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M.S. PARKER

A NOVEL

FORBIDDEN

Pleasures

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Forbidden Pleasures

A Novel

By M.S. Parker

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Broken Pleasures

The Prequel

Chapter 1

It happened during my last session with my court-appointed therapist. She'd given me two pieces of advice that I decided to follow. The first was to not let anyone define who I was, to be an individual who was comfortable in her own skin. The second was to have a healthy sex life. I remember thinking that was kind of strange, considering I was only eighteen at the time.

Somehow, I doubted this was what she pictured when she'd imparted those words of wisdom.

The man beneath me moaned as I rode him. The muscles in my thighs were starting to burn with each rise and fall, but I didn't slow. I kept my eyes open, my head down, but I barely registered the pretty-boy features of the young man I'd picked up just an hour ago. My hands splayed on his muscular chest, helping me balance.

“Fuck, babe, you're so tight.”

Okay, so I hadn't picked the guy for his eloquence, but he had a nice thick cock and no issues with me calling the shots. That's what mattered.

I flexed my muscles the way I'd been taught, and he swore again. “I work out,” I said and flexed again.

I leaned forward, and he pushed himself up on his elbows, his mouth latching on to a pale pink nipple. My eyelids fluttered as he sucked on it, his

tongue and teeth teasing, but I didn't close my eyes. I always fucked with my eyes open... always. Lights on. No exceptions.

“Harder,” I said and ground down, the angle allowing just the right amount of friction on my clit. I was close. The pressure inside me was at the point where I had to come or explode. “Come on... baby.” I almost tripped over not knowing his name, but I caught myself. “Suck harder. Make me come.”

Technically, I was doing most of the work, but he deserved a little credit for his nice cock and the wonderful things his mouth was doing to my breast, especially when he followed my directions. Never underestimate the importance of a man who does what he's told.

“Ah,” I moaned as the suction increased, sending jolts of intense pleasure from my breasts straight to my throbbing pussy. I moved one of my hands to the place where my body joined with his and my fingers found my clit. I rubbed it with quick, rapid circles, the combined friction and pressure making it hurt beautifully. I always needed that edge.

“Fuck, I'm gonna...” The guy's words turned into a loud grunt as his hips jerked up against me, his final thrusts hard and fast.

The hand not between my legs moved to my breast. Even as I felt my partner's cock begin to pulse inside the condom, it was my turn. A light pinch and twist to my nipple, and I was there. My muscles tensed and my pussy contracted around the thick shaft inside. The nameless young man swore again, his face a mask of pain-pleasure. As I descended from my high, I rolled off him, and his now-sensitive cock slipped out. I lay on my side, breathing heavily and enjoying the little bursts of electricity racing along my nerves, the aftershocks of a pretty good orgasm. Eight on a scale of ten.

He moved closer and I immediately stiffened, adrenaline flooding my system. I jerked upright, pushing myself back until I was well out of arm's reach.

“Easy, babe.” He gave me a smile, showing a set of deep dimples that went perfectly with his baby blues. He leaned on his elbow. “That was amazing.”

I nodded in agreement and climbed off the narrow dorm bed. College boys were easy, but their beds were generally shit. I picked up my underwear and bra.

“Leaving already?”

I glanced at him as I dressed. He hadn't moved, even to cover himself.

“Come back,” he continued. “Give me ten minutes and an energy drink from the mini-fridge, I'll be good to go again.”

It wasn't even remotely tempting since that would mean at least ten minutes of small talk, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I wasn't a bitch, no matter how often I'd been called one. “Thanks, but no. I have to go to work.”

He glanced at the clock, a puzzled expression settling on his handsome face. “It's three in the afternoon.”

I smiled and shrugged as I adjusted my tank top. His eyes locked onto the bit of cleavage the tight black top exposed. I didn't say anything. He'd seen them bare. As long as he kept his hands to himself now, he could look all he wanted.

“Will I see you around?” He sat up, but didn't reach for me.

“Probably not for a while,” I answered truthfully. While I liked coming to campus, I generally tried not to frequent the same places when I had an itch to scratch. No matter how good the sex, I rarely repeated. I knew society liked to pretend it was the women who got clingy, but I'd met plenty of men who thought a couple roles in the hay meant we were a regular thing.

I smoothed down my miniskirt and pulled on my nearly knee-high boots. I had two pairs, but these were my favorites. The four-inch heels raised me close to five-eight and I preferred being tall. Plus, if I ran into any trouble, they packed a hell of a kick.

“Where do you work?”

I gave him a small smile, but didn't answer. I scanned the carpet. One of my earrings had fallen out. I still had the other three in my right earlobe, but the hoop from the cartilage at the top was missing.

“Let me guess.”

I rolled my eyes, knowing he couldn't see my face. I knew what was coming. I knew how people saw me. I'd dyed my hair several times over the years, but for the past six months, I had rocked a bright blue. It was cropped short, angled at my chin in a way that kept my heart-shaped face from looking too delicate. My eyes were a pale gray that most people thought were contacts though they were one hundred percent natural. Aside from the multiple piercings in my ears, I also had an eyebrow ring and one in my bellybutton. That, plus my numerous tattoos and the way I dressed, meant people generally made the wrong assumptions regarding my occupation.

“Dancer at The Blue Moon?”

At least he'd picked one of the classier strip clubs in the area. I had a

feeling more than one of my conquests over the past three and a half years had gone trolling clubs looking for me. The thought was amusing. What did it say about the state of feminism in society when a woman couldn't express herself through her appearance without people assuming she was a stripper?

I finally spotted the small silver hoop and slid it back into place with practiced ease. "It was fun," I said as I headed out the door.

By the time I reached the dorm lobby, I was already running through my schedule for the day, my encounter all but forgotten. I only had two jobs today, but the second had a long list of things I needed to do, most of which had to wait until everyone at the company had gone home. Those were my second favorite kind of jobs, because it meant I rarely had anyone staring at me or trying to talk to me while I worked. The best work was, of course, the kind I could do from home. I liked crowds at clubs and concerts, the anonymity that came with being part of the masses, but I wasn't a social person. There was only so much personal interaction I could handle at a time. I'd heard half a dozen psychological diagnosis as well as a multitude of reasons behind them. I had a simpler explanation that I preferred.

I didn't play well with others.

The brisk wind that greeted me as I stepped outside was much chillier than it had been less than an hour ago. Autumn really had come to Colorado. I shivered and pulled my long-sleeved shirt more tightly around me. I'd been debating about stopping home before hitting my first appointment—the weather just cinched it. Coming home late tonight without a jacket would

suck.

I headed toward the apartments that sat on the edge of the Colorado State University campus. They were a nice mix of graduate students, married students and recent graduates in the transition stage between college and real life. Age-wise, I fit in with them, even though I'd graduated three years ago. I didn't really hang out with any of them though. I preferred my own company. I could trust myself.

I didn't even give the 'out of order' sign by the elevator a second glance; it had only worked the first year I'd lived here. I didn't mind the walk up three flights of stairs most of the time. Less time I had to spend on the treadmill at the gym. It was a real bitch when I had to carry stuff though.

The apartment was small, but I didn't need a big place. When you grow up with hardly any room to move, a one-bedroom with a kitchen, bathroom and living room all to myself was a luxury. The place was neat and simple, the furniture a mismatch of clunky college thrift store finds and the nicer pieces I'd been slowly buying. A bedroom suite had been my first purchase, a celebration of my first self-employment check. I didn't go in the bedroom though. I didn't need to. Still, I paused at its doorway and looked at my place, allowing myself to feel the satisfaction of knowing I'd accomplished all this on my own.

