

“I’m so sorry, Lia. I don’t know Beau all that well, but I have to say, this doesn’t sound like him. Maybe there’s a rational explanation for whatever you saw.”

“Yeah, right. The explanation is I’m a shitty picker. I keep falling for guys who turn out to be involved with someone else.” Another sob escaped and she angrily wiped at her eyes.

“Where are you right now?” Lucia persisted. “I hear traffic sounds.”

Lia glanced around. “I’m in the parking lot of some liquor store near his place. I was heading home but I pulled over to calm down.”

“Are you okay to ride home now? Do you want to come up to The Enclave? Do you need me to come to you?”

“I think I’m okay to head home,” Lia said. “Thanks for your kind offer, but I think I just want to be alone right now.”

Lucia sighed. “Okay. I understand. I’ll check in with you later to see how you’re doing.”

“Thanks, Lucia. You’re a good friend.”

Somehow, Lia made it back to her place in one piece. Once back in her apartment, she dropped her helmet and shrugged off her jacket, letting them lie where they dropped. Bending down, she unlaced her boots and tugged them off, along with her socks.

She sank into a beanbag chair with a sigh. What a total fucking idiot she’d been. Here, she’d been going quietly nuts all week, every spare moment spent thinking of, dreaming of, longing for Beau. Meanwhile, the prick had probably forgotten her the moment he’d so unceremoniously dumped her at her door.

It really drove home how little she actually knew about the guy, outside of the scene and academia. Hell, maybe that woman had been waiting in the wings the whole time. Maybe she wasn’t the only one. After all, Beau was drop-dead gorgeous, highly accomplished and supremely self-confident. For all Lia knew, he might have a whole string of sub girls waiting at his beck and call.

The really stupid thing—the infuriating thing—was that she knew better. People generally tell you the truth about themselves if you take the time to listen. Beau couldn’t have been clearer the last time they’d spoken.

“Sometimes a strong BDSM connection can feel like more than it is... I look forward to our continuing friendship... I wish you the very best.”

Those were not the words of someone who was into you. Just because she had desperately wanted him to reciprocate her feelings, wishing didn’t make a thing come true.

Hope is the thing with feathers that soars, only to crash headfirst to the ground.

“Fuck hope,” she said aloud, clinging to her rising anger so it might displace her despair. “And fuck Beau Jackson.”

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As Lia roared away, Beau reached a fumbling hand into his pants pocket. Shit. He'd left his keys in the apartment, not to mention his phone and his shoes. He nearly collided with Renee as he rushed back to his door.

“Beau, what is going on, you big silly? Why did you run away like that? Don't you get it? I've come back to you. Your one true love has returned at last.” She looked him up and down with a critical eye. “Your feet must be freezing on that cold concrete. Come inside and let your sub girl warm you up properly.”

“I don't have time for this, Renee,” Beau said brusquely, pushing past her and into his apartment.

Before he could stop her, Renee followed right behind him. Once inside, she kicked off her heels and dropped her designer bag. Reaching back, she unzipped her dress and let it puddle to her feet. Underneath, she wore a white satin bustier with pink ribbons. Matching pink garters held up sheer black stockings. She wore no panties.

She looked as gorgeous as she ever had but the sight of her left him cold. And furious.

“God damn it, Renee,” Beau began, but before he could finish the sentence, she ran laughing from the room.

“Catch me if you can, Beau Bear.”

“Fuck,” he swore as he took off after her.

She easily found her way to his bedroom. As he entered the space, she lowered herself to her knees and placed her hands behind her head. “I know I've been a very bad girl. But I'll make it up to you. I promise. Everything will be all right now. I'll never abandon you again.”

Beau reached her in two strides. He swallowed hard in an effort to wrestle his rage under control. At the same time, there was no sugar coating what he had to do. Renee was intent on creating a false narrative in which he had zero interest. The sooner she got that through her head, the better.

Reaching down, he grabbed her arm none too gently and hauled her upright.

“Renee, listen to me,” he said, gripping her by the shoulders. “I don’t know what made you think you should track me down and just show up at my door after three years of radio silence. But now you need to listen to me. Whatever we might have once had, it ended a long time ago. There’s nothing left between us. Do you understand? *Nothing.*”

Her pretty face crumpled, a tear appearing artfully on her cheek. “Oh, Beau Bear. You don’t mean that.”

“I’ve never meant anything more in my life.”

Letting her shoulders go, he again gripped her arm. Keeping a firm hold, he dragged her stumbling from the bedroom. “Now, you need to put on your clothes and get out. I have somewhere I have to be.”

“You’re just upset. I should have called first. It’s all too much of a shock for you,” she tried, though surely even she couldn’t believe what she was saying.

To his relief, she plucked her dress from the floor and dropped it over her head. When she turned for him to zip it, he did so, but only to speed her on her way.

Lia’s stricken expression loomed large in his mind as he grabbed his keys and wallet and slipped his feet into his loafers. “After you,” he said, pulling open the door. When Renee didn’t move, he propelled her out onto the walkway and slammed his door behind them.

“I’m sorry you wasted your time with whatever the hell this was. Good luck to you. Now, I’ve got to go.”

He left her standing there, gaping in apparent disbelief. Racing toward his car, he unlocked it as he approached and dove behind the wheel. As he pulled out of the lot, he opened his mouth to tell his car’s Bluetooth to call Lia.

But at that moment an incoming call came through. Without waiting to see who it was, he accepted the call. “Lia?” he cried breathlessly.

“It’s Mark,” said a decidedly masculine voice. “What the hell is going on, bro? Lucia just told me Lia’s a mess. What the fuck happened? More importantly, how are you going to fix it?”

Beau barked a harsh laugh. “Jesus, you guys are too fucking much. Don’t you have anything better to do up there than mind everyone’s business?”

“Not when one of our own has been hurt. Lia and Lucia are like sisters.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry. You can announce it over The Enclave loudspeakers. I’m heading to her place as we speak. And as to what happened, Renee Carter showed up at my doorstep this evening wearing my slave collar and basically hurled herself into my arms. And if that weren’t bizarre enough, Lia chose that exact moment to appear and she, uh... she drew her own conclusions.”

“Are you shitting me? No way! That’s crazy. Renee, after all this time? What the hell?”

“Right? That’s what I said. And I’ll tell you, Mark, her showing up like that, even before Lia made an appearance, really brought it home to me. I’m totally, completely over Renee. It took me a while to get her out of there, but I finally managed to send her on her way with zero illusions left about any kind of possible reunion. I was just about to call Lia but you beat me to the punch.”

“You’re driving right now?”

“Yeah.”

“Focus on your driving. Get there in one piece and then fix it with Lia.”

“That’s the plan.”

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Lia’s doorbell rang, three quick jabs. Still sprawled on the beanbag chair, she lifted her head. It wouldn’t be the first time someone else’s DoorDash delivery showed up at her place.

“Wrong door,” she called out. “This is unit 124.”

“Lia? Lia, it’s me. Please open the door.”

Lia’s brain stuttered as it tried to reconcile the pizza delivery guy with Beau’s beautiful baritone.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a forceful knock on the flimsy wood.

Without making the conscious decision to rise, Lia found herself on her feet. As if drawn by a magnet, she moved in a kind of trance toward the sound. “Beau?” she whispered, not quite believing it. Hope, horrible, terrible, impossible to repress hope, had once again spread its broken wings.

“Please open the door. I need to talk to you,” he persisted. “Please, Lia. I need to explain.”

Ugh. She’d heard that one before. Master Pain had desperately wanted to explain as well, after she’d busted him.

Still, unable to help herself, Lia placed a tentative hand on the knob. She was torn between a fierce, aching need to let him in and her determination to shut him out of her heart once and for all. She stood on her toes to peer through the peephole. He was staring directly at it, as if he could see her, too. She drew in a sharp breath and immediately dropped back down out of sight.

Her heart was racing, as if a thousand tiny birds were fluttering frantically in her chest. As if it had a mind of its own, her hand reached once more for the knob. Just as her treacherous fingers started to turn it, he spoke again.

“Lia, please, open the door and let me talk to you.”

Silent as a mouse, she lifted again to her toes and focused on him through the peephole. He was still looking straight at it, his expression earnest, even pleading. Her heart gave a painful lurch, but this time she didn’t look away.

“First, I need to explain what you saw earlier tonight. I promise, it’s not what you thought. That was my ex. We broke up years ago. For some reason I have yet to understand, she decided to just show up at my doorstep. What you saw—that kiss—that was all her. I don’t mean to sound like an asshole, but she threw herself at me. There’s really no other way to put

it. I was in the process of trying to disengage when you appeared.”

Lia remained still, listening hard. She wanted to believe him, but something still held her back. She lowered herself again to flat feet.

Beau continued, “I thought it was *you* when I opened my door, Lia.” His voice cracked with emotion, which brought fresh tears to Lia’s eyes. “I wanted it to be you.”

“Oh, Beau,” she whispered to the closed door.

“I’ve been a total jerk. I can’t blame you for being pissed. I walked away from something amazing because of my own issues and fears. I spent the last week talking myself into believing there was no way we could work out, long term.”

She rose again on tiptoe to peer at him through the peephole.

Beau blew out a breath and ran his hand through his hair, leaving it adorably tousled. “I fucked up, Lia. I ended things so abruptly between us, not because I was afraid there was nothing there, but because I knew there was. I was a coward, Lia. I wanted to protect my stupid heart from another break. Which is ridiculous, because what are hearts for, if not to break and mend and grow stronger in the process?”

As Beau spoke, Lia felt as if her body were growing lighter and lighter. As if she might at any moment rise into the air and hover there like that thing with feathers.

“Please, Lia. If you’re there listening to me now, please open the door.”

She placed her hand again on the knob.

Heart racing, she turned it.

Chapter 26

Beau's heart seized at the sight of Lia's face. She'd obviously been crying, and it was his fault.

"Oh, Lia," he breathed, reaching for her. "I'm so, so sorry."

She took a step back, wrapping her arms protectively around her chest.

It was then he saw the rope collar around her neck, the same simple knot he'd first tied for her at her throat. She must have cut a piece from the harness he'd had her wear at the family dinner.

Beau's heart seized with tenderness at the gesture, his reaction a hundred and eighty degrees from the confused irritation he'd felt on seeing that old leather collar around Renee's neck. Taking a step toward her, he reached out to run his finger along the collar.

"Lia," he said gently. "I know what it took for you to seek me out. I'm so grateful that you did, and terribly sorry things got so messed up in the process." He let his finger trail from the collar to her soft cheek.

As he spoke, her arms slowly unwound from around her torso and dropped to her sides. Still, she didn't speak.

How could he reach her?

On an impulse, he dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her legs. Looking up into her face, he said, "I never should have let you go, Lia. Not for one second. I let my own shit get in the way of *us*. And I hurt you in the process. Can you forgive me?"

She stared down at him, a play of emotions moving over her face. Her mouth worked as if she were about to speak.

“Say something,” he urged, smiling to soften his pleading tone.

“It’s about time you came to your senses,” she said, her lush mouth curving into an impish grin.

With a whoop of pure joy, Beau wrapped his arms tighter around Lia’s legs and rose to his feet with her in his arms. Before she could react, he tossed her easily over his shoulder.

“Hey,” she cried, half laughing, half indignant as she pummeled his back with her small fists. “What the heck do you think you’re doing?”

Beau strode purposely through the maze of beanbag chairs and hanging plants. “What I should have done last week. I’m taking you to bed.”

As he entered her tiny bedroom, which twinkled with fairy lights, he kicked off his loafers. He flipped Lia from his shoulder onto the mattress. Falling onto the bed beside her, he drew her into his arms and pressed his lips to hers, letting his longing pour into the kiss. After a moment, her lips parted, her tongue darting to meet his. The kiss deepened, reigniting the fire that had smoldered beneath the surface from the moment they’d first scened together.

It was Beau who broke the kiss, but only so he could gently push Lia onto her back. Her lips still parted, her pupils dilated, Lia reached for him.

“Come back,” she demanded, a cute pucker appearing between her eyebrows.

Beau chuckled. “Still as impatient as ever,” he teased. “Lift your arms over your head. I’m going to take off your shirt.”

She opened her mouth as if she was going to protest. But then she closed it. Her eyes fixed on his, she obeyed. Beau pulled the T-shirt over her head. She wore no bra and her lovely nipples stiffened as he stared down at them, a faint flush moving over her chest.

He tugged at the fly of her jeans, releasing the metal buttons that held it closed. As he reached to drag the pants down her legs, Lia obligingly lifted her hips. He saw that she

was trembling slightly, the flush on her chest now moving up her throat.

His own heart was beating fast as he stripped her. She lay naked and lovely before him like an invitation, like a gift.