I swapped my outer shirt for my favorite leather jacket and headed back out. Nothing like a good fuck and then a little affirmation of how far I'd brought myself. I wasn't a shrink, but I thought I was pretty well-adjusted. Considering other people who'd gone through the same things I had were either dead, drug addicts or prostitutes, I felt a pat on the back was well-deserved.

I was still in a good mood when I strolled in to Khan and Associates, and the secretary glaring at me only brightened my day. She was a new addition since the last time I'd been here, which meant I was going to enjoy this.

“May I help you?”

If she'd had glasses, she would've glared at me over their rims. I plunked my backpack down on her desk just to see her eye twitch.

“I'm here to see Ms. Khan.” I kept my tone polite and professional. “She's expecting me.”

“Take a seat.” The secretary gave me one of those condescending looks that women like her seemed to reserve for people like me. “I'll get to you when I get to you.”

I laughed and the scowl deepened, creating an array of tiny wrinkles on her forehead. If she kept that up, she'd make herself look years older than she was. “Check your appointment book. Lang Tech Consulting.”

She didn't even pretend to look at her computer or the calendar on the desk. Instead, she pointed toward the chairs and looked at me like I was something to scrape off the bottom of her shoe. My mild annoyance started to turn into actual anger. I didn't show it though. Even as good as I was at my job, if I got too mouthy, people wouldn't overlook my appearance to hire me.

“Ma'am,” I spoke through gritted teeth. “I'm going to say this one more time and then I'm going to make a call that you really don't want me to make. Let Ms. Khan know I'm here.”

“Excuse me?” She stood up, leaning toward me with her hands on the desk.

I was sure the look she was giving me had quelled plenty of people who

seemed tougher than me. Unfortunately for her, my past was full of people a hell of a lot scarier than a middle-aged secretary with a superiority complex.

I sighed and straightened. "Don't say I didn't warn you." I pulled my phone from my bag and scrolled through my business contacts. I tapped on the right name and waited.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Khan, this is Jenna Lang."

"You're late, Ms. Lang." My client's voice was sharp.

"Yes," I agreed. "I've run into a bit of a snag and it doesn't look like I'll make it in."

"Ms. Lang," Ms. Khan interrupted. "Is there a point to this? You're far too professional to sound so flippant about canceling at the last minute."

"Indeed," I said. "Your secretary seems to be under the impression that my presence here is unwelcome."

Ms. Khan muttered something under her breath that could have been a series of swear words. "I'll be right there."

I ended the call, put my phone back in my bag and then gave the secretary a sugar-sweet smile. "It'll be just a minute."

"Young lady," she said, far from threatened. "And I use that term very loosely, if you don't turn around and start walking toward that door, I will call security and watch them haul your slutty little ass right out of here."

A door at the end of the hall opened, then closed, and I took a step back from the desk. A flash of triumph crossed the secretary's face and I knew she thought she'd won.

“Sandra!”

I couldn't stop the smirk when I saw the secretary's face go pale. I didn't want her to get fired, but I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to witnessing her bubble get popped.

“Ms. Khan.”

“Didn't Ms. Lang tell you that she had an appointment with me?”

The secretary glared at me, crossed her arms and turned back to her boss. “No, ma'am, she just marched right in here and demanded to see you.”

My smile disappeared. She was seriously going to stand there and lie? I glanced at Ms. Khan. The woman was impeccably dressed, as always, the picture perfect business woman. She didn't look at me, but I could tell her face was blank.

“Your job, Sandra, is to make inquiries in situations such as this, not prevent work from getting done. Something to keep in mind for the future.” Ms. Khan turned back the way she'd come, making an impatient gesture over her shoulder. “Come on, Ms. Lang. I'm not letting you bill me for the time you've wasted.”

I pressed my lips into a flat line and followed. I'd done four jobs for Khan and Associates and had always thought she'd been at least indifferent about me. Apparently, I'd been giving her too much credit. As we walked down the hallway to her office, I realized she was just a good actress. She'd been tolerating me because I was good at what I did and still new enough to charge a lower rate than my competitors. I didn't feel any anger though, just resignation. It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last.

Fuck them all.

I didn't care. I was who I was. No one would ever change that.

Chapter 2

I finished up at Khan and Associates in good time, my annoyance at what had happened driving me to get done and get out as soon as possible. Fortunately, Ms. Khan left me alone to do my work, so I didn't have her condescending presence to deal with. Still, I was glad to leave. I wouldn't end my contract with the company over this, but I wasn't about to spend any more time than necessary hanging around.

The sun was going down as I stepped into the brisk wind. I headed for the bus stop, thankful it was only a couple yards away. I'd probably end up taking a cab home tonight. It was getting to be the time of year when I couldn't walk to all my jobs, which meant splitting my travel between cabs and buses. I wasn't fond of either, but didn't have enough money to buy a car yet, no matter how well I'd been doing financially. Still too much debt to pay off.

The driver gave me a once over and rolled her eyes as I climbed on board. I took the first empty seat and stared out the window as the bus made its way through Fort Collins. The software company I was going to was on the other side of the city, so I had at least thirty minutes, forty if traffic was bad. I ran through the checklist of everything I had to do. The repetition and familiarity of work kept me from thinking about anything else, and if there was one thing I avoided at all costs, it was thinking too much.

Archer Enterprises was in a fairly unassuming building considering it was one of the largest software companies in the country. I hadn't been here before, but I'd done my research when I'd gotten the call for the job. The place didn't look like much on the outside, but I knew the tech inside would be better than anything I'd ever seen before. Hell, their state-of-art badassness was the main reason I'd wanted the job.

I walked to the glass doors and glanced around as the doors opened. Immediately inside the lobby were two security guards who looked like they'd once either been Special Forces or linebackers. Maybe both.

“Jenna Lang,” I introduced myself. “Lang Tech Consulting.”

The younger of the two guards gave me a doubtful look and I wondered if I was going to have another issue.

“Have you been here before?” the other guard asked. His dark eyes were warm, but his expression professional.

I raised an eyebrow. “Does it matter?”

“Actually, Miss, it does,” he said. His tone was neutral, neither kind nor unkind. “Mr. Archer doesn't allow us to let people up unless they've been here before.”

One corner of my mouth twitched up in a partial smirk. “Then how are they ever supposed to get in?”

The younger one smiled. “What Monty here is trying to say is that Mr. Archer insists on being contacted personally to come down for anyone who hasn't been here before.”

Okay, that was surprising. What CEO came down to see every visitor? I mean, I knew a lot of those types had a lot of time on their hands, but I

assumed the majority preferred to spend that time clubbing or fucking or spending obscene amounts of money, sometimes all at once.

“Wait here,” the older guard instructed. He reached over and picked up a phone. He pushed a button, waited a moment, and then spoke again. “Mr. Archer, there's a Ms. Lang here for you.” Another minute passed. “Yes, Sir. Thank you.” He hung up the phone and turned back to me. “He'll be down in a moment.”

I nodded and the older guard took a couple steps back. The younger one, however, stayed where he was. I didn't think he was concerned about me doing something crazy or anything like that. Based on the way he eyed me up and down, I was pretty sure he was deciding if he just wanted to ogle me or ask me out. He was kind of cute, but I wasn't interested in another fuck anytime soon. And I didn't do dates.