Reaching for his own shirt, he pulled it off and dropped it over the side of the bed. Her eyes moved over his face and down to his chest, her tongue appearing on her lower lip. She held out her arms to him once more.

“No,” he said. “Lift your arms over your head on the mattress and leave them there. I want to explore your body.”

“Oh,” she whispered, her eyes widening. And then, “Yes, Sir.”

Shifting on the bed, Beau crouched between Lia’s legs, gently forcing them apart. He stroked her soft cheek and let his fingers trail down her throat. He smoothed her shoulders and ran his hands over her abdomen. He cupped her breasts, enjoying the sensation of her nipples poking against his palms. She arched her back, her eyes heavy-lidded, her breathing uneven.

He kissed along her sternum and traced the arcs of her hip bones with his lips. Her skin was heating beneath his touch, her breath coming faster as her chest heaved.

He ran his hands along her sides, which made her shiver. Leaning up over her, he let his teeth scrape lightly against her neck. Trailing down, he closed his lips over a nipple and flicked it with his tongue. Her soft moan spurred him to bite the tender bud, lightly at first, and then harder.

As she sucked in a sharp breath, he released the engorged nipple and murmured, “You would look lovely with pierced nipples, Lia. Would you like it if I bound you to a cross and pierced your nipples with my needle? Would you wear my jewelry as a symbol of my ownership of that perfect body?”

“Ooh,” she moaned. “Yes, please, Sir.”

He sucked her other nipple into his mouth, drawing another sexy moan from her sweet lips. Releasing it, he licked

along her jugular, feeling the rapid pulse of her heart. She shuddered at his touch and sighed softly.

His cock was hard, his balls tight. Rolling from her a moment, he yanked down his fly and pulled off his jeans and underwear. Naked, cock bobbing, he knelt again between her legs and placed his hands on either thigh to spread her open.

Her lovely cunt glistened with her juices, the scent of her arousal like a powerful aphrodisiac. Lowering his head, he planted tiny kisses along the warm crevices between her mons and her thighs. She shuddered again.

He ran his tongue in a lazy circle over the triskelion tattoo on her mons. She arched her hips, legs lolling wide, her invitation clear.

“Please,” she begged throatily.

Unable to hold back any longer, he dipped his head and let his tongue snake over her plump, slick labia. She moaned, the sound primal and deeply sensual. He lapped at the sweet folds, purposely avoiding the hard nubbin of her clit.

“I’m going to pierce your perfect cunt, too, Lia.” He reached for her labia, catching a bit of the slippery, soft flesh between thumb and forefinger. “The needle will slide in slowly. You’ll need to stay absolutely still so I don’t tear the flesh. Do you understand, slave girl?”

She was actually shaking now, her breath a ragged pant. Her hands had clenched into fists. “Yes, oh god, yes. I want that, Sir. I want you,” she pleaded. “Please, Master Beau.”

Her use of the honorific sent a surge of power through his blood. He lifted his head, the spicy-sweet taste of her on his tongue. “Tell me what you want right now, in this moment. Tell me what you need.”

“I want,” she gasped. “I want you to make me come, Sir. With your mouth. With your cock. Please, Sir.” Her voice cracked. “Please, Beau. Make love to me.”

He lowered his head again, this time flicking his tongue over and around her swollen, pulsing clit. She cried out, her hand flying down to grasp the sides of his head. His face still

buried in her hot, sweet sex, he gripped her wrists, holding them tight as he licked and suckled her until she was bucking beneath him.

“Oh, god,” she cried. “Please,” she panted. “Please fuck me, Master Beau. I’m going to die if you don’t fuck me right now.”

Releasing her wrists, Beau rose over her and fisted his cock. “Look at me,” he commanded as he guided the shaft toward her entrance.

Lia opened her eyes, which blazed golden in the dim fairy lights that sparkled around the room. Her gaze was hot and wild, her lust as palpable as his own.

Their eyes remained locked on one another as he slid into her silken, blazing heat. He groaned with pleasure so intense it was almost painful. She was so perfectly, mind-meltingly tight. It was as if she’d been custom-made for him.

He lowered his weight over her, pressing her into the mattress. Reaching beneath her, he cupped her ass as he swiveled inside her. She whimpered with pleasure, her arms circling his neck.

“Oh, god,” she cried. “So good. So, so good.”

He withdrew in a long slide and then thrust back, seating himself fully. He withdrew again, lowering his head to watch his cock slide out of her, gleaming with her wetness—and then entered her anew.

“More,” she panted. “Harder.”

Taking her at her word, he plunged into her, driving right to the hilt. Lia let out a sound somewhere between a moan and a scream, and he found himself echoing it in their shared passion.

Gathering her to him, he knelt up on the bed, his cock still buried deep inside her. He could feel her heart beating like a tiny bird flapping desperate wings between them. She wrapped her legs around his waist with a primal cry as he thrust up into her. He wasn’t going to be able to hold on much longer.

“Please, Sir,” she cried, as if sensing he was holding on by a thread. “I’m coming. Oh god, oh god, oh god, oooooh...”

“Do it,” he commanded. “Come for me, Lia.”

Her body stiffened, her cunt spasming around his cock as she keened with pleasure.

Beau let go with an answering cry. Holding her tight, he spurted deep inside her in a long, perfect stream of pure, raw passion.

Holding her in his arms, he rolled onto his back so she was on top of him, his cock still buried inside her. She collapsed against him, her cheek resting on his chest.

“Lia,” he whispered as he stroked her tousled hair. “My sweet, darling Lia.”

She didn’t respond, save for a series of snuffles that he at first thought was just her catching her breath. But then her shoulders began to shake, and he felt the wetness of fresh tears on his chest.

Alarmed, he rolled over, letting his cock slide from her as he pushed her gently onto her back. She turned away, bringing up an arm to hide her face.

He leaned up on his elbow beside her, his heart clutching with worry. “Lia, honey. What is it? Why’re you crying? Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she managed through her weeping. She allowed him to lower her arm so he could see her face. He saw she was smiling, though her tears continued to flow. “You didn’t hurt me. You were amazing. Perfect. And I’m not crying,” she added, her words immediately followed by a hiccupping sob and then a laugh. “Or I guess I am crying, but I’m not sad. I’m happy.”

“Oh, my sweet, darling, crazy girl,” Beau said, relieved and grinning. He wiped away her tears with his thumb. Her skin was hot and flushed but her eyes were sparkling.

She stared up at him, a startled, delighted look moving over her delicate features. “It happened,” she said with wonder

in her tone. “It actually happened.”

“What happened?” he asked, bemused.

“It almost didn’t happen,” she added, confusing him. “I was ready to do it—to quit—but then you showed up like some guy in a romance movie. And then it happened.”

“What *are* you talking about, Magnolia Rose Duvall?” he said, letting a bit of exasperation enter his tone.

“Ugh,” she cried with mock horror. “Don’t call me that.”

“Then tell me what you’re going on about?”

“Lucia is always telling me not to quit before the miracle. I told her I don’t believe in miracles, but here you are, Beauregard Jackson. Living proof that dreams can come true.”

She sat up and reached for him, covering his mouth with hers.

He wrapped his arms around her, their lips still touching. His hands roamed over her slender form, stroking her back and cupping her ass as their kiss deepened.

Then, without warning, he lifted one hand and brought it down with a resounding smack on her ass. Lia mewled in startled surprise against his mouth. He smacked her again, the sound ringing in the air.

She moaned, her body trembling with anticipation as she waited for the next blow.

He obliged. She moaned again and ground her mons against his pubic bone.

“Dirty little slut,” he breathed into her ear, his cock hardening despite the recent orgasm. “You need this, don’t you, slave girl?”

“Yes. Yes, please, Sir,” she panted.

He pressed one hand against the small of her back to keep her still. With his other, he spanked her bottom until it was fiery hot to the touch. He didn’t stop until she went limp against him. He held her until her breathing deepened and her heart slowed its frantic pace.

“Lia,” he whispered, lifting his hand from her back to stroke the hair from her sweaty brow.

“Hmmm,” she murmured, the sound dreamy and content. It was then he understood she was flying—drifting in that sweet, peaceful limbo between awareness and dreams that was sometimes referred to as submissive headspace.

Thrilled to be the one who had brought her there, he let her drift a while longer. Then he gently rolled her to her back. She opened her eyes, her face still smudged with the sated expression of a sub who has been well used. Wordlessly, she held out her arms.

Beau lowered himself on top of her, pinning her to the mattress with his body. His cock was like an iron bar between them. She shifted and he felt her small, cool fingers curl around his hot shaft. Arching her hips, she spread her legs and guided him toward her still-slick cunt. He groaned with pleasure as he entered her.

Beau took his time, stroking her with his cock and his fingers as he kissed her mouth and suckled her spongy-hard nipples. He could actually feel her body temperature rising as sweat slicked between them.

This time when she was teetering on the edge of orgasm, he commanded, “Ask for permission, slave. Don’t come until I say yes.”

“Oh, god,” she moaned, a deep shudder shaking her beneath him. “Please, Sir. May I come?”

“Not yet,” he breathed as he ground his pelvis against her clit.

“Ah,” she cried, trembling. “I can’t help—”

“Now,” he commanded, cutting her off. “Now you may come for me.”

With a long, keening wail, she shuddered, her fingers digging into his back as she spasmed beneath him. His body responded in kind, and he came a moment later, her name tumbling from his lips as he let himself go.

When they both were spent, he slid his arms around her and rolled to his back, taking her with him. His cock slipped out of her as she shifted and curled into his side, her soft cheek resting against his chest. She made a soft sound in her throat, almost as if she were purring.

A deep, pleasant exhaustion moved through him, melting his muscles into the mattress as his eyelids closed of their own accord. The closeness of her against him felt like something he'd needed all his life and never known he was without.

With a contented sigh, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 27

Lia opened her eyes, for a moment completely disoriented. She was in her own bed, the comforting fairy lights sparkling against the soft drape of fabric. A heavy, masculine arm was around her shoulders and her cheek rested on a smooth, firm chest.

The events of the evening rushed back as she came fully awake. Seeing Beau in the arms of that woman had created a pang of jealousy so sharp it had felt like being snapped with a rubber band—one big enough to knock her on her ass.

But then, as if she had been starring in her very own romance movie, Beau had appeared at her door, showing a vulnerable side of himself she'd never seen. It couldn't have been easy for him. Guys weren't always the best at sharing their deepest emotions, and dominant guys could be even worse.

It had taken courage to show up at his place, but it had taken just as much for him to show up at hers.

Caught as she was beneath Beau's arm, she couldn't see the small digital clock she kept on the nightstand. A sliver of moon glowed outside her window. She let her mind drift back over the amazing events of this wild night.

When he'd said those incredibly sexy things about binding her on a cross and piercing her, she'd nearly come on the spot. Somehow, the man had tapped into one of her deepest, sexiest fantasies. Had he meant what he said, or was it just part of his foreplay? Either way, she'd been more turned on than she'd ever been in her life. Period.

She thought back over other men she'd had sex with. Most were forgettable. Of the few she still remembered fondly, rope,

cuffs and impact toys had always been a part of the equation. Sometimes she wasn't sure afterward if it had been the actual guy or simply his skill with BDSM play that had done the trick.

But Beau was the first man who had ever made love to her. The realization was both startling and a little terrifying. "Oh, my god," she whispered to the sleeping man beside her. "I'm in love with you."

He continued to breathe deep and even, his chest rising and falling.

Lia carefully eased herself out from under the deadweight of Beau's arm. "Do you love me, too?" she whispered, her heart suddenly hammering in her chest.

He made a snuffling sound but otherwise didn't move.

Slow down, she admonished herself as she tiptoed to the bathroom and slid the pocket door silently closed. *You spent a week together followed by a week apart. Yes, tonight has been amazing, but you need to slow down and stay where your feet are.*

Even as she gave herself this warning, she couldn't help the bubble of pure joy that rose in her chest. Maybe it was too soon to say it out loud, but the facts were the facts. She wanted to wear his collar and she wanted him to claim her with his needles and his ropes. She was smitten, and there was no going back.

She felt the pleasant soreness of a well-used cunt as she peed and wiped herself. Her stomach rumbled, making her remember she'd been too on edge earlier to eat much dinner. There was a pint of butter pecan ice cream in her tiny freezer with her name on it.

She tiptoed through the bedroom to the kitchenette and retrieved the ice cream along with a spoon. Taking the entire pint to the living room, she plopped down on a beanbag chair. As she spooned the sweet, creamy confection into her mouth, she thought about the incredible intimacy of their first kiss.

At the first touch of his mouth on hers, her body had melted into a pool of butter. As their kisses had grown deeper and more urgent, time had stalled, everything around them disappearing. It was just his lips, his skin, the heat of his body against hers.