I looked around. The lobby was small, but that didn't surprise me. Archer Enterprises was large in terms of production, so their factories were massive, but one of the things that made Archer different from similar companies was that the CEO hand-picked only the best and the brightest, believing in quality over quantity, and he was willing to pay what they were worth. Which made sense since he'd been the best and the brightest his whole life.

Rylan Archer. Twenty-eight and a self-made billionaire who'd started his software company while a freshman at Colorado State University. By the time he was a senior, he'd had enough money that he could've dropped out, but he finished his degree in computer science and then hired the number two in his field, a guy named Curt Stockard who'd end up being the public face of Archer Enterprises until eighteen months ago when a car accident put him in a coma for three weeks. When he woke, he cashed in his shares of the

company and had taken off to the Bahamas with his wife. Since then, Rylan had been forced into the spotlight and, from what I could tell, he didn't like it. I'd barely been able to find any interviews with him.

I looked over when I heard the elevators ding and Archer stepped out. My eyes widened a bit. I had to admit the pictures I'd found didn't do the CEO any justice. Dark brown hair that was just a bit too long for the average businessman, stunning blue-violet eyes that, even from a distance, I could tell were intelligent. He was tall, easily six-two, six-three, with broad shoulders and a suit that showed off his muscular torso. Strong jawline, high cheekbones. Damn. He was hot.

But this was business. And I never mixed business with pleasure.

“Mr. Archer.” I stretched out my hand.

“Ms. Lang.”

Rylan's grip was firm, but not too much. He didn't try to do what most men did and make it caress, but he also didn't take the opportunity to prove his superiority by trying to crush my hand either. The men who attempted to do that generally ended up with an unpleasant lesson in the pressure points in the hand.

“If you'll follow me.”

He turned and started to walk without even looking behind him to see if I was coming. I wondered how much of that was the confidence that came from being the boss or if it was arrogance. I supposed I'd figure it out soon enough.

“I've done my research on you, Ms. Lang,” he said as he pressed the elevator button.

I was a bit surprised. I'd thought someone who insisted on personally meeting every new arrival would want to talk to me one-on-one since we hadn't really had an interview. As we hadn't gone to his private elevator, I assumed he was putting me right to work.

“And I've done mine on you, Mr. Archer,” I replied.

I caught a hint of a smile, but he didn't look at me.

“I insist that all of my employees call me Rylan.”

Ah, one of those kinds of rich guys. I'd met them before. They wanted their employees to think of them as buddies. Thought it gave them some kind of equality, made them more like the “common man”.

“Am I an employee then?” I asked as I followed him onto the elevator.

“For the moment,” he answered and pushed the button for the top floor.

I frowned. Most central computer systems were kept on ground floors, sometimes higher up if a company didn't have the whole building. I'd never heard of a computer room on the top floor.

“You'll be accessing the server from my office,” Rylan said. “I don't allow anyone but myself in the main server room.”

“No private elevator?” The question popped out and I mentally scolded myself. That wasn't any of my business.

Rylan ignored my question and went back to his previous train of thought. “You have quite an impressive history.” He glanced at me. “Would you prefer I call you Ms. Lang, or is Jenna okay?”

I knew how it worked. If I said Ms. Lang, I was being stand-offish. If I said Jenna, he might take it as license to get too personal. In previous

situations, I'd found the best way to handle it was to not make the decision. "However you address the rest of your employees would be appropriate."

Again, a twitch of lips that said my answer somehow amused him. "All right, Jenna. As I was saying, when looking for a tech company, I was very thorough. I have to say, I was surprised when I reached you."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he was surprised. Everyone was surprised to find out I ran a legitimate business and had the degrees to back it up. Not that I could blame them. I looked more like the freak the suits kept in the basement and never let out.

"You're young to have a masters in computer science," he said.

Not the first thing I'd expected. I figured he was either building up to comment on my appearance or would let it go completely.

"Then again, you graduated at sixteen, went straight into summer classes and didn't take any time off. Considering all that, getting a masters along with a minor in business by twenty isn't really odd." Rylan's voice was even, matter-of-fact.

I wasn't sure if I should be impressed or freaked out that he knew so much about me. Most employers dug, but not that deeply. The elevator dinged and the doors opened. Rylan motioned for me to step out first and then followed. We were on the top floor, which wasn't surprising, but what surprised the hell out of me was that there wasn't a hallway. It opened straight into his office. At least I assumed it was his office since that's where he'd said we were going.

It didn't look like any CEO's office I'd ever seen before. For one thing, it was one giant open space with three glass walls. Behind us, where the room

would've gone out over the lobby, was a solid wall with a door on either side of the elevator door. One, I assumed, would lead to a private bathroom. The other, I wasn't sure, but wasn't too curious about. Not my business. What would be my business was the set up three fourths of the way into the room.

When we first walked in, there were two long conference tables on either side of the elevator door. All of the chairs faced an elaborate extension of about three or four desks had been placed together to create a long island that could hold the half a dozen computers currently set up. I already knew the kind of computer I'd be working on based on the software Archer Enterprises put out, and I wasn't disappointed. He had a tower and the newest, top of the line desktops as well as laptops and massive monitors. I had no doubt that his systems would be up to date as well. He didn't hire me for bugs or software upgrades.

“What I found most interesting was that you were able to get an investor for Lang Tech Consulting at such a young age. Banks have gotten wary about loaning money for computer ventures over the past couple years.” Rylan barely glanced at the skyline view as he walked toward his desk.

“I didn't get a loan,” I said, unable to stop myself from explaining. “One of my professors saw how good I was and convinced the college to hire me for a couple jobs. Helped me get my foot in the door.”

It was a test. The look in Rylan's eyes as he glanced at me said he already knew that, but had wanted to know if I'd be honest about how I'd gotten started. From what I could tell, it looked like I'd given the right answer.

As I followed Rylan around the desk to the front of the monitors, one of the non-elevator doors opened and a man entered. He was tall and lean, but

not a cut and defined kind of lean. Rather, he had the build of someone fortunate enough to have a good metabolism, but didn't spend much time exercising. His jet black hair was slicked back in a style that was older than the early thirties his features seemed to fit. His eyes were the color of dark chocolate, but they weren't exactly warm. His gaze slid over me and I had to suppress the urge to glare at him. There were some guys I could just tell were undressing me with their eyes. Admiration was one thing; leering was something else.

“Jenna, meet Christophe Constantine, my assistant.” Rylan tapped on one of the keyboards and the screens all came to life. “Would you like tea or coffee? We also have water and fruit juice available.”

“Coffee, please,” I said. “Black. And decaf if you have it.”

I was close enough to see Rylan's eyes shine with humor.

“I thought caffeine was all computer programmers and techs drank.”

Despite myself, I smiled.

“Rylan,” Christophe spoke. His voice was much lower than I would've thought, almost gravelly. “Emmaline Kent wants to speak to you about some glitches in the program she's working on.”

“I'm booked until tomorrow,” Rylan said. I watched him scan a mental calendar, his eyes narrowing as he appeared to find an empty slot. “Schedule her an appointment for one o'clock and tell her to be ready to present a series of possible solutions for the issues she's having.”

“Will do,” Christophe said. “Did you want anything to drink?”

“My usual,” Rylan answered even as he pulled out two chairs. “And make sure the pots are full before you leave for the day.”

“Got it.” Christophe turned and walked out.

“Now, Jenna, what do you say we get down to business?” Rylan sat down in one of the chairs and I took the other. “Once you get started on the preliminaries, I’ll have Christophe order us some dinner.”

“Excuse me?” I pushed my chair away from him as I turned.

“I assumed since we’d be staying late, you’d get hungry. I usually order in when I’m working late, so I figured I’d get enough for two.” Rylan didn’t seem put off by the edge in my voice.

“You’re staying too?” I tried not to scowl. One of the things I liked about security system work was that I usually had to do it after the offices were empty, which meant I only had the occasional security guard checking in on me.

Rylan gave me a small smile. “I know there are a lot of companies that give free reign, but no one gets on my computers or my server for the first time without me there. Sorry, Jenna. You’re stuck with me for the duration of this assignment.”

Chapter 3

I wasn't happy that Rylan was staying while I worked, and even less so when I realized he fully intended to be right there the entire time. He wasn't hovering, but it was close. It wasn't that I couldn't work with someone watching me. It was more that I didn't like to, especially when that someone was a man I didn't know. But, I was a professional and I'd do what needed to be done. Besides, he hadn't given me a reason not to trust him.

“You said you had a security issue.” I pushed my chair to the edge of where I needed to be and hoped I didn't offend him. “But you didn't mention specifics.”

Rylan nodded and leaned closer to pull up a program on the center monitor. I managed not to flinch or pull away, then mentally scolded myself for being so jumpy. It wasn't like I hadn't worked with men before or even good-looking men. And while he was definitely hot, that wasn't the reason I felt more nervous than usual. Not that I knew what the real reason was.

“I didn't mention specifics,” Rylan said. “Because it's a security issue with a prototype of brand new software I'm beta testing on our servers.”

Oh. That made sense. No one in their right mind would tell someone like me that their servers weren't secure. Even a company with a long-established reputation shouldn't be trusted with information like that. With a company like this, stolen information could be sold to the highest bidder for

millions. Now I really understood why Rylan didn't plan to leave me here alone. This was practically the most vulnerable position a business like this could be in. In fact, that was usually why jobs like this were done from the inside.

“Why me?” I asked. “Why doesn't your security tech handle this himself? Or herself?”

A flash of anger went across Rylan's face. “He's no longer employed here.” The tone of his voice told me the matter wasn't going to be discussed any further. “So, what can you do to fix this?” He gestured toward the screen.

There was no attitude in his question, so I didn't snap off some smart-ass reply. Instead, I focused on the screen and let myself fall into the safety of ones and zeros, the cyber-world where I was in control and a single keystroke could change everything. That was one of the reasons I'd gone into a technological field. As an expert, I had power in a place where things were straightforward, even if I was using a backdoor. There were other reasons I'd chosen computers, but this wasn't the time or place to rehash any of them.

The program Rylan had opened was an impressive one. It was a multi-level operating system designed to exponentially increase speed and efficiency while offering a new, attractive appearance. Once all of the beta tests were done and this hit the market, it'd be huge.

If I could fix one, teeny-tiny, glaring error.

As I continued to read the code, I began to frown. Something wasn't right here.

“What is it?” Rylan asked. “You see something.”

I nodded. “I do.” I didn't expound, but kept reading instead. I half-

expected him to interrupt and insist that I share, but he didn't. Instead, he let me keep going until I'd finished. Only then did I look away from the monitor and face Rylan.

“What did you see?” Rylan asked, almost holding his breath. This is the first time I saw a crack in his professional surface.

His face was carefully masked and I knew he was testing me.

“The security breach in the software was intentional.” I paused, and then made an intuitive guess. “Which is why your security tech got fired.” I glanced at the monitor nearest me again. “Do you know who he sold the information to?”

“No one,” Rylan admitted.

I was surprised. I hadn't expected him to admit the breach. I thought he'd just brush aside the question and move on.

“The day we installed the software to start beta testing, one of my other security personnel found an incriminating note that made me check the program. My former employee didn't have any time to let his contact know he'd opened a window for them. We had him arrested and a friend at the police station promised to keep him away from a phone for twenty-four hours.”

“Which is why you needed me to come in right away,” I connected the dots. “You need me to fix the problem before this guy calls his contact and lets them know it's open season on Archer Enterprises.”

Rylan nodded. “Exactly.”

“Question. Why don't you just uninstall the software?”

He grimaced. "It's not that easy. It'd take a complete system wipe and reboot. And while the old software was re-installing..."

"You'd be vulnerable," I finished. A question popped into my head, but I wasn't sure if it was a good idea for me to ask it.

"Whatever you're wondering, just ask."

I blinked. I'd never had someone call me out like that before. I hoped it wasn't because I was getting easier to read. I didn't address that, however, but asked my question. "Why'd you install software without checking it first?"

He leaned back in his chair. "You mean why did someone who's supposed to be smart not notice there was something seriously wrong with the software before I installed it?" Rylan asked wryly.

I shrugged. "You said it, not me."

"I trust my employees," Rylan said. "They check their own work, ask for help when they need it."

"And how's that working for you?" I closed my eyes as soon as the question came out. Shit. "I'm sorry. That was completely unprofessional." I opened my eyes, guessing I'd be getting fired if he wasn't on a timetable.

"No need to apologize." Rylan held up a hand. He crossed one long leg over the other and I couldn't help but admire how well tailored his pants were. "It's worked fine for years, but I suppose it had to catch up with me sooner or later."

I managed to keep my opinion to myself on that one. Rylan was far too trusting, especially for a CEO. His eyes met mine and I wondered if he knew what I was thinking, if he could read the code that turned into thoughts inside my mind. I tried not to squirm. There wasn't anything inappropriate in his

gaze, but it felt like he was seeing deep inside me. I didn't like it.

“Are you able to fix the problem?” Rylan asked, finally breaking the silence. He turned toward the monitor, the personal conversation clearly over.

Grateful for the shift, I nodded. “I'm basically going to have to re-write the code that your tech put in here. He didn't just leave it out. He actually wrote an open door in its place. I'll want to go through the rest of the code too, just to make sure he didn't put in a back door or mess with anything else.” I didn't look at Rylan as I added, “If you have a non-disclosure agreement for me to sign, I can do that now.”

He slid a piece of paper across the desk and I read through it quickly. I'd learned how to skim these things to make sure I didn't get caught off guard without taking forever to do it. I signed my copy and the company's copy and then Rylan initialed both. With that taken care of, I turned my attention to the task at hand.

I let myself fall into the rhythm of work, tuning out everything around me. I was vaguely aware that Rylan was watching me, but pushed it to the back of my mind. I was good at compartmentalizing when I needed to. I didn't realize that Christophe had brought in coffee until I automatically reached over and a mug was there. It was perfect, strong and black. I sighed. Decaf too. That was good. I'd had enough caffeine today. Anymore would leave me on the wrong side of total control.

I didn't know how much time passed, only that I was half-way through my system check when I became aware that Rylan had moved closer and was now looking over my shoulder. I inhaled sharply, catching a whiff of something masculine and spicy. My stomach clenched in a good way. I didn't know what kind of soap or aftershave that was, but I liked it.

“You're doing great work.” His voice was low and near enough that I tensed. He reached over my shoulder and pointed at a line of code. “That backdoor was virtually undetectable and you closed it while allowing for a passcode to grant access if necessary. Always important in case I get shut out of my system.”

I pushed back from the desk, moving away from him. My eyes narrowed. “How'd you know that was there?”

“I am a software designer,” he said mildly.