She still couldn't quite believe she'd let him—no, let's be accurate here—she begged him—to put his mouth on her sex. She could count on the fingers of one hand how often she'd let a guy go down on her. And it wasn't just because she found their slobbering and over-focus directly on her clit incredibly annoying. No, even when the guy knew what he was doing, something about it had always made her feel nervous and far too vulnerable.

But with Beau... *Oh. My. God.* She'd nearly died from the intensity of that rolling, endless orgasm. And then he'd entered her with that huge, perfect cock... Normally, a cock that size would have taken some getting used to. But she'd been so slick with desire it had almost been embarrassing. She couldn't remember ever being more aroused in her life.

Lia became aware of a pulsing throb intensifying between her legs. Rising from the beanbag, she returned to the kitchenette and put what was left of the ice cream back in the freezer.

Beau hadn't moved from his position on his back, his head turned to the side, eyes closed.

She climbed quietly back into bed and maneuvered herself between his thighs. Cupping his warm balls with a feather-light touch, she carefully lowered her mouth over his shaft. As she suckled, it rapidly expanded and thickened in her mouth.

She shifted to her knees to take him in deeper. All those fellatio training classes at The Enclave her first time there had paid off. She eased down until she had the full length of him in her mouth, the head of his cock lodged in her throat. She was able to keep her throat open and relaxed as she received her Master's cock.

Her Master...

Suddenly, a strong hand clamped the back of Lia's head, pushing his cock even deeper into her throat. She gasped at the unexpectedness of his touch, while her cunt gushed with moisture at the dominant gesture.

After a moment, he loosened his grip on her head and reached for her shoulders with both hands. He pulled her up and onto his thighs. His beautiful cock glistened with her kisses.

There was fire in his gaze as he placed his hands on her hips and lifted her effortlessly onto his shaft. He lowered her carefully, though she was so wet he needn't have. As he filled her, she moaned with helpless, scorching need, her craving sharper than hunger.

His hands slid down her sides, sending shivers of heat over her skin. As he moved inside her, her pleasure became an ever-expanding cloud that threatened to burst her apart. It was a pleasure so fierce it could have been pain. It consumed her until all that was left of her was pure, raw sensation.

All at once, he flipped her over and covered her body with his. His cock was still inside her, filling her completely. His tongue opened her mouth as he cupped her hips in his palms. She twisted beneath him to free her arms, which she brought around him. She was greedy for the hot, bare skin of his muscled back. He was so warm, so solid and sure atop her.

One of his hands slid between her legs. She cried out as a tsunami of sensation crested through her, threatening to drown her with its force. Her body arched off the bed, her hands clutching the sheets for anchor, her legs hooking around his to draw his body even closer.

She wanted to speak, to ask her Master for permission, to whisper her love, love, love... But she had lost all control of her body, her mouth, language, thought, any awareness but this dark, encompassing, overwhelming sensation. It lifted her to the top of the cresting wave and hurtled her up, up, up until she was nothing but a tiny spark floating in a perfect, dark sky...

Dawning sunlight filtered through the gauzy fabric that hung from the walls, bathing the room in a golden, diaphanous glow. Lia looked so at peace lying in the middle of the disheveled bed that Beau didn't have the heart to wake her.

He rolled quietly from the mattress and padded softly to the bathroom. Closing the door so he wouldn't disturb her, he turned on the shower. While he was waiting for the water to heat, he squirted some toothpaste on his finger and did a makeshift job of brushing his teeth.

Once in the shower, he sighed with satisfaction as he peed in a long, steady stream. He reached for the bar of soap and, almost regretfully, washed away their mingled sweat and sex from his body. As he was washing his hair, he heard the pocket door slide open.

A moment later, the curtain was pulled back to reveal Lia's pixie face. Before she could react, he reached past the curtain and grasped her wrist, pulling her to him under the cascading water as she gave a startled, laughing yelp.

"Hey, gorgeous," he murmured as he held her in his arms. "You were sleeping like the dead out there. I hope I didn't wake you."

"The sun's not even up yet. You do realize that?" she said, grinning up at him.

He shrugged. "We must have fallen asleep at nine o'clock the first time around."

"Yeah," she said with a snort. "Typical guy. Wham, bam, snore."

"Hey," he retorted, laughing. "I could say the same thing that second time about you. You were out before you even finished coming. I was afraid for a minute there I was going to need to do mouth to mouth."

"Like this?"

Lia stood on tiptoe and took Beau's face in her hands, pulling him down for a long, passionate kiss. When they eventually parted, he noticed the makeshift collar she still wore, now soaking wet.

Reaching for the knot, he untied and pulled the bit of rope from around her neck.

“Hey,” she said, her lips forming an adorable pout.

He grinned. “Not to worry, sub girl. We’ll get you something better once we’ve had a chance to talk things over.”

He could already visualize the perfect collar and he knew just where to get the leather.

Slow down, warned a voice of caution in his head.

Fuck that, his heart replied. *I know what I know. I’m done with caution.*

He turned her around so he could wash her hair. She leaned back against him with a sigh of satisfaction as he massaged her scalp with strong fingers. Stepping aside in the tiny stall, he had her lean her head back to rinse the shampoo away. He took his time soaping her body, lingering at her breasts and between her legs.

He enjoyed how easily she was aroused at his hand, and the awareness that he controlled that arousal. When she tried to drop to her knees to take his cock, he stopped her.

“No more sex for a while, my little slut,” he said, pulling her back to her feet. “Don’t forget, I’m nearly twice your age.”

Lia laughed. “Oh, spare me. You can fuck me under the table any day of the week. I’m not sure I’ll be able to walk for the next couple of days. My poor little pussy is so sore.”

“Is that so?” he asked, cupping her hot cunt. “Maybe I need to kiss it and make it better?”

“Yes, please,” Lia said with a sassy smile.

He slid a finger inside her. A sexy shudder moved through her, her cunt spasming around his finger. In spite of himself, his cock was hard again.

He pulled his hand away. Drawing her close, he murmured in her hair, “I like it when you’re on fire.”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied throatily.

Beau reached for the water and turned it off. Lia slipped out of the stall and returned a moment later with a large bath towel. Still dripping wet herself, she dropped to her knees as he stepped out on the mat.

Looking up at him, she said in her sweet, husky voice, “May I dry you, Sir?”

He smiled down at her. “Yes, sub girl. You may dry me and then yourself. Then you will kneel by the bed so I can give you your morning mark. You do have an appropriate impact toy for the task, I assume?”

Her pupils had dilated as he spoke, her gaze softening as her lips parted. “Yes, Sir,” she breathed. “I have a flogger and a cane, Sir.”

He nodded, power pleasantly heating his blood at the prospect of marking her.

“Good girl. First the mark. Then we need to talk.”

Chapter 28

Lia welcomed the white-hot kiss of the cane as it sliced across her ass. “Thank you, Sir,” she managed to gasp.

“You’re welcome, my love.”

She started to rise, but his hand on her lower back stopped her as he sat on the bed beside her. “Stay where you are until I give you permission to move.”

A pleasant whoosh of submissive satisfaction moved through her at his command. “Yes, Master Beau.”

Master Beau.

The words tripped so easily from her lips now. They felt... right.

“I think it’s a good idea if we take some time this morning to talk things through and figure out where we go from here.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said into the mattress. She couldn’t quite repress a sudden pang of unease. Was he pulling back?

Stop buying trouble, she ordered herself. He was right. A lot had happened in the space of a very short time. It was only sensible to take stock of where they were.

He took his hand from her back. “Do you have any of Aubrey’s miracle salve handy?”

At the mention of the salve, she refocused on the pleasant, stinging throb of the welt he’d gifted her. “Yes, Sir. I have some in my gear bag, which is under the bed.”

Beau rolled from the bed and crouched down to retrieve the bag. Sitting again beside her, he unzipped it and peered inside. With her head turned to the side, she was able to see what he was doing.

“Interesting,” he said as he rummaged through the contents. “Leather wrist cuffs... Ankle cuffs...” He barked a laugh as he pulled out the ball gag, leather straps holding a bright pink ball. “Now, this is a surprise. Somehow, I don’t see you as a sub who willingly lets someone put a ball gag in her mouth.”

Lia shrugged. “It was a gift I got at a BDSM toy party a few years back. I almost forgot it’s in there. And you’re right. It’s never been used.”

“We’ll have to remedy that,” he said in a low, sexy growl that sent a shiver of lust through her frame.

He found the tube of salve and smeared a soothing dollop over her ass. Getting to his feet, he said, “Get dressed. No jeans. A loose skirt, if you have one, and no panties. I’m taking you to breakfast.”

Beau drove Lia to a little place in the River Arts District. His telling her to wear a skirt and no underpants had of course gotten her juices flowing. When they stopped at a red light, Beau turned to her with a sexy half smile. “Lift your skirt and sit bare-assed on the seat, legs spread wide.”

Lia obeyed, her clit at full attention.

As he drove, he reached casually over and slid his big, warm hand up her thigh. She shuddered with pleasure as he cupped her cunt. When he slid a finger into her wetness, she groaned.

“Don’t you dare come,” he admonished, his eyes on the road, a cruel smile on his lips. “Show some self-control, sub girl.”

Naturally, this made her want to come. His palm ground sensually against her clit as he continued to finger her. She clenched her hands, pressing her fingernails into her palms to distract herself.

All too soon, he pulled his hand away, to her extreme sexual frustration. Bringing his fingers to his nose, he inhaled.

“I love the way you smell,” he said, making her flush. He slid his index finger into his mouth. “And the way you taste.”

“Can I come, Sir?” she begged, still on fire with lust.

“Absolutely not, slut,” he said with a chuckle. “I like it when you suffer for me.”

The words sent a delicious submissive shudder through her body and pulled a sigh from her lips. She closed her thighs in an effort to alleviate the throb in her sex.

It wasn't long before they pulled into the parking lot of a small café. It still being quite early on a Saturday morning, they were seated immediately at a small table with the view of the French Broad River. Lia had missed her morning mark during their week apart, and now squirmed happily against the chair, enjoying the lingering sting that remained even after the soothing salve.

Menus were already on the table, along with a small pitcher of cream, a bowl of sugar packets and a bottle of Firewalker hot sauce.

As they perused the menus, a thirtysomething waitress dressed in a low-cut top that barely covered her substantial chest appeared holding a carafe of hot coffee.

“My name's Odilia and I'll be your server this morning,” she said in a sultry drawl, her focus entirely on Beau. She leaned down so her cleavage was almost in his face. “How are y'all doing today, sugar?”

“Doing very well,” Beau answered with a smile, not appearing in the least discomfited by her not-so-subtle overtures.

“Can I get y'all started with some coffee?” she asked, her attention still solely on Beau.

Get used to it, Lia told herself with an inward grin. After all, the guy was seriously hot, even without knowing how masterful he was.

“Sounds good,” Beau replied. “How about you, Lia?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she replied, consciously echoing Odilia’s Southern drawl.

The waitress obligingly filled both their mugs. “Y’all know what you want or you need a little more time?”

“I’m ready. Lia?” Beau asked, nodding toward her.

Lia glanced again at the menu. The few bites of ice cream she’d consumed in the middle of the night were a distant memory.

“I’ll have the banana-stuffed French toast with extra butter and syrup,” she said. “Oh, and also two over-easy eggs and a side of bacon.”

Beau lifted his brows in obvious amusement.

“What?” she said defensively. “I’m hungry.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he protested, grinning. “I like a girl with a healthy appetite.” To Odilia, he said, “I’ll have the chicken and waffles, thanks.”

As the waitress went to put in their order, Beau reached beneath the small table and slid his hand under Lia’s skirt. Fortunately, the table was covered with a long cloth, so no one else could see what he was doing.

He stroked her thigh as he murmured, “Let’s finish what we started in the car. I want you to play with yourself under the table. If you can make yourself come before she brings the food, you have my permission.”

Lia glanced around. There was no one yet seated at any of the nearby tables. She slipped her hand under her skirt and between her legs. After another glance around, she rubbed furiously at herself, eager to come before the waitress returned.

“Keep your eyes on me,” Beau directed.

Lia focused on the sexy man across from her. His eyes blazed into hers as she stroked herself. She had to press her lips together to keep from moaning aloud. Her nostrils flared as her breathing quickened.

“Now,” he commanded in a soft but masterful tone. “Come for me, Lia.”

Heart smashing against her ribs, Lia slid a finger inside herself, her eyes fixed on Beau, her palm grinding against her swollen clit. With a stifled cry, she climaxed in a series of small spasms.

Odilia chose that moment to return with their food. As she set down the plates, she eyed Lia with apparent concern. “You all right, honey?” She lifted a brow. “You look a little flushed.”

“I’m fine,” Lia managed. She turned her attention to the food to avoid eye contact with either one of them. “This looks great. Thanks.”

“Enjoy,” Odilia said.

After she left, Lia lifted her gaze to Beau. He was grinning broadly. “You did good.”

Lia laughed, relaxing. “I feel good,” she asserted. “Except that I’m starving.”

Mouth flooding with saliva, she turned her attention to the French toast covered in sliced bananas and melting butter. She poured a healthy amount of syrup over the stack and tucked in with gusto.

They ate in companionable silence. The eggs were cooked just right, the bacon the perfect complement to the sweet French toast. When Lia couldn’t eat another bite, she wiped her mouth with her napkin and leaned back in her chair with a satisfied sigh.

Beau, who had finished his meal before her, shook his head with feigned amazement. “I have no idea where you put it all, girl.”

Lia shrugged, grinning back. “What can I say? That workout you put me through last night gave me an appetite.”

Beau smiled, but then his expression grew serious, his lovely forest-green eyes fixing on her. “I owe you an apology, Lia. I’m the one who talks about how communication is

paramount in a D/s relationship, but I've been less than forthcoming. All the insanity last night with my ex aside for the moment, I owe you a better explanation for why I thought I had to put the brakes on things this past week."

He blew out a breath, a determined expression moving over his handsome face. "First, the age thing."

Lia scowled. "Not that again."

He held out his hands, palms up. "I know, I know. It's just a number and all of that. But the last thing I wanted to do was take advantage of your innocence. Though I have to admit," he added with a chagrined smile, "in some ways you're more mature than I am."

"Damn straight," she retorted with an answering grin.

He looked down at his hands. "When I left you at your door last Friday night, I told myself it was so I wouldn't take advantage of you. We had a finite training contract and we had completed the terms. I've seen it before with submissives in a training situation. It's very easy for a sub to confuse getting her deep-seated erotic needs met with feelings for the person making that possible. Precisely because you're so young and inexperienced, you might be especially susceptible to that kind of transference."

He met her gaze, his expression earnest. "It took me a while to admit what I was feeling. The age difference wasn't the primary factor driving my behavior. The unvarnished truth is that I didn't want to get hurt again. That woman you saw last night, her name is Renee. We were in a relationship for over two years and it was quite serious. She wore my slave collar and we had talked of getting married."

"When did you break up?" Lia asked.

"It's been a while now—nearly three years. Which is one reason it was so freaky to have her show up out of the blue like that. The thing is, back when we were together, I believed she was the one. Then she cheated on me. I managed to forgive her the first time, though it wasn't easy. But then she did it again, and that was it for me. I ended things, but I never

really dealt with my feelings for her and how the whole thing affected me. I let it shut me down for a long time.”

“I can relate,” Lia said. “I thought I was in love with a guy but it turned out he didn’t exist.”

Beau wrinkled his brow in apparent confusion. “Huh?”

She slapped her forehead in disgust. “It was so stupid. I got heavily involved with an online Master, but only virtually. According to his profile, he was single and looking for a real life submissive to claim for his own. I fell for his bullshit, thinking I’d found Master Right. But then I started having some doubts when it never worked out for us to actually meet in person. Finally sick of waiting, I tracked the guy down and showed up at his place. His wife answered the door, a baby on her hip.”

“Ugh,” Beau said sympathetically. “So, you know exactly what I’m talking about. That gut punch of betrayal.”

“I do, indeed,” she agreed darkly. “So, when I finally got up the nerve to show up at *your* place last night, it happened again—or I thought it had. You can see why I freaked out, and why I wasn’t in a hurry to open the door to you.”

Beau groaned. “God, talk about horrible timing. I am so, so sorry you had to go through that a second time.”

He reached across the table, taking her hands in his. “I behaved like a coward, not a Dom. I denied the possibility of love because of fear.” He shook his head, his expression rueful. “The crazy thing is when you showed up at my door, I was already planning to show up at yours. Mark and I had been talking, and he really brought it home to me. Love—even just the potential for love—is something too precious to throw away. I finally understood that I don’t want to take the safe route anymore just to avoid possible emotional pain. I’m ready to open my heart again.”

He squeezed her hands. “What am I saying? It’s already open. And last night—making love to you—just confirmed what I already knew.”

He brought one of her hands to his lips. Turning it over, he placed a slow kiss on the tender flesh in the hollow of her palm. The gesture was supremely sensual, and Lia couldn't help but sigh.

"I'm falling in love with you, Lia." Beau shook his head. "No. Scratch that. I'm *in* love with you." He gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. "I was already falling when I agreed to our week of one-on-one training. I put up every wall I could think of, but you knocked each one down without even realizing that's what you were doing." His expression was earnest, almost pleading. "There's no more denying it—not to you or myself. I love you, Lia."

A joyful laugh escaped Lia's lips. "I love you back," she proclaimed. "I fell the first time I saw you at that stupid wedding, even though you were with yet another tall, gorgeous blonde."

Beau made a face. "Don't remind me." But he was grinning too.

"Y'all look happier than two pigs in a mud bath."

They looked up at the sound of Odilia's voice. "I guess we are, at that," Beau replied with a laugh.

The waitress placed the check on the table. "Take your time." To Lia, she added in a conspiratorial stage whisper, "I hope you said yes."

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After breakfast, they took a walk along the boardwalk by the French Broad River. The morning was sunny but a little chilly, especially as Beau had raced from his apartment the night before without taking the time to grab his jacket.

Just as he reached for Lia's hand, his cell phone dinged. "Fuck," he swore softly.

"What?" Lia asked.

As if in reply, the phone dinged again.

"Aren't you going to see who that is?"

Earlier that morning as he'd dressed, Beau had noticed the dozen or so text messages that had come in the night before from a number he recognized as Renee's, though he'd removed her from his contact list some time ago. There were also several missed calls and accompanying voicemails. Those he deleted without listening to them.

The messages had ranged in tone and substance from outraged disbelief at the way he'd run off to declarations of love and back again to fury. It had been startling to realize just how little her words moved him. He'd used to equate her high emotional drama with true love. Now, he understood it for the hyperbole it was. Still, the gentleman in him couldn't ignore her entirely, so he'd dashed off a text apologizing for leaving her so abruptly while reminding her there was no longer anything between them.

Now, he pulled out the phone and swiped at the screen. As he'd feared, it was yet another text from Renee.

This is your last chance. Meet me at the Grand Bohemian, room 256, in half an hour or you'll never see me again.

"Who's it from?" Lia asked.

"My ex." Beau showed her the phone.

"Drama queen," Lia said with a grin. "So, you gonna meet her?" Her tone was playful, but Beau sensed a trace of lingering concern underneath.

"No way in hell," he replied emphatically.

"You going to answer?" Lia persisted.

"I don't think so," Beau replied. "I'm afraid it would just encourage her. I'm going to do what I should have done three years ago."

Angling his phone so Lia could see what he was doing, he blocked the phone number associated with the text, and then deleted the message.

As if in electronic response, Lia's phone buzzed. She barked a startled laugh. "Oh, no. I hope she didn't somehow get *my* number." She pulled out her phone and swiped at the screen.

"Not sure if this is better or worse. It's from Loretta." She held out the phone so Beau could see.

Brunch tomorrow morning. Bring your young man.

Beau lifted a brow as he read. "What young man would that be?"

Lia laughed. "Good point. You are *awfully* old."

"Ouch," he said with a mock wince.

"So," she said. "Should I tell her yes?"

"Absolutely," Beau affirmed. "It would be my pleasure."

He took her hand again, their fingers intertwining as he led her to a bench. "Let's sit a bit. I want to talk to you about where we go from here."

"Sounds ominous," Lia said with a smirk.

"I'm serious."

The grin fell away. "I know," she said softly, her own vulnerability showing. "Humor is one of my defenses."

As they sat, he turned toward her and cupped her cheek. "You don't need any defenses with me, Lia."

"Thank you," she said quietly. "It might take me a while to get there."

"I understand," he said gently. "We'll get there together."

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. "I think we both agree we want a D/s relationship."

"Only kind there is, in my book," Lia quipped.

Beau smiled but then grew serious. "It's important for you to understand that if I claim you, you will give yourself fully

to me, 24/7. Though I will never put you in a position that compromises your professional or family life, I will control every aspect of our erotic life together. That includes when or if you orgasm, how I choose to use your body, how many strokes of the cane you accept, how many lashes of the whip, how much *Kinbaku* rope I choose to wrap you in. I may require certain things of you to remind you that you are my possession, even when we're apart. You will wear my collar and my ropes and accept my piercings as tokens of your complete submission. I don't expect perfection. This will be a learning curve for us both as we figure out what works best for us as Master and slave. But every step of the way I will expect you to give this relationship—and me—your all.”

Beau stopped and reached for Lia's shoulders with both his hands as he looked into her eyes. “Does that work for you, Lia? Are you willing to give yourself completely to me, without hesitation and without reservation?”

To his surprise, she wriggled out of his grasp and sank to her knees on the boardwalk in front of him, oblivious of passersby. Dipping her head, she brushed the top of his loafer with her lips and then looked up at him with tears in those beautiful eyes.

“Yes, Sir,” she said. “With all my heart.”

Chapter 29

It was snowing that January afternoon as Lia made the short walk from the campus library to Whitesides Hall. The large, fat flakes melted as they hit the paths, but seemed to be sticking to the winter grass. The rope thong Master Beau had knotted at her waist and brought up between her legs that morning rubbed between her labia as she walked, a sexy reminder of who she belonged to. The sting from that morning's mark had faded, but the deep sense of serenity the daily ritual gave her remained.

They'd been together for close to three months. During that time, Lia had settled completely and joyously into her role as Master Beau's beloved slave girl. At last, the serenity and deep sense of peace and belonging she'd so envied among her friends at The Enclave was now hers as well.

But her relationship with Beau went beyond that of Master and slave, and even beyond that of lovers or partners. They were best friends and sometimes that was the sweetest thing of all.

People on campus were aware Beau and she were a couple, as they brought each other as their plus-one to various faculty mixers and get-togethers. When Beau stopped by the library, he always sought her out for a quick hello.

The friends she'd made amongst the library staff liked to tease her about being with the hunkiest prof on campus, alternately swooning with envy and genuinely happy for her. When they'd asked how she and Beau had met, she didn't even have to lie.

At least once a week, Master Beau invited Lia to come to his office for a quick reminder of her status as his prized possession. Sometimes the text came during her morning

break, other times during lunch. She never knew which day his summons might come. She did her best not to anticipate and was mostly successful.

The visits were never longer than a few minutes, given their schedule constraints and need for discretion. Sometimes he would direct her to lean over his desk and flip up her skirt or lower her pants. He kept a small leather bit in his desk drawer. He would give it to her to bite on to help her remain silent while he used her. He might give her a single flick of the small whip he kept in his messenger bag for the purpose. Or he might tease her cunt, bringing her rapidly to the edge of climax, though never allowing her to come. She was only permitted to orgasm at home or when they were with scene friends, and then only when it pleased her Master.

Today he had texted her at the end of her workday as she was preparing to head home. End of the day visits to his office were always the best, as the history department support staff was usually gone by the time she arrived. Because of that, Master Beau was freer to use her as it pleased him without risk of their being discovered.

Now, as she entered his building, she clasped the beautiful rose gold Celtic love knot necklace he had given her at Christmas that served as her collar when out in the vanilla world. Her entire body thrummed with anticipation as she took the stairs to Master Beau's floor.

Because it was a Friday and snowing to boot, the floor appeared to be deserted as she walked along the hallway that led to Master Beau's office. Though the door was ajar, she knocked lightly. Beau was wearing the soft blue-green cashmere sweater she'd given him for Christmas that brought out the forest green of his beautiful eyes.

At her knock, he looked up, flashing his brilliant smile. "Come in."

Lia entered and closed the door with a soft click.

"Lock it," he directed. "Hang your coat and then come kneel on your cushion."

Master Beau had placed the floor cushion he kept at the office for her near his desk. Lia quickly removed her coat and draped it on a peg on the hat rack just inside the door. As she knelt on the cushion, Master Beau swiveled in his chair to face her. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the single-tail whip resting on his lap.

“Unbutton your blouse and unhook your bra,” he directed. She had taken to wearing bras that clasped in the front in order to be more accessible to her Master. She quickly obeyed, her nipples stiffening beneath his fiery gaze.

Master Beau opened his drawer and withdrew the leather bit. As he held it to her mouth, she dutifully parted her lips and accepted the gag.

“Cup your breasts and hold them up for the lash,” he commanded in a low, sexy voice.

Heart tapping rapidly against her ribcage, Lia obeyed.

Master Beau lifted the whip and brought it down across both breasts with a single whistling stroke. The erotic pain turned into lightning as it crackled over her flesh. Lia bit down hard on the leather to keep from crying out as a red welt rose across her pale skin.

Eyes glittering, Master Beau removed the gag from her mouth.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said breathlessly, savoring the lingering erotic pain.