I looked around, the passage of time now registering. The sky was dark, the light coming in through the window now artificial. We'd been alone in Rylan's office since the beginning, but now I knew we were alone in the building. Maybe there was a security guard somewhere, but I doubted he came up to the top floor when the boss was here. Especially if the boss was up here with a woman.

“Why didn't you fix this yourself?” I stood as my heart started to race. “Why did you hire me to do something you could do yourself?”

I could feel my palms begin to sweat. I told myself that there had to be a reasonable explanation. Logically, I knew that had to be the case. Smoking hot CEO's of billion-dollar software companies didn't randomly hire tattooed and pierced computer techs just to get them alone. The panic that threatened to choke me told a different story.

The panic reminded me that Rylan had admitted to researching me, finding out about my past. He couldn't know too much, of that I was certain. I'd made sure Jenna Lang was impossible to trace to who I once was. But still, he'd looked me up. My mind raced. Was it possible he'd chosen me because I was alone? Did he think no one would believe me if I tried to claim

he'd done something to me? Did he think he could get away with... what?

My breath was coming in rapid, short bursts of air now. I needed to calm down. Breathe. My imagination had taken on a life of its own and was running away, taking my brain hostage. If I didn't get control of it, I would hyperventilate. It didn't happen often, but I could feel a panic attack on the brink. It had been a while since I'd had one. I was due.

“Jenna, are you okay?” Rylan looked concerned as he stood.

He reached out, his hand brushing against my arm. Electricity shot through me, followed by a surge of adrenaline so strong I nearly roared. I could do nothing but act on instinct, my brain barely processing my actions.

My hand curled into a fist and my arm drew back. I turned my body like I'd been taught, putting everything into the punch. Pain flared through my knuckles and up my hand as I connected with the side of his face.

Then I did the only thing I could do. I bolted. I heard him call my name as I hit the elevator button and prayed it would close before he got too close. I didn't know if he wasn't chasing or if I was quick enough, but either way, I made it to the lobby without being caught, and then headed for the front door. It wasn't until I was halfway down the side that I finally slowed. Thank God, a bus. I picked up my pace and jumped on. I dug four quarters out of my pocket, tossed them in the collector and collapsed on a seat. I didn't realize I'd forgotten my backpack until I was at my apartment and had to use my spare key.

Fuck.

I would have to go back to Archer Enterprises and get it.

Double fuck.

Chapter 4

“Aren't you just a cute little thing?”

His voice was rough but his hands would be rougher. They always were.

I knew I was dreaming. I always knew it when I got to this point, but it didn't make things any easier. Didn't take away the metallic taste of fear coating my tongue. Didn't stop me from cringing when his hands tore away my clothes.

I cried out as the fabric burned my skin as the shredded garments were discarded. That earned me a backhand and a laugh deep from his throat. Even though I knew it was coming every time, I could never stop myself from making a sound.

Terror choked me as my hands were captured and held down. Tears blinded me, keeping me from seeing his face beyond a blur. It didn't matter. I knew his face. It was etched behind my pupils. I would see it every time I closed my eyes until the day I died. And even then, I doubted I'd be free.

Pain tore through me and I tried not to give him the satisfaction of a scream, but as he shoved and ripped, I couldn't hold it in anymore.

“Stop! Please! Stop!” I screamed the words over and over again, but he didn't listen. He never did. I begged and cried, coughing and choking, and it only excited him more.

Safe.

I tried to say the word, to remind myself that this wasn't real. I was safe in bed or curled up on my couch.

I'd eventually reach a point in my nightmare when I was forced to wake up because it was just too much, my conscious mind saving me from the abyss. There would be no man. No real pain. But I could barely hold on to a thought for more than a few seconds before the fear drove it out and I was lost to the past again.

“Such a good baby girl,” he grunted, his breath hot against my cheek. His breath smelled like tobacco and mint. “So soft and sweet.”

I retched and choked on the scent of his cloying cologne. Bile rose in my throat and I knew I was going to throw up. I'd vomit on him and he'd get angry. He'd hit me and do even worse things to me and nothing I could do would stop him. It would never stop...

I jerked awake. My heart was racing and I was bathed in sweat, but it took me only seconds to orient myself. It had been a while since I'd had one of the nightmares, but they always came. They weren't memories, not exactly, but they sometimes felt like the truth. Then, at some point I would realize I was dreaming. I'd wake up, and reality didn't take me by surprise. The pounding pulse and sweat was just my body's reaction to a flood of adrenaline.

I took slow breaths like I'd been taught, but I only made it through a couple when I heard it again, the sound that had pulled me out of my nightmare. Someone was knocking on my door. And this time, a man's voice

joined in.

“Miss Lang, it's the police. We need to speak with you.”

I frowned. The cops. Why would the cops... then I knew. My hand throbbled like a nark about to spill his secrets.

Shit.

I'd hit Rylan Archer, one of the richest and most powerful men in the city, maybe the country.

I climbed out of bed, knowing I'd have to face the consequences sooner or later. When they knocked again, I called out, “I'm coming!”

I looked down at myself to make sure my sweatpants and tank top covered everything important. I was glad I'd managed to find a pair without any holes. While I didn't really care what the cops thought of me, if Rylan was going to press charges, at least I'd be somewhat presentable when I was arrested. I ran my hand through my hair as I walked across the small living room to the door.

I supposed I shouldn't have been surprised that Archer called the cops. After all, he hadn't done anything to deserve the hit I gave him. Was it possible he'd intended something? Sure, but I didn't have any proof. All these cops would see was that I didn't have a mark on me other than the ones I'd paid for or the ones too old to matter. I hadn't been roughed up or reported an assault. Not that there had been one to report.

No, they would only see tattoos and piercings, blue hair and a bad attitude versus a rich, handsome man with an impeccable record. It wouldn't matter what I said. Right. Like there was any way in hell I would tell anyone why I reacted that way to begin with.

I opened the door.

Two officers stood in the hallway. One was a woman with a severe-looking expression and even more severe-looking hair. She was probably in her early thirties, but the scowl on her face made her look way beyond her years. Her partner was stocky and about an inch shorter. He looked to be a couple years older, with gray at his temples and a world-weary look in his eyes.

He looked down at his notepad. “Are you Jenna Lang?”

“Yes.” I crossed my arms and ignored the way his eyes flicked down to my breasts and then back up again. “So, did Archer call you guys last night or wait until this morning to make his complaint?”

“Excuse me?” The woman looked genuinely confused.

Now it was my turn to be puzzled. “Why are you here?”

The man scowled, clearly not appreciating my tone. “I’m Officer O’Brien and this is Officer Ferris. We’re looking into a break-in on the second floor that happened last night around nine o’clock.”

“Oh.” Now I felt stupid, but I wasn’t about to let them see that. “I hadn’t heard anything about it. I was out until after ten.”

Officer Ferris gave me a slow once-over, not bothering to hide her disapproval of my appearance. I was half-tempted to do a half turn so she could see the angel wings tattooed across my shoulder blades. The barbed wire inked around my right wrist and left ankle were already visible. You would think enough people had tattoos now that it wouldn’t be a big deal, but I’d found most people expected women to have demure little things that were easily covered. Hearts. Flowers. Cute little cartoon characters. And, of

course, the ever popular tramp-stamp at the small of the back. Those were sexy, not rebellious. I was both.

“Looking for a good artist?” I asked as the woman's gaze lingered on my wrist.

“Where were you last night, Miss Lang?” Officer O'Brien asked brusquely.

“I was working late,” I answered, keeping my tone polite.