“You’re welcome, slave.”

Setting the whip aside, Master Beau rose to his feet and unbuckled his pants. Opening the fly, he pulled out his shaft, which was hardening before her eyes. Moving closer, he gripped the back of her head as he guided his cock into her mouth.

Without preamble, he thrust all the way in, gagging her with his thick, hard shaft. Lia closed her eyes, focusing on opening herself fully to her Master. He used her roughly, rutting in her mouth as he fucked her face, his fingers twisting in her hair. She loved every second of it.

He came quickly with a small, strangled cry. Pulling out, he slapped her cheek lightly with his shiny cock as she swallowed every precious drop of his seed.

“Thank you, Sir,” she said, submissive joy permeating her being, even while her cunt ached with heat and desire.

“You’re welcome, slave,” he said again.

Zippering up, he resumed his seat at his desk. “Straighten yourself and unlock the door.”

Lia rose at once to her feet. She reclasped her bra and buttoned her blouse, the welt pulsing pleasantly across her breasts. As she unlocked the door, he said, “I’ll see you at home. I have about an hour’s work I have to finish. I’ll expect you to be waiting at the door, as usual.”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied, reaching for her coat.

“Oh, before you go, come back here a sec.”

She returned to him. Standing, he took her into his arms. Claspings the back of her head, gently this time, he gave her a long, lingering kiss that melted her into a puddle of happiness.

“I love you,” he whispered into her hair.

“I love you back,” she whispered in reply.

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Beau had assumed his house-sitting duties at the beginning of the month, his colleague having left for her year-long sabbatical overseas. It was a small but very comfortable house only a few blocks from campus. Lia and he often walked to work, weather permitting.

Lia still had her studio apartment, primarily to avoid issues with her parents, who had very strong opinions on “living in sin.” Though they’d only officially been a couple for three months now, Beau knew with every fiber of his being that Lia was “the one.”

She had blossomed under his strict regime of total erotic control. While still maintaining her naturally sassy and playful demeanor, Lia now exuded the kind of deep serenity he’d

witnessed in slaves at The Enclave. He felt at once humbled and exultant that she'd been able to achieve under his tutelage what had once been so elusive for her.

She was the ideal subject when he held his periodic *Kinbaku* training sessions at The Enclave, utterly at ease, even when constrained for considerable lengths of time in difficult positions. At the last training he'd conducted, he'd bound Lia using the Ebi, or shrimp tie. It involved bending her body backward into a contorted position that did somewhat resemble a shrimp. It was an advanced tie that required careful positioning. She'd handled it beautifully, slipping almost at once into submissive headspace, where she'd remained for the duration of the session.

It was a little after six when he pulled into the driveway. The snow was falling more thickly now, and they were forecast to get up to four inches by morning. He walked up the three steps to the covered entryway and inserted his key into the lock.

The door opened directly into a cozy living room with large picture windows that let in the natural light, the adjacent kitchen creating an open concept living space. Lia knelt in her usual spot in front of the door, her forehead touching the carpet, her arms extended before her in supplication.

The delicious aroma of the lasagna Lia had put into the oven for their dinner permeated the house, awakening Beau's appetite. He removed his jacket and laid it, along with his messenger bag and keys, on the entry table just inside the door. He walked the short distance to Lia, stopping just in front of her.

As he'd taught her, she lifted her head to kiss the top of his shoe. Then she shifted gracefully into a kneeling-up pose, her hands resting on her thighs as she spread her knees wide. The slave collar he'd woven for her from strips of *Kinbaku* linen rope was around her throat. The welt across her breasts was still visible.

Beau held out his hand. Lia took it, allowing him to pull her upright. "It smells great in here," he said as they walked together to the kitchen. Lia had already laid the table in the small dining nook. An open bottle of cabernet was on the table, along with two wine glasses.

As if on cue, the oven timer dinged. "Please have a seat, Sir," Lia said. "Everything's ready."

He poured them each a glass of wine as Lia brought the steaming pan of lasagna to the table. He cut and served them each a portion while she brought the salad and hot garlic bread.

As she slid into the padded bench seat across from him, he lifted his glass. "A toast," he said, "to your nipple piercing."

Lia's eyes widened, her mouth opening into a small O. "Really?" she breathed, her eyes shining. "Tonight?"

Ever since he'd floated the idea of piercing her nipples a few weeks ago, Lia had been on board. "We'll do it soon," he had assured her. "I just want to give you a little time to get used to the idea."

The beautiful nipple jewelry he'd ordered from an online site had arrived two days before. He'd had it delivered to his office so he could keep it a surprise.

"Yes, tonight," he agreed, taking a sip of his wine. "Right after dinner."

They left the dishes soaking in the sink, both eager to head down to the playroom. Beau had snagged a small bottle of orange juice from the fridge in case Lia needed it after the piercing.

The basement had two rooms along with a small laundry room. One of the rooms had been converted to a home office, with a desk, a sofa and a few chairs. The second room had also been finished, with laminate wood flooring and recessed lighting, but no furnishings.

The space was ideal for a BDSM playroom, and Beau had wasted no time setting it up as such. Along with a rack for his impact toys, he'd bought a rolling cabinet, which he'd filled with cuffs, gags, *Kinbaku* rope and other goodies. He added a portable St. Andrew's triangle cross, a padded barrel bondage horse and a sturdy suspension rack with rotating suspension rings like the one he'd so admired at The Enclave. He'd also brought down an air mattress, which he'd covered with soft sheets and a warm down quilt.

Lia watched wide-eyed as he set out his piercing supplies on top of the cart. When he was done, he pulled out the small jewelry bag from his back pocket. Undoing the drawstring, he slipped the jewelry into his palm and held it out for Lia to see.

"Oh," Lia breathed. "They're beautiful, Sir."

"I had these custom-made just for you, darling girl," he said, pleased she approved. Each nipple ring sported an intricately wrought love knot made from fine strands of the same rose gold as her day collar.

As he locked her wrists and ankles into place against the cross, Lia said, "Ready for true confession time?"

Beau loved the way they moved easily from Master/slave to lovers to best friends. "Uh oh," he said with a grin. "Is this something I want to hear?"

"Well," she replied, smiling back. "It's not something I ever told anyone because I always thought it was too corny to admit out loud."

"Go on," he said, cupping her lovely breasts.

"This has been my dream ever since I got into the scene. Having my Master claim me with a piercing." She ducked her head, adding almost shyly, "And now it's coming true."

Dipping his head to hers, he took her face in his hands and kissed her, long and deep. Then he took a step back. She looked breathtakingly beautiful, bound spread eagle, completely at his mercy.

"I'm honored to be the one to help make your dreams come true, Lia," he said sincerely.

It had been a while since Beau had pierced anyone's nipples, but he was confident in his abilities. First, he sterilized the nipples and surrounding area with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol, as well as the jewelry. Using a surgical marker, he marked the precise location at the base of each nipple where he would place the piercings.

"You sure you're ready for this?" he asked as he opened the wrapping on the single-use piercing needle, along with the hollow cannula he would use to guide the jewelry into place.

"Yes, Sir," she said, her voice calm, her eyes following his every move.

With a nod, he used a small clamp to stabilize her left nipple. He picked up the needle. As he did so, her eyes latched onto it. He could almost feel her quivering on a pinnacle of desire tinged with erotic fear. Working with careful concentration, he slid the needle through the delicate flesh. Lia yelped.

"Breathe," Beau reminded her.

The second nipple went as easily as the first, though she yelped even louder the second time, no doubt having come down abruptly from the adrenaline rush that had preceded the first piercing. There were only a few drops of blood, which he gently cleaned with a sterile wipe.

"You did well," he said approvingly. "Once you remembered to breathe."

"It hurt like hell, Sir. Not the good kind," she said with a snort. But then she smiled, her entire face lighting with pleasure. "But now I feel amazing. Like I would float right up to the ceiling if I weren't bound to this cross."

Beau grinned back. "Want to see?"

"Yes, please."

He rolled over the portable full-length mirror and set it up in front of her. Her eyes widened, her lips parting. "Oh, they're *gorgeous*, Master Beau. I love, love, love them."

“I’m glad,” Beau said, unable to stop smiling as he released her cuffs. She swayed as she stepped away from the cross. He reached for her, easily lifting her into his arms.

He carried her to the mattress and set her gently down in a sitting position. After giving her some orange juice, he had her lie back against the pillows. Crouching between her lovely thighs, he spread her sweet little cunt and planted feather kisses along her labia.

She sighed with pleasure as he snaked his tongue along the delicate folds. It wasn’t long before she was panting, her hands curling into fists as shudders racked her trembling body.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she moaned breathlessly. “Please, Sir, may I come?”

He lifted his head only long enough to say, “Yes, slave girl. Come for me. Come for your Master.”

When she eventually stilled, Beau said, “Since you did so well with the nipple piercings, I have a third piece of jewelry I want you to wear.” He patted her sticky, swollen sex. “Guess where?”

Chapter 30

Tonight was their official collaring ceremony, and Lia's emotions had been running the gamut from excited to nervous and back again ever since they'd arrived at The Enclave that evening.

She was with Ellen in the slave quarter bathroom. Because Lucia and Katie, who normally handled hair and makeup for formal Enclave events, were otherwise engaged, Ellen had volunteered to help Lia with preparations.

Ellen was a lovely girl, with shiny brown hair and wide hazel eyes. She had a curvy figure, her breasts full and round, her ass made for spanking.

"It's like déjà vu, right? Us being together again," Ellen said. She had returned to The Enclave a few days before to prepare for the upcoming binding auction.

"It is," Lia agreed, smiling.

Unlike Lia, Ellen exuded natural submissive grace. Also unlike Lia, who had crashed and burned during her aborted training at The Enclave, Ellen had graduated with honors.

As she carefully applied rouge to Lia's nipples, she said, "I love your piercings."

"Thanks. Me, too," Lia agreed with a grin.

They had healed beautifully in the month since Master Beau had pierced her nipples and labia. She loved displaying them proudly when they were in BDSM venues and feeling their sexy secret beneath her clothing while at work or with family.

Hair and makeup completed, Ellen took a step back to examine Lia in the mirror. "You look perfect, Lia." Her tone

grew wistful. “I love collaring ceremonies. They’re like weddings, only better.” Though she smiled as she spoke, her eyes were sad.

Lia placed a light hand on Ellen’s arm. “You’re going to find your Master at the binding auction. I just know it.”

Ellen brightened. “I hope you’re right.” She glanced at the large wall clock. “It’s time.”

Another swoop of anxiety rushed through Lia’s bloodstream. She felt as nervous as a bride, and as excited. “Okay,” she said, gathering her courage. “Let’s do this thing.”

Lucia was waiting for Lia at the entrance to the living room. Everyone was already assembled inside, and Ellen slipped past them to take her place among the guests.

They’d discussed and planned the ceremony in some detail, though they hadn’t gone as far as an actual dress rehearsal. Lia’s only adornments were her nipple and labia jewelry. She’d removed the linen rope collar Beau had made for her back in October in preparation for the new collar he was going to give her at the ceremony. He’d been working on it in secret, not allowing her even a hint of what it might look like. She couldn’t wait to see it, and to wear it, at last.

Now, Lucia eased the loop of a rope leash over Lia’s head.

“You ready, *querida*?” she asked with a smile.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Lia replied.

Lucia took the other end of the leash and led Lia into the living room. As they entered the space, everyone rose to their feet, just like an actual wedding ceremony when the bride appeared. The room glowed from the light of hundreds of candles, like something out of a fairy tale. The warm smell of vanilla and lavender filled the air. Soft ambient music was playing from hidden speakers.

As Lucia led her to the huge stone fireplace, Lia kept her focus on Master Beau. He stood waiting in black leather, Mark at his side. In lieu of a canopy, they stood beneath a portable

rack, a single suspension ring hanging at the ready. Next to the hearth there was a whip rack filled with a variety of impact toys.

Everyone sat again as Lia took her place between the two men. Lucia knelt quietly on Master Beau's other side. It struck Lia that Lucia and Mark had assumed the positions of matron of honor and best man, BDSM style. The thought made her smile.

Mark was the first to speak. "We are gathered here tonight to witness and celebrate the joining of two souls, two hearts. The collaring of a slave is an important symbolic act that reflects the total power exchange between Master and slave."

He turned to Lia. "Slave, please present your leash to your Master."

Praying she'd remember the words she'd practiced, or at least a reasonable approximation, Lia lifted the leash from around her neck. Facing Master Beau, she dropped to her knees and held up the leash on both palms.

"Master Beau," she said, willing her voice not to quaver, "I offer this leash to you as a symbol of my desire and need to follow your lead, and to allow you to guide, control and protect me on our continuing D/s journey together. I promise to communicate my honest feelings and to listen to your guidance and counsel. I vow to obey your commands and to dedicate myself to serving and pleasing you in all things."