“I'm sure you were.” Officer O'Brien smirked and threw a sideways look at his partner. She glared at him, though I was sure it was more about the unprofessional nature of the comment rather than defense on my part.

“Can anyone vouch for you?” Officer Ferris asked.

“We'll need the name of the club and the names of your 'co-workers' so we can make sure you didn't leave between sets.” Officer O'Brien didn't even bother to pretend he wasn't staring at my breasts. I was willing to bet he was wondering if my nipples were pierced too.

“O'Brien,” Officer Ferris snapped.

Okay, I thought, maybe I'd misjudged her. Maybe she had an issue with the way I looked because she thought my appearance made it harder for women like her to be taken seriously, especially in a job like hers. It didn't mean I liked or agreed with the attitude, but at least I could respect it.

“I'm a computer tech,” I said. “I was out late on a job.”

“A computer tech?” Officer O'Brien made it quite clear what he thought the chances of that were. “No offense, but you don't exactly look like the type of person someone would hire for that.”

My mouth tightened. I hated when they tried to act like they were playing nice. If you mean something offensively, at least have the balls to admit it. "I'm self-employed." I shifted my stance to try to keep up the appearance of boredom.

"What happened to your hand?" Officer Ferris asked suddenly.

Shit. I hadn't even thought about it, but now that she'd mentioned it, I could feel my knuckles throbbing.

I looked down. My knuckles were scraped, bruised and swollen. Only an idiot would think that came from something other than throwing a punch.

"A computer piss you off?" Officer O'Brien asked.

The snide tone in his voice was really starting to irk me. "No," I answered shortly. "But that's really none of your business. You said you were here to ask about a break-in last night. I wasn't here. And before you ask it, no, I haven't seen anyone suspicious hanging around."

"You seem to know an awful lot about how this works," Officer O'Brien said.

"I watch a lot of cop shows," I shot back.

"You said you were working last night," Officer Ferris brought the conversation back around. "Where?"

"My clients rely on discretion, Officer Ferris," I said. "I can't disclose anything about that job without their permission."

"Why don't you call them and get it then?" Officer O'Brien asked.

I crossed my arms and raised an eyebrow. "I signed a non-disclosure agreement. Word gets out that I ask my clients if I can break confidentiality

at the drop of a hat, I lose business.”

Officer Ferris held up a hand to stop her partner from saying something that probably would've made me lose my temper. “Did you stop somewhere on the way home? Maybe for a cup of coffee? Did you order in or go out for a meal? Anything that can show us where you were around the time of the break-in? Did you see or speak to anyone who can confirm your whereabouts between eight and ten last night?”

A pair of dark violet-blue eyes flashed across my mind, but I stubbornly refused to acknowledge them. Aside from the fact that I never wanted to see Rylan Archer again, I doubted he'd be willing to alibi me unless he also pressed charges for assault. Since I hadn't done it, I was willing to take my chances with the robbery. If the cops heard about the assault, I was fucked.

“So there's nobody who can support your alibi?” Officer O'Brien actually looked happy about that.

“I can.”

My nails dug into my arms as I struggled to keep my face from showing the panic that immediately flared inside at the sound of his voice. The cops turned, revealing Rylan. He had a black eye, flowers and my bag. I didn't even bother to try to figure out how he knew where I lived. Men like him had the resources to get what they wanted.

“Miss Lang was working with me last night,” he continued. He gave me a quick glance, but smoothly turned his gaze to the officers after just a few seconds. “She left a little after ten.” He shifted my bag into the hand with the flowers and then held out his now-free hand. “Rylan Archer.”

Based on the way Officer Ferris's eyes widened, she knew the name.

That wasn't surprising. After all, Rylan had been featured as the city's most eligible bachelor, a title I suspected he loathed. Officer O'Brien didn't look like he recognized Rylan, but a clean-cut, well-dressed man would generally be more credible than me, even with a black eye.

“Mr. Archer.” Officer Ferris was trying to sound like she wasn't gushing and it wasn't working. “It's an honor to meet you.” She glanced over at her surprised and annoyed-looking partner. “Mr. Archer is the CEO of the top software company in the city.”

Officer O'Brien looked from Rylan to me and back again. I could almost see the wheels in his head turning. I didn't need to be a mind reader to guess what he was thinking. A hint of a smile curved his lips.

“Is everything all right, Mr. Archer?” he asked.

Rylan gave a rueful smile. “Just a bit of a misunderstanding, that's all.”

Officer O'Brien nodded. “All right then. We'll leave you two to sort things out and get back to our business.”

“Sorry to bother you, Mr. Archer,” Officer Ferris said.

Bother him? I scowled as the cops moved down the hall to my neighbor's apartment. Then Rylan stepped forward and I was forced to turn my attention to him. He held out my bag and it was all I could do to not snatch it from his grasp.

“They didn't ask for your side of the story.”

I looked up from my bag and almost laughed at the puzzled expression on Rylan's face. “You do realize they think I'm your side piece of ass, right? Your freaky little secret.”

Rylan's jaw dropped and I did laugh.

“What?”

“I know,” I said. “Like you'd even be into any of that.” Heat flooded my cheeks as soon as the sentence popped out. Why the hell had I said that? “Sorry,” I muttered.

“Don't be,” Rylan said. He shot an angry look over his shoulder at the cops. “I can't believe they just left me here with you without even asking if you would be okay. What if I was some abusive psycho ex?”

“Don't worry about it,” I said with a wave of my hand. If I hadn't been strung so tight trying to figure out why he was here, I might've made some smart-ass comment about how guys like him didn't have ex's who looked like me. At least not ones he'd admit to. “Thanks for bringing my bag back.”

Rylan turned back to me, but I had a feeling he wasn't going to let this go. “I also came to apologize for the misunderstanding and to give you these too.” He held out the flowers.

I stared at him for a moment, waiting for the punchline. When one didn't come, I took the gift. They weren't roses, but rather orchids. “Thank you.”

“I figured it was the least I could do for deceiving you,” he said.

My eyebrows shot up. I definitely hadn't expected him to admit to lying.

“Look.” Rylan shoved his hands into the pockets of his designer jeans, looking more like some grad student than a multi-billionaire. “I can explain everything.” His eyes met mine. “May I come in?”

It wasn't a good idea, but he had brought my bag back and hadn't said anything to the cops about how he'd gotten his black eye. If he'd wanted to,

he could've made my life very miserable. So, reluctantly, I stepped aside and motioned for him to come in.

I tried not to think about how I was still in my pajamas or how my apartment must look to someone who made more in a month than I did in two years. I had nothing to be ashamed of, especially when considering how far I come, though Rylan knew nothing about that.

“You wanted to explain,” I said as I stood next to my table. “Go ahead.”

Rylan crossed to my thrift store couch and sat down. He looked up at me, as if waiting for me to take a seat as well. I didn't say a word and stood there, arms crossed over my chest, an eyebrow raised in silent question. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees.

“You were right when you said I had the skills needed to fix the issue.” A sheepish look crossed his face. “Mostly because I wrote it.”

I frowned, but didn't say a word. I may have looked like I stayed upright because I was pissed, and that might've been one of the reasons, but the main motivation was more self-servicing. If I was on my feet, I could get out the door before he grabbed me...

“It wasn't a job,” he said. “It was a job interview.”

“Say again?”

“My security tech did try to sell me out,” he said. “But he wasn't as smart as he thought he was. I caught it in plenty of time and isolated the damaged software to my system only.”

I inched toward the door, starting to wonder if I'd need the cops from the hall after all. Rylan's explanation sounded an awful lot like he'd planned things so he could be alone with me.

“I know what you're thinking,” he said. “But hear me out.”

I waited, my entire body tense, prepared for fight or flight.

“I need to replace my tech and do it fast. I'm a programmer and designer. I have the capability to deal with the security issues, but it's not my strong suit.”

“So you advertise, like a normal person.” I regretted saying it as soon as the words left my mouth. What was it about this man that cracked years of careful self-control and made me say whatever popped into my head?

“Okay,” he said. “I probably deserved that.”

He spread his hands out in front of him and I noticed, for the first time, that he had long, slim fingers, the kind musicians often had.

“Like I said, I needed to find someone fast, so instead of wasting my time wading through a bunch of applications from people who couldn't find their way out of a simple code, I decided to try something different.”

“You hired me,” I said. I wasn't happy he'd been deceitful, but at least these pieces provided a relatively sane explanation for what had happened.

Rylan nodded. “I had to see if you were as good as I'd heard, and the best way to do that wasn't to sit and talk to you about shit I could find with a ten minute internet search. I needed to see you in action.”

“Why didn't you just say that?” I asked.

“You had to think the stakes and the deadline was real for me to get an accurate take,” he said. “But I would've told you at the end if...”

“If I hadn't freaked out,” I finished it for him. It was the truth. I over-reacted. The end.

He gave me a half-smile that said he agreed with my description, but hadn't wanted to say it. "It's partially my fault," he said. "I should've realized how it would've looked from your perspective."

I had to give him points for admitting it instead of just acting like I was crazy.

"So, what do you say?" he asked.

"Say about what?"

"My job offer. Full time security tech. You'd be responsible for writing security code, checking code, making sure our servers were safe." He stood. "And no more tricks. I promise."

I shook my head. Even if the interview had been done differently, I wouldn't have accepted the position. "No thank you. I prefer running my own company."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "Starting salary is sixty thousand, plus an expense account for travel. Full benefits after sixty days. Vision. Dental."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry you wasted your time with me, but I'm not interested."

"Not even if I throw in a company car?" His eyes gleamed and I wondered if he was teasing me.

I gave him a half-smile. "I like my independence too much."

"That's too bad," he said. "I think we could've been good together."

Something in his voice told me he wasn't only talking about work. There was a heat to his gaze that hadn't been there before and I knew we'd made a shift from professional now that he knew I wasn't wouldn't take his job offer.

“Was there anything else?” I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. Now that we weren't talking business, I was suddenly more aware of just how good-looking he was.

“Let me take you out for coffee,” he offered. “A true apology.”

“That's okay,” I said. My eyes flicked up to his and they held. They really were a perfect combination of blue and violet, a deep, rich color that I could get lost in if I let myself. I needed him to go.

“All right,” he said even as I torn my gaze away. “Then you should take me out for coffee.”

I looked back up at him.

He was grinning. “Think of it as an apology for the black eye.”

Dammit. How could I argue with that? I had hit him and he was going to have to explain to his employees why he had a shiner. He hadn't even asked for an apology for it either.

And, if I was going to be completely honest, I kind of wanted to go out with him. Now that the whole misunderstanding had been cleared up, I could admit what I'd known yesterday from the moment I'd seen him. He was fucking hot. And it wasn't just a physical attraction either. He was probably one of the few people I knew who was as smart as I was. Okay, probably the only person.

Still, I tried to make my tone as reluctant as possible. “Well, if you think so.”

He smiled, showing a dimple in his left cheek.

“But not now,” I quickly said. I didn't want him to stick around while I

showered and dressed, and I couldn't ask him to wait outside without an explanation. "You have to go to work, right? Find yourself another tech."

"Tomorrow," he said. "Morning or afternoon?"

"Afternoon," I answered promptly. If he let me set the guidelines, this would go quite well. "You know Marco's Diner over on Fourth?"

"I do," he answered.

"Meet me there at one."

Chapter 5

I didn't let myself get nervous before I walked over to the diner. What would the point be? Besides, this wasn't a date. It was coffee as a thank you and an apology. There might be some flirting and I was definitely planning on admiring the view, but it wasn't anything more than that. Guys like him didn't date girls like me, even if I'd been thinking of it that way. I'd been a little surprised when he'd agreed to meet me in public, though I supposed he assumed no one would recognize him in a little diner on that side of town.

Still, I dressed up. I couldn't exactly say I'd dressed nicely because I doubted anyone would describe my outfit with that adjective, but it was tame compared to what I usually wore out. Skinny jeans and a simple long-sleeved black shirt with a fairly modest scooped neckline. I did wear a pair of heavy boots and my leather jacket. If I'd had normal hair, I might not have gotten a second look from anyone.

I saw the surprise in Rylan's eyes when I came into the diner, but I was too busy appreciating his jeans and fitted sweater to comment. I took the seat across from him and then realized this wasn't an area I had much experience in. Okay, I didn't have any experience at all. I didn't do the whole dating thing. I either worked with men or I fucked them; the second consisting of a brief exchange of words that may or may not include first names.

It wasn't until I tried to figure out what I was supposed to say that I

realized I may have set the time and place, but I wasn't in control. I didn't like that at all. At least this wasn't an actual date.

“Do you want something to eat or just coffee?” Rylan motioned for a waitress.

“That depends.” I found my voice. “Does ordering a cheeseburger turn this into a dinner date? Because if it does, I'll stick with the coffee.”

He chuckled and I relaxed.

“Considering I've never had a woman order a cheeseburger on a date, I think you're safe.”

“No surprise there,” I replied.

The waitress raised her eyebrows when she saw me and then asked if we knew what we wanted. I ordered my cheeseburger and fries, then smirked when Rylan got the same thing. When the waitress walked away, I looked at him.

“It sounded good.” He shrugged, then leaned forward. “What did you mean when you said it wasn't a surprise?”

“Supermodels and actresses tend to stick with salads or shit like kale,” I answered matter-of-factly. Since I didn't know how I was supposed to behave on a real date – which this wasn't – I'd just be me. Maybe by the end of the meal, he'd realize he dodged a bullet when I turned down his job offer.

“And what makes you think I date supermodels and actresses?”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, so maybe all of them aren't exactly in that field, but they could be if they wanted to. Men like you date those kinds of women. The gorgeous ones who watch what they eat and spend half their day with a

personal trainer.”

“Men like me?” He took a sip of his coffee.

“Good-looking, rich, powerful.” I glanced toward the waitress returning with my coffee. “Men like you.”

“So you do think I'm attractive.” He smiled, showing that dimple again.

I glared at him as I took a drink and burnt my tongue. “I don't really think that's an appropriate work conversation.”

“Then it's a good thing we're not at work and you turned down my job offer. I'm not your employer.” His eyes twinkled. “Which means I can tell you that while you look great, I was hoping for another mini-skirt, because you have amazing legs.”

I raised an eyebrow. That was a bit more forward than I'd expected from him. I thought he had devised this opportunity to try to talk me into taking his job offer. Of course, I'd thought charming and flirting would be part of the deal, but I'd expected subtle, nothing that could be taken for actual attraction.

“If that's the case, why'd you offer me a job?” I asked. “Were you planning on coming in every day to check out my legs?”

“That would've just been a bonus,” he said easily. “But I value your mind over your body.”

I wasn't quite sure how to take that one. I knew my employers valued my mind over my appearance, but I'd never heard anyone say they wanted my brain more than my body. I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that. In fact, I wasn't sure how I felt about this entire encounter. It was a relief when the waitress brought our food and I was able to dig in.