Master Beau took the leash. "Thank you, slave. I accept the gift of your submission, and all that entails. You have proven yourself over the past months as worthy to serve as my slave, giving your body, heart and soul freely to me. I fully accept my responsibility to keep you safe, while giving you the intensity of experience you crave. I vow to hold, protect and cherish you, love you and listen to you, always putting our relationship above all others."

He turned to Lucia, who rose to her feet. She held out something in her hands, which Master Beau took. Turning to Lia, he showed her what he held. Lia gasped in admiration and delight as she stared at the most beautiful collar she'd ever

seen in her life. It was made from strips of dark pink leather artfully woven together in a series of heart knots, held together with a simple magnetic clasp.

“This collar is a symbol of my love for you and a promise to honor and cherish you as you deserve. Lia, love of my life, joy of my heart, will you accept this collar as a sign not only of your submission to me but as a symbol of our commitment as Master and slave?”

Ignoring the happy tears sliding down her cheeks, Lia breathed, “Yes, Master Beau. I will.”

She bowed her head as her man placed the buttery-soft leather around her throat. The magnetic closure clicked satisfyingly into place at the nape of her neck. “You now belong to me, slave Lia. Please rise so I can bind you with my ropes and share you with my friends.”

Lia accepted his offered hand as everyone around them clapped and cheered. Mark came forward, hanks of Master Beau’s beautiful *Kinbaku* rope in his hands, dyed for the occasion the same cotton-candy pink as Lia’s hair.

“Place your hands behind your back, wrists touching,” Master Beau directed.

Lia slipped pleasantly into that snug, happy place bondage always took her as the two men bound her at the wrist and elbow. Master Beau directed her to bend forward at the waist, feet planted shoulder width apart. Once she had assumed the position, they clipped one end of a length of chain to the suspension ring, the other to the rope at her wrists so that her arms were held parallel to the ground.

“Mark, my good friend,” Master Beau said in a voice designed to carry. “Both through example and good advice, you helped me to remember that nothing is more important than love. I would like you to be the first to mark my slave tonight.”

Lia couldn’t help the shiver of nervous anticipation that shuddered through her. She had known this was coming. It had actually been Mark and Jaime’s idea, a nod to the slave

initiation ceremony all staff slaves underwent when joining The Enclave.

Lia, facing the room, couldn't see what impact toy Mark chose. But then he appeared in front of her, a wicked-looking snake whip in his hand. "Lia, do you accept my mark as a token of your submission to your Master, and by extension to me?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied, heart kicking up its pace in anticipation of the whip's biting kiss.

Mark moved out of her line of sight. A moment later there was the whistle and then the crack as the lash hissed over both ass cheeks.

"Thank you, Master Mark," she gasped, wincing from the welcome pain.

Lawrence was next. Crouching directly in front of her, he gripped her by the hair and forced her head up. He hadn't chosen an impact toy. "You've finally earned the right to be called a slave. Do you accept my mark as a token of your submission to your Master, and by extension to me?"

"Yes, Sir."

Drawing his hand back, he slapped her across the face with a stinging blow that brought tears to her eyes. Unlike some subs, for whom face slapping was a negative trigger, Lia adored it. She had to bite her tongue to keep from asking for another. Instead, she said, "Thank you, Master Lawrence."

"My pleasure."

Brandon and Marjorie, dominant husband and wife, were next. Marjorie held a single tail. "I knew you had it in you, girl," she said with a warm smile. "Do you accept my mark as a token of your submission to your Master, and by extension to me?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Brandon cupped Lia's breasts, lifting them for Marjorie's whip. She snapped it expertly across Lia's left breast. It hurt like a motherfucker.

“Thank you, Mistress Marjorie,” Lia said through gritted teeth.

Brandon repeated the ritualistic words as Marjorie held up Lia’s breasts. He then gave her a second welt. As she hissed her thanks, Mason appeared, a long, sharp-looking knife in his hand.

Lia couldn’t help but recall her last botched session with Mason, one in a series during her disastrous training the first time around at The Enclave. What had changed since then? Why was she now so easily able—not just able but eager—to submit to all these different Doms?

Because you’re doing it for Master Beau, a calm, happy voice inside her whispered. There was always a submissive inside you, but she needed love to flourish.

Mason, like Lawrence, lifted Lia by her hair, forcing her head up so their eyes met. With his other hand, he pressed the tip of his knife against the hollow of her throat. Though she knew he wouldn’t actually cut her—the parameters of the scene not conducive to blood play—still her heart began to race, her breath catching in her throat.

Then she felt the warm, comforting touch of Master Beau’s hand on her lower back, reminding her he was right there beside her. She instantly calmed. He would keep her safe.

“Do you accept my mark as a token of your submission to your Master, and by extension to me?” Mason asked in his gruff, rumbly voice.

“Yes, Sir,” she said, her voice steady.

He drew the tip down her sternum in a slow line, stopping just between her breasts, which still throbbed from the lashes delivered by Brandon and Marjorie. The knife left a long, straight stinging red line on her skin. As she stared down at it, a single drop of blood appeared between her breasts.

“Oh,” she breathed, mesmerized by the bright red bead.

A moment later, Mason dabbed at the blood with one of the premoistened sterile wipes he always kept at the ready.

Recalling herself, she said, “Thank you, Master Mason.”

He flashed an approving smile in Master Beau’s direction. “My pleasure, slave.”

Julian appeared next, moving behind her before she could figure out what he was holding in his hands. There was some quiet murmuring between him and Master Beau, and then he said, “Do you accept this butt plug as a token of your submission to your Master, and by extension to me?”

At least she was already bent over, which would make acceptance of the toy easier to handle. Reminding herself she was submitting to Master Beau, she replied, “Yes, Sir.”

Hands spread her ass cheeks and then she felt the gooey tip of the lubricated phallus pressing against her nether opening. Closing her eyes, she focused on total surrender, willing her muscles to relax to receive the plug.

After the initial pressure, it slid in easily, with only the brief pain at the end as it was fully seated. “Thank you, Master Julian,” she said. The feeling of fullness along with the endorphins swirling in her bloodstream made her realize just how turned on she was by all this erotic pain and attention.

As if in response, Aubrey’s gift was to insert a small, vibrating egg inside Lia’s sopping wet cunt. “Don’t come until your Master says you can,” she whispered into Lia’s ear. Master Anthony was next, delivering a series of searing cane strokes to the backs of her thighs.

By now, Lia was trembling from overstimulation, balanced on the edge of orgasm. She realized with relief that all the Doms present at the ceremony had had their turn. She felt the tug at her anus and then the plug was pulled free. Her arms were released from the suspension ring. Then, with sure fingers, Master Beau plucked the knots free.

As she stood upright, he remained behind her, massaging her arms back to life. The egg continued to vibrate inside her, tickling her clit from the inside out. She was so wet that her juices had slicked her inner thighs. Beau brought his arms

around her, one gently cupping her breast, the other slipping between her legs.

“You want to come, my sweet little slut?” he murmured into her ear as his fingers swirled over her engorged labia.

“Oh, god, yes,” she groaned. “Yes, please, Master Beau. May I come?”

“You may, my darling. Come for me. Come for your Master.”

She came hard, her knees buckling as a powerful orgasm swept over and through her. Master Beau held her as he carefully lowered her to the ground. Seated behind her, he gently extracted the egg from inside her and turned it off.

As he cradled her between his strong legs, she slowly opened her eyes. She was startled to realize everyone was watching them, all of them smiling, a few clapping with approval.

“I have to say,” Lawrence said, smiling as broadly as anyone there. “You achieved the impossible, Beau. You found the submissive in our Lia.”

Lia wanted to protest on principal. What did Lawrence know of her submission?

He does know, a small, contented voice whispered inside her. And now, thanks to Master Beau, you know it, too.

Chapter 31

Books kept falling from the shelves as Lia tried to make her way through the library stacks. The lights flickered and then went out. She had to feel her way as she stumbled through the dark, caught in an endless maze. She was sweating, her pulse racing. She was going to be late. She was going to miss her own wedding.

The scene shifted. She was in her parents' backyard. The quartet began to play the Vivaldi piece they'd selected, her cue to begin the procession down the aisle. Her father waited up ahead for her to take his arm. But as he turned toward her, his face twisted with shock, his mouth falling open.

She looked down at herself in confused disbelief. Instead of her beautiful wedding gown, she was dressed in a black leather bustier that showed more of her breasts than it covered. She wore nothing below, unless the BDSM triskelion on her bare mons counted. Instead of the fairy princess heels her mother had insisted she buy, her feet were shod in her old Doc Martens.

Grimly, her father grabbed her arm and hauled her down the aisle. Guests on either side gasped in dismay as they took in her garb. If she could just get to Beau, who stood with his back to her beneath the wedding arch, he would make things right.

But when he turned around, it wasn't Beau at all. Instead, Lawrence stood there, his face a grimace of disgust. "You fucked up again, slave," he snarled. "You really are hopeless." He pointed an imperious finger toward the cage that had appeared beside the wedding arch. "Get in there now, before you cause any more of a scene."

Her face flaming with shame, Lia dropped to her knees and crawled into the cage. The door slammed shut with a clang. Hands gripping the bars of her prison, she watched in horror as Renee appeared. She was wearing Lia's wedding dress, her honey-blond hair shining, her face radiant as she glided toward Beau, who beamed at her from the altar.

"No," Lia cried in anguish. As she rattled the cage bars, she saw that she'd bitten her lovely, pink-polished nails to the quick, her cuticles torn and bloody. "He's mine!" she shouted, though no one seemed to hear her. "I'm supposed to be the bride," she wailed. "Let me out of here."

Beau and Renee had turned to one another, their faces alight with joy.

"No," Lia cried helplessly. "No, no, no, no!"

"Lia. Lia, baby. Wake up. Come on. Wake up. You're okay. Everything's okay."

With a gasp, Lia jolted awake. Her heart was pounding, her breathing ragged. Was she too late? Were Beau and Renee already married?

"Shh," Beau soothed, cradling her in his strong arms. He stroked the sweaty hair from her face. "It was just a dream, baby. You're here with me, safe in my arms."

The nightmare fell away as Lia focused on Beau. They were back at her place for the weekend, safe and snug in her canopy bed. She managed a shaky laugh. "So, I didn't show up to the wedding in scene clothes? You're not married to Renee?"

Beau laughed. "That sounds like some kind of nightmare, for both of us." He pulled her closer, arranging her so her head rested on his chest, his arm comfortingly around her.

"It's not even six o'clock yet," Beau said, his voice sleepy as he stroked her back. "You have over five hours before you have to be at your mom's. Let's go back to sleep. This time you'll have sweet dreams."

Lia closed her eyes, willing herself to relax. Despite her best intentions, the dark fog of the nightmare still clung to her. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She focused on the soothing beat of Beau's heart beneath her cheek.

It wasn't long before his breathing slowed and deepened. In spite of herself, the nightmare began to replay against her closed eyelids.

She was back in the cage, now completely naked save for her bright pink ball gag. Dozens of couples were slow dancing beneath the sparkling fairy lights draped in the trees. Now it was the blonde from the Biltmore wedding in Beau's arms. No one seemed at all aware of Lia in the cage as drool coursed down her chin and tears ran down her cheeks.

In a last, desperate effort, she gripped the bars and shook them for all she was worth. The cage began to move, tottering as she thrashed and wailed a garbled cry against the gag...

“Okay. That's it. We're getting up.”

Lia vaulted awake a second time, again disoriented as she stared at the man in her bed. Weak sunlight was filtering through the window of her bedroom. “What time is it?” she managed, relieved to have been released from the clutches of her troubled sleep.

“Seven fifteen.”

Beau swung his legs over the side of the high bed and stood before her like a naked god, his hands on his hips, his gorgeous morning erection jutting in her direction like an invitation.

Eager to distract herself from the lingering nightmares, Lia scooted toward the edge of the mattress and lay on her back, her head hanging off the edge. The unusual height of her old-fashioned bed was ideal for a six-foot guy to stand in front of his submissive, his cock perfectly positioned to ease into her open mouth.

“Please, Master Beau,” she begged sweetly. “Will you fuck my face, Sir?”

His eyelids hooded, his lips parting. With a soft growl, he positioned himself so his cock was inches from her face. “Spread your legs so I have access to your cunt,” he commanded.

Lia eagerly obeyed, clit already throbbing, nipples tingling. Her entire body relaxed in submissive pleasure as Beau slid his heavy shaft into her mouth. She opened her throat as he slid deeper, not stopping until he had completely cut off her ability to breathe.

She closed her eyes, losing herself in the helpless joy of being completely at his mercy. Her heart pounded and her lungs burned as the seconds ticked slowly by. She balanced on the knife’s edge of surrender, prickling with a panicky sensation that was as much pleasure as fear.

Finally, she opened and closed her hands, the signal that she had to have air. Beau pulled back, allowing her only a few seconds to inhale before plunging back into her mouth, choking her on his cock. She was distracted by the sudden, sharp smack of his palm against her spread cunt.

The pain was instantly softened by the swirl of his fingers stroking her sex. The rush of pleasure was only heightened by the cock down her throat and the lingering sting of his palm.

The pattern repeated: cock thrust down her throat, a sharp smack of his hand followed by the silky stroke of his fingers, her hands curling into fists, a gasp of breath, and again...

It wasn’t long before she bucked and thrashed, hips arching up to meet each smack and sexy stroke as her lungs burned. In the seconds before she hurtled into a powerful climax, Beau pulled suddenly away.

In a deep voice resonant with power and lust, he commanded, “Get on your hands and knees. I’m going to fuck your ass.”

Trembling, Lia managed to force her rubbery limbs to obey. A shudder moved through her body as he smeared a

dollop of lube at her puckered entrance. Then she felt the shift in the mattress as he crouched behind her.

One hand on the small of her back, he used the other to guide his hard cock inside her. Using the breathing techniques he'd taught her, Lia consciously relaxed her body to receive her Master. The initial pain of penetration quickly gave way to pleasure.

He groaned as he eased inside her. Once fully seated, he gripped her hips with strong hands, pulling her back against him. As he thrust in and out of her, he growled, "If you can make yourself come before I do, you have my permission."

Nearly wild with lust, Lia rubbed her sopping cunt, her pleasure magnified by the full feeling of his hard cock inside her. His groans of pleasure spurred her on, and within seconds, she was falling, falling, falling into a powerful climax that melted her body and ignited her soul.

Beau shuddered against her, her name on his lips as he ejaculated deep inside her. They fell together in a sweaty heap onto the bed. They lay that way a long while, until their thudding hearts slowed and their breathing returned to normal. Lia was drifting in a pleasant haze when Beau's voice roused her.

"Let's take a shower and grab some coffee before I hand you off to the wedding fairies."

His words jerked her back to reality.

Today was May eighteenth, their wedding day! Loretta had directed her to arrive at the Duvall home at eleven a.m. sharp for a girls' brunch, followed by hair and makeup. The photographer would arrive at four for family photos, the actual ceremony to commence at five.

As they showered together, Lia's nerves reasserted themselves. "I hope those alterations to the gown were done properly," she fretted. "I'll need to check the seating assignments. Loretta has strange ideas of who should sit with whom. Do you think our scene friends will be okay at such a vanilla event? I'm not sure I like that DJ that Zinnia hired. He

plays too many nineties hits. What if it rains? We should have waited until June. Are you sure that tie you chose goes with the jacket?"

Finally, Beau grabbed her, pulling her into a tight embrace. Laughing, he demanded, "Who stole my kickass slave girl and replaced her with a Southern belle debutante?"

"Ugh, right?" Lia exclaimed. "This whole wedding thing has made me crazy. It's like Loretta has wormed her way into my psyche, channeling all that perfectionism and judgmental disappointment that dogged my whole childhood. I feel like I'm sixteen again. Like I'm still the family fuckup who never quite measured up."

Beau let Lia go. He gently gripped her shoulders as he stared down into her eyes. "I think that's exactly what's happening here, Lia. There's no question that the wedding planning has been stressful. Your mom can definitely be a lot to handle. And it's natural to be nervous on your wedding day, and to want everything to be just right. But it's also good to remember that you're *not* that sixteen-year-old girl anymore. You're a strong, confident, serene submissive who meets every challenge with grace and courage."

"Thank you, Sir. I want to be that person. But how do I stop those stupid, old tapes from playing?"

Beau moved one hand from her shoulder to her throat. Though his touch was gentle, the primal gesture sent a lovely shiver through Lia's frame. "First, remind me and yourself," he said in a low, sexy voice, "who do you belong to?"

Lia immediately calmed as she stared into those lovely green eyes. "You, Master Beau," she whispered.

"That's right. You are mine, Lia. And why do you exist?"

"To serve, to love and to please you, Sir."

He graced her with a beautiful smile that warmed her to her toes. "That's right, slave girl. And it pleases me for you to let go of old patterns of behavior that no longer serve you." As he stroked her cheek, she leaned into his touch. "I think you just need a little centering."

He reached for the small cane he'd left on the nightstand the night before. "First, your mark."

Lia happily draped herself over the side of the bed, instantly calming at the prospect of her morning mark. She welcomed the biting sting of the cane as it whipped over her bottom.

"Thank you, Sir," she breathed.

"You're welcome, slave."

When she started to rise, he placed a hand on her back. "Stay as you are. Stop anticipating. Just be. A good, thorough flogging will help you reconnect with your inner submissive."

Lia settled into herself with a deep sigh as the soft, stinging leather tresses caressed her body from shoulder to thigh. Each stroke helped to center her. All the edginess, doubt and anxiety was whipped away as she gave herself fully to her Master.

"Thank you, Master Beau. I definitely needed that."

"I'm still not quite done with you," he replied. He lifted her into his arms and settled himself on the bed so she lay on his lap, facedown. "You did so well that you've earned a reward."

"Oh, yum," Lia said, wriggling happily against Master Beau's thighs. While she loved impact toys, there was nothing better than the skin-on-skin closeness of a good, hard spanking. With each stroke of his hard palm, she ascended to that sweet, graceful plane of pure submissive serenity that only Master Beau's steadfast, dominant love could give her.

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Beau smiled as he took in the Duvall's spacious backyard with its emerald-green, rolling lawns. The dogwood trees and azalea bushes were in full bloom, painting the landscape with delicate shades of white, pink and lavender. The mountains were bathed in a soft, hazy light. The distant ridges seemed to stretch endlessly, creating a breathtaking backdrop.

The guests were seated in white wooden chairs neatly arranged on either side of a center aisle. Their families took up

the first six rows on either side of the aisle. Behind them sat Beau and Lia's friends, both new and old, many from The Enclave.

Lia had acquiesced to her mother's insistence on a traditional wedding that included bridesmaids and groomsmen, who stood now on either side of the wedding arch. Lucia, Lia's matron of honor, stood among the younger bridesmaids, radiant and smiling. Beau's groomsmen stood on the other side. He had chosen Mark as his best man. Hopefully, Mark had remembered the rings.

The arch was itself a work of art, wrapped in flowing fabric and draped with seasonal flowers and greenery. String lights and lanterns had been hung from the trees around the perimeter of the backyard. A spacious tent had been set up, elegantly decorated with sheer curtains and twinkle lights. Inside, long banquet tables were adorned with crisp white linens, fine china and sparkling glassware. Floral arrangements in vintage vases and candles in elegant holders served as centerpieces. A parquet dance floor had been set up beside the tent, a sound system placed nearby for the DJ.

The string quartet began to play as Lia appeared at the end of the aisle on the arm of her father. Beau caught his breath as she moved slowly toward him, her face wreathed in smiles.

She had let her hair grow over the months, and on that late afternoon in May it was swept up and away from her face in a loose twist, pink tendrils framing her delicate face. Miniature white roses had been woven into the updo, matching the white rose in Beau's lapel.

His tuxedo hid the new tattoo on his shoulder—a heart-shaped knot of rope with the words *Beau Loves Lia* incorporated into the twists and turns of the design. It was admittedly corny but delighted them both, nonetheless.

His bride looked like an angel in her ivory gown. It draped gracefully over her lithe form, catching the light with a subtle sheen. The luxurious satin was thick enough to hide her nipple jewelry, as well as the rope harness she wore around her waist and between her legs in lieu of panties.

Dazed with happiness, Beau took his sub girl's hand as she reached the wedding arch. As her father took his seat beside his beaming wife, Lia and Beau turned to face the officiant, who was none other than Anthony Gerace. It had turned out that, among the various hats Master Anthony wore, including successful businessman, BDSM club owner and slave trainer, he was also a justice of the peace.

Though both sets of parents would have preferred a minister, Beau and Lia had gently prevailed on this one issue. It pleased them to weave their vanilla and D/s worlds together in this small way.

Anthony beamed as he regarded them, looking as proud as any parent. His deep, sonorous voice carried as he said, "We gather here today in this beautiful setting to celebrate the union of Lia and Beau, two extraordinary individuals who have chosen to embark on this incredible journey together. I've had the privilege to witness their love story unfold from the very beginning. It's abundantly clear that they are each other's perfect match."

The secret smile he offered at the double meaning of his words was met by their answering grins.

Sobering, he now spoke directly to them. "Love isn't just an emotion. It's a profound connection that transcends time and circumstance. It's the force that brings two people together, drawing them closer, guiding them through life's challenges and uplifting them during moments of joy. Love is what makes us human. It's the thread that weaves our stories together."

Again addressing their guests, he continued, "Today Beau and Lia stand before us, declaring their love for each other in front of witnesses who hold them dear. They are making a commitment to nurture and protect this love, to cherish it as the most precious gift they have been given. Their love isn't just the foundation of their partnership. It's the heartbeat of their journey together."

Beau was in a daze of pure happiness as he and Lia exchanged their vows. The collaring ceremony had been

intense and powerful. But there was something so delicately sweet and almost sacred about this more traditional, vanilla ceremony.

The sun had begun its descent behind the mountains, casting a warm, golden glow over everything as the sky transformed into shades of pink and orange. At a nod from Anthony, Mark, who had indeed remembered them, handed Anthony the ring boxes. Beau and Lia had designed the rings themselves, choosing, as a nod to Beau's passion for *Kinbaku*, a love knot motif. Made of rose gold, the rings consisted of two intertwined loops in a continuous pattern. Lia hadn't wanted a separate engagement ring. As a compromise, they'd incorporated a diamond at the center of her ring's knot.

Anthony handed Lia's ring to Beau. Smiling so wide his face hurt, Beau took Lia's small hand in his. Slipping the ring onto her finger, he said, "With this ring, I pledge my love and commitment to you, now and always."

Tears sliding down her soft cheeks, Lia accepted Beau's ring from Anthony. As she placed the ring on his finger, she replied, "With this ring, I give you my love, my commitment and my unwavering devotion."

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," Anthony said. "I invite you to seal this union with a kiss."

Applause and cheering erupted all around them. But the sound faded away as Beau took Lia's face in his hands. As their lips touched, he was overwhelmed by the deep and unconditional love he felt for her. As her arms circled his neck, their lips parted, tongues dancing together.

The kiss was a symbolic union of their souls, a promise of lifelong partnership, not just as husband and wife, but as Master and slave, with all the passion and intensity such a union entailed.

When they finally parted, Beau looked down at his beautiful girl with a big smile. She grinned back and reached for his hand. "I'm starving. Where's the cake?"

If you enjoyed this novel, please take a moment to leave a review!

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Be sure to check out the first two novels
in the [No Safeword Series!](#)



**Ready for more edgy, sensual BDSM
romance, Claire Thompson style?
Here's a sneak peek at the first novel
in the [Master's Club Series](#)**

Chapter 1 – At His Mercy

Cameron Lord watched from a distance, his eyes riveted to the scene. With each flick of the whip against her ass, his cock twitched with appreciation. From his vantage point, he could see only her back, and even that was partially obscured by the crowd that had gathered around the scene station, and the hulking man in leather wielding the whip.

He would have liked to see her face. Was it twisted in agony? Slack with submissive bliss? Her thick, copper-colored hair was piled loosely on her head, tendrils escaping at the nape of her long, slender neck. He pushed his way closer, seeking a better view.

She was naked, save for a pair of thong panties, her wrists and ankles cuffed against a cheap, portable St. Andrew's cross. Her back was streaked with dark pink welts, the kind that stung like hell when delivered, but would probably have faded away by morning. Her ass was cherry red, some bruising evident where the rounded globes met her thighs.

Cameron didn't normally bother with the public clubs. He'd only stopped by on a whim, on his way to his private club. His friend Grayson would have said he was slumming, but Cameron considered it more of a way to keep tabs on what the wider BDSM community was up to. And you never knew—there just might be a submissive diamond amidst the coal, waiting to be scooped up.

He edged closer to get a better look at the woman cuffed to the cross. He admired the long, lean curves of her youthful body. She flinched as the whip's tip made contact with her flesh, but otherwise remained still and quiet. The man delivering the whipping was mechanical in his movements, seemingly devoid of passion.

The onlookers watched the unfolding scene with leering silence, several with their mouths hanging open. One guy actually had his hand down his pants.

Mildly disgusted, Cameron started to turn away, but a cry from the girl arrested his attention. Shouldering his way to the front of the motley assortment of gawkers, he saw the long red welt curling around her hip bone.

“That was your fault,” the man snapped. “I can’t aim properly when you’re jerking around.”

Cameron nearly said something, but held his tongue. What did he expect from a public club? The players here were rank amateurs.

The woman murmured something inaudible. Cameron moved closer, straining to hear.

“That was your fault, not mine. You moved,” the guy snapped. “I’m the boss, and it’s over when *I* say it’s over, and not a second before that, sub girl. I want to mark those perky tits of yours. Then, we’ll go to one of the private rooms where you’ll get on your knees and thank me properly.” He barked an ugly laugh.

This time the woman spoke loud enough for Cameron to hear. “Are you deaf or just stupid? I used my safeword. Let me down.”

A husky female voice from the crowd called out, “She used her safeword, asshole. End of story.”

The would-be Dom glanced back, glaring as his eyes moved over the people gathered there. Turning back to the girl, he snarled loudly, “Fucking prick tease. You said you could handle anything. Obviously *not*.”

Cameron had had enough. The guy was being a total jerk. He made a move forward, but before he could get close enough to intervene, the woman who had called out stepped onto the scene mat. She was maybe in her fifties, heavysset but still quite attractive in a black leather minidress that hugged her ample curves. “The girl said no, bub.” She put her hand on

the man's shoulder. "No means no, and safeword means end of scene. Capiche?"

The man shook himself away from the older woman's touch. He glared around at the crowd but found no sympathy there. "Fuck this," he growled. Bending down, he grabbed his gear bag, stuffed his whip into it, and stalked away.

What a flaming asshole. Cameron had the urge to follow the guy, tap his shoulder, and when he turned around, punch him in the jaw.

But he stayed where he was, watching as the woman crouched to release the bound girl's ankles and then stood, reaching up to unclip her wrist cuffs.

The naked girl lowered her arms and turned slowly from the cross. She was lovely, with round, high breasts, a long, slender torso and gently flaring hips. Cameron's cock twitched in appreciation at the lovely sight.

His gaze moved up to her face. A jolt of recognition shot through him.

"Holy shit," he mouthed silently. His brain was having a hard time connecting the dots as his two worlds collided.

Her hair had come out of its makeshift bun and now fell in a coppery tumble of loose curls to her shoulders. Her face was heart-shaped, her large green eyes bright. Her mouth was lush, the lips full and red, like a plump piece of fruit just waiting to be bitten. Why had he never noticed before how ravishingly beautiful this young woman was?

Because in his other world, she wasn't a submissive, naked and vulnerable, her back and ass streaked with marks from the lash. She was Jessica Cooper, one of the newer associates at his law firm. While he'd never worked directly with her, she had recently done a good job in a support capacity on a major deal for one of his top clients.

His brain tried to combine the two disparate images of this young woman. And failed.

Cameron liked the compartments of his life to be neat and orderly, with no bleed between the two. He chided himself for

the brief fantasy that had leaped full-blown into his mind: Jess kneeling naked before him, eyes on his erect cock... He shook his head slightly to clear away the unacceptable image. Though there was no specific rule at the firm about colleagues becoming involved outside the office, he'd made it a personal rule never to engage. He didn't have time for a relationship, anyway. He got all the release and satisfaction he needed at the Masters Club.

As if feeling Cameron's gaze on her, Jessica lifted her head. As they stared at one another, her mouth opened in a small O of surprise, her eyes widening. Her hand fluttered to her chest as color washed over her throat and face. Clearly, she had recognized him as well.

He offered her the hint of a smile, not surprised at her discomfiture. He should have turned away at once, before she'd had a chance to see him. "*Don't worry,*" he silently telegraphed. "*I'll keep your secret.*"

She didn't seem to receive the message, however. Snapping her mouth closed, she whirled away. Grabbing a discarded robe from the mat, she draped it over her shoulders. She remained with her back to him. It was clearly a dismissal.

Not wanting to embarrass her any more than he probably already had, Cameron walked away from the scene station, the smile still playing over his lips. What an interesting turn of affairs.

The question was, what should he do about it?

If he were prudent and properly cautious, he'd do nothing. Nothing at all.

But Cameron Lord hadn't gotten where he was by shying away from risks. Why start now?

~*~

The next morning, Jess arrived at the office later than she liked to. She'd left the club right after the aborted scene, too shaken up by the encounter with Cameron Lord to remain. New York City was a huge place. It was bad enough to run

into her boss at a BDSM play club. But did she really have to be bare-ass naked at the time?

Just the memory of those clear gray eyes watching, assessing, judging, brought heat flooding into her face.

The only thing that had kept her from dying of mortification on the spot was the fact he'd been there, too, dressed in leather, gear bag slung over his shoulder. He couldn't very well accuse or judge her, unless he accused and judged himself as well.

She was grateful he hadn't tried to approach her. Hell, it was possible he hadn't even recognized her. After all, at work she was just another second-year law associate, beneath the notice of an equity partner.

On the other hand, she had been getting more involved in the mergers and acquisitions side of the business lately, which was his area of expertise. She'd done a ton of work on the Atlantic City-based Lansing Hotel and Casino merger with the smaller, super high-end hotel chain, Veranda Esplanade, which threw off plenty of cash. Mr. Lord had brought in the business for the firm, though she had no idea if he even knew of her contributions.

He was in what she thought of as the equity partner bubble, protected by a flank of managing partners and his support staff. Now, she was glad she'd only had indirect contact so far on the Lansing deal. She just had to hope that peculiar look he'd given her had been not one of recognition, but perhaps commiseration because of the botched scene.

She'd examined herself carefully in her bathroom mirror upon arriving home, providing her own aftercare. Most of the marks were already fading, but there was a nasty welt still visible over her hip, where the whip had missed its mark.

The guy she'd chosen for the evening's play had had definite potential. He'd been around her age and good looking, too, though it was apparent he knew it all too well. Too bad he had turned out to be such a dick. It wasn't that she faulted him necessarily for the painful miss with the lash, but rather how he'd handled it—blaming her, and then ignoring her safeword.

She didn't normally even go to the clubs on a Thursday, usually still at work until eight or later. She preferred weekend play so she could sleep in the morning after. Last night had been her gift to herself, after three weeks of nonstop work on the Lansing deal. She had desperately needed to decompress with a mind-clearing, purifying BDSM scene.

She'd gotten to bed around midnight, but her mind had refused to shut down, obsessing over what Mr. Lord may or may not have seen. Naturally, her first reaction had been abject panic. No matter that he'd been there, too. She was the one who'd been on display, naked and cuffed to a cross.

Despite her chagrin, Jess couldn't help but grin at the thought of proper Mr. Lord hanging out at a kinky sex club. Imagine the fodder for gossip she could provide for the girls at work if she dropped that morsel into the cauldron of frustrated office lust?

Not that she'd ever do such a thing. She'd steered well clear of the girly gossip about the enigmatic partner. Cameron Lord had attained almost cult status among the secretaries and other support staff. His nickname among the girls was Lord Hunk, and despite the conservative suits and reserved manner, his appeal couldn't be denied.

Young compared to the other partners, handsome, elegant and aloof, his backstory was fodder for speculation among giggling girls in the breakroom. He wore no wedding ring, but there was always an elegant woman on his arm for corporate events, though, apparently, never the same one twice.

She'd once overheard the girls in the secretary pool comparing him to Richard Gere's character in the old movie, *Pretty Woman*. "I'd be his Julia Roberts any day of the week," she'd heard Brenda confide to her desk mate.

Jess had never entertained such dreams. She had zero interest in getting involved with someone at the office, no matter how sexy and mysterious he might be. Several of the other associates and even one of the managing partners had asked her out over the two years and change she'd been with

the firm, and she'd always politely but firmly declined. That was one quagmire she had no intention of stepping into.

Nevertheless, she couldn't help but admire Mr. Lord. He had a reputation as a whiz kid who'd climbed quickly up the ranks. Around forty, he took good care of himself, his body lean, his skin and eyes clear. He dressed impeccably in perfectly-tailored suits and elegant Italian loafers. He *was* nice to look at, there was no denying. He had dark, wavy hair and piercing gray eyes. A lot of women she knew would have killed for his thick fringe of dark lashes. His face was angular, his nose strong. Yet his mouth was surprisingly sensual, the lips full and soft. Though she'd never have admitted it aloud, she'd had the occasional fantasy of kissing those lips.

While she'd always found him very attractive—who didn't—she'd never seriously considered him as potential dating material. Not only because he was a senior partner and possibly already in a relationship, but because, she'd assumed, he would be as vanilla as an ice cream cone.

To discover that he *was* in the scene—at least to the extent that he'd shown up at a BDSM club wearing the uniform, gear bag in tow—had thrown her for a complete loop. It had forced her to rethink everything she'd thought she knew about the man, and blown away her protective shield against his considerable physical charms in the process. Her mind naturally segued to an insane fantasy of being *his* submissive. Of giving herself, heart, body and soul, to Cameron Lord...

In bed, her hand had slipped between her legs as she imagined kneeling naked in front of him—not the staid, self-contained partner in his bespoke suits and elegant silk ties, but the Master in black leather, a cane and a coil of rope in his hand.

She must have passed out finally somewhere near dawn. She'd slept through her alarm, missed the express subway train and been forced to take the local that stopped at every station.

Now, setting her heavy briefcase on the desk of her small, windowless office, she removed her sneakers and replaced

them with work pumps. More folders had been added to her inbox since she'd left the evening before. She had a pile of contracts to review. She needed to put the bizarre events of the night before out of her mind and focus on the day ahead.

But first, coffee.

She passed by the hallway that contained the partners' elegant row of offices as she headed to the breakroom. Was Mr. Lord already in his office? Had he put two and two together last night? Did he plan to do anything about it?

Once back at her desk, coffee mug by her keyboard, she booted up her computer, more or less ready to face the day. Her edgy, nervous mood eventually calmed as she immersed herself in her work. She was just finishing the draft of a letter to opposing counsel outlining the firm's final position when Brenda stuck her head around the door. Brenda, a forty-something redhead with a voluptuous figure and a sharp mind, was Jess's favorite secretary in the pool shared by the associates.

"One of the top dogs wants to see you," Brenda said with a smirk.

It took Jess a moment to switch gears and process what Brenda had just said. Then her stomach swooped unpleasantly. Was this it? Was she about to get fired?

No. That was crazy. She hadn't broken any laws, and she certainly hadn't been at Spankees in any professional capacity. And anyway, he'd been there, too. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

In spite of herself, her nipples tightened as she recalled his slow, sexy gaze moving over her naked body. Perhaps that had been a good thing. Maybe he'd been too busy staring at her body to notice her face.

It suddenly occurred to Jess that Brenda hadn't said which "top dog." There were nine partners, and she answered to all of them. Maybe she was panicking for nothing. She looked up, hoping her face didn't betray her nerves.

“Who exactly is asking for me?” she asked, pleased her voice came out calm and well-modulated.

“Lord Hunk,” Brenda breathed, reverence in her tone.

Jess’s pulse began to race. Keeping her expression under control, she managed to speak with a calm she didn’t feel. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“No,” Brenda said. “I didn’t actually speak to him. Marion told me. All she said was that he wanted to see you in his office at your earliest convenience.”

“Okay. Thanks, Brenda.”

Brenda continued to hover at the door, her face a study in excitement and curiosity. “Do you have any idea what he wants?”

Jess shrugged. “Not a clue.”

Brenda made a small clucking noise of encouragement. “I’m sure it’s something good. You’re lucky. All that work you’ve been doing on the Lansing deal must be paying off. This might be your big break—a chance to be noticed.”

Or fired.

Jess did her best to keep her face blank. She had no intention of giving Brenda fodder for the mid-morning coffee break. Flashing a nervous grin, she managed, “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

She grabbed her suit jacket from the coat rack in the corner of the office. She put it on over her blouse and smoothed down her skirt. Pulling open a side drawer, she removed the small makeup bag she kept there. She opened the compact to inspect her face. She looked tired. And nervous. She applied a little fresh lipstick and smiled to make sure there was nothing in her teeth.

She briefly considered taking a quick gulp of the unopened single malt scotch a client had given her, and which she kept in her bottom desk drawer. *Don’t be ridiculous*, she silently chided herself.

Whatever happened, happened. She wasn't going to stress out over it in advance. She'd graduated in the top ten in her law class at NYU. She was a second-year associate, hopefully on a path to partner at a prestigious Manhattan law firm. She'd worked her ass off for the firm. She'd handled herself well in court the few times she'd been allowed to present. What she did on her own time was nobody's business.

Grabbing the elegant, monogrammed leather portfolio her parents had given her at graduation and her lucky Montblanc pen, she left her tiny office. She focused on her breathing as she moved down the thickly carpeted corridor to Mr. Lord's corner office.

Marion glanced up from her computer screen as Jess approached. "You can go right in. He's expecting you."

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