“For the record,” Rylan broken the silence that had fallen while we'd started on our meals. “The reason most of my dates don't order cheeseburgers is because they're not generally on the menu.”

“Ah,” I said. “Too good for regular people food?”

He rolled his eyes and I almost choked on my hamburger from trying not to laugh. Sitting across from him, looking at the smear of ketchup on the corner of his mouth, watching him make the kind of face I'd seen guys in college make with their friends, I thought I could see a much younger version of Rylan Archer.

“What?” he asked.

I pointed to the side of my face. “You have some stuff on your cheek.”

He picked up a napkin and brushed at the wrong side.

I shook my head. I knew he was messing with me. His expression was serious, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. He dabbed at his cheek higher up and I knew what he was trying to bait me into doing. I bit, and reached for the napkin. He let me take it, his fingers brushing against mine. I was ready for the possibility of a touch this time so I didn't flinch or pull away. Besides, we were in a public place, which did give me a bit of a safety net.

I used the corner of the napkin to clean off the ketchup, and it was harder than I expected to pull away without touching his face. I was itching to know how the stubble on his cheeks and chin would feel against my fingers, if his lips were as soft as they looked.

I dropped my hand. “There, all better.” I resisted the urge to rub my hand on my pants. Usually, after this much time had passed since I'd met a guy, we'd either gone our separate ways or were already tearing each other's

clothes off. And there was never any of this kind of light flirting.

When we were done here, I would need to get laid, just to get things back to normal.

I finished my cheeseburger without another word, keeping my eyes on my plate. I felt his gaze on me, but didn't look up to meet it. As attractive as I found Rylan and as good as the food was, I was ready for this... whatever this was to be over. This was why I didn't date. Too much of a risk of some sort of personal connection. Better just to fuck and flee.

“Is something wrong?” Rylan's voice was worried.

“No.” I shook my head as I glanced up at him. I regretted it immediately. Damn those eyes. I was used to having men either disgusted with me or visually undressing me. Not looking at me with interest and concern. Something inside me sparked and I shoved it down. I wasn't going there. I needed a distraction. “So, Mr. Rylan Archer, CEO, how did you explain that shiner to your employees?”

He laughed and let me change the subject. He brushed his fingers across the deep purplish bruise beneath his eye as if just remembering it was there. “I considered trying to cover it up with make-up, but then I realized I'd look kind of silly trying to figure out how to match my coloring.”

I smiled in agreement.

“So I just told them the truth.”

“Seriously?” I stared at him.

“I told them I was mugged by a three hundred pound biker.”

I laughed, and the tension that had been building eased.

“Actually, I didn't offer an explanation and no one asked,” he admitted. “It was a little embarrassing.” He quickly clarified. “Not because you're a woman, but because I over-stepped by touching your arm.”

“I over-reacted,” I said. “It was my fault.”

He waved his hand. “Neither here nor there. It's over. No need to discuss it.” He popped the last bite of his cheeseburger into his mouth.

“So we've had our apologies for our behavior,” I said. “And we've both finished our meal...”

“In that much of a hurry to get rid of me?” The question was asked as a joke, but I sensed the undercurrent of seriousness in it.

“More like I just have somewhere I have to be,” I lied. Well, only partially lied. I was planning on finding myself someone to fuck, but I wasn't sure that constituted a place I needed to be.

“I see.” He nodded. He didn't look annoyed, but there was a mixture of frustration and disappointment in his eyes. When I stood, he did the same. “When can we do this again?” He held out his hand.

I took it and couldn't deny the pleasurable tingle that ran across my skin. That just confirmed my answer to his question. “I don't think that's such a good idea.” I turned and walked away before he could ask why. I wasn't sure I could answer him if he did.

Chapter 6

Because it was still in the middle of the day, no clubs were open and the only men hanging out at a bar wouldn't be anyone I'd want to go home with. Well, not home, because that never happened. There weren't any frat parties going on either. But, that didn't mean there weren't plenty of horny college boys on campus. I just needed to decide where I was going to search.

I headed for the gym. I didn't have a student ID anymore, but I knew I could hang out in the lobby until someone showed enough interest for me to make a move. It didn't take long. I'd barely been there ten minutes before a tall, dark-haired guy came out from the locker rooms. His hair was still damp, so I assumed he'd just taken a shower after working out. That was good. A rush of endorphins always made for hot sex.

“You waiting for someone?” he asked, his eyes lingering on the cleavage I'd created by tugging on the front of my shirt.

“Depends,” I answered coyly. “Are you someone?” I shifted my weight, knowing it would draw his attention back to my chest. Men were so predictably. For a moment, I wondered if Rylan would fall for my little tricks, if he'd forget about my mind and I worked my magic. Then I pushed the thought away and focused on the man in front of me.

“I can be someone.” He let his gaze run down the rest of my body. “I'm Evan.”

“Jenna.” I put my hand on Evan's arm. “You have a roommate?”

“He's in class until five,” Evan said. “You wanna come back to my room?”

I ran my tongue along my bottom lip. “I can promise you the best fuck of your life, but I'm in charge. You do what I say and you won't regret it.”

“Let's go.”

He didn't take my hand and I was glad for that. It meant he knew the rules and I wouldn't have to explain it. We made our way across the short distance to the closest dormitory. It didn't surprise me that he was in the athletes' dorm. As we went up the stairs, I vaguely wondered what sport he played. He was only a little over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and a muscular chest, but that didn't narrow things down. He could've been a quarterback or a point guard, or some other position I wasn't familiar with. I wasn't a big sports fan, though as I got a nice glimpse of Evan's tight ass, I had to admit, I liked the results of their work-out regimens.

I followed him into his room, pretending not to notice him kick some dirty clothes under his bed. The bed looked clean enough and that's all I cared about. I grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head.

“Damn, girl. You don't waste any time, do you?”

I smiled at him as I unbuttoned my jeans. “Something wrong with that?”

“Hell no.” Evan tossed his shirt onto a nearby desk.

I took a moment to appreciate the flat plane of his stomach, the defined muscles of his chest and arms. He had ink all the way down one side, a dragon whose tail I assumed curled around his back. He winked at me and pulled off his sweats. He was going commando and his cock bobbed happily

in front of him as it was freed. Another reason I loved college guys. It didn't take much to get them hard.

I stripped off my jeans and underwear together, then unfastened my bra and let it join the rest of my clothes. Evan swore under his breath, but his admiration didn't mean much of anything to me. I knew I had a nice body. My breasts were average size and firm, with pale pink nipples that were already starting to harden. I didn't shave my pussy, but the dark hair was neatly trimmed and thin. If any guy I'd been with didn't like it, they never said anything. Not that I would've cared if they had. Yet another reason why I avoided repeat hook-ups.

I saw his eyes flick down to the six-inch burn scar down the left side of my stomach. I took a step forward, distracting him from looking again. The moment my fingers wrapped around his cock, any question he might've considered asking was forgotten. He was a bit thinner than my last hook-up and about an inch shorter, but still well within average range. I could work with it.

I slowly stroked his cock from base to tip and his hands found my breasts. He palmed them, then lightly squeezed. His dark eyes met mine and I could see he was testing me, seeing what I'd meant by taking control, waiting for me to tell him to stop. He pinched my nipples, but not quite hard enough. I dropped my hand to his balls and gave him a squeeze. He caught his breath.

“Fingers or mouth?” I asked.

“What?”

I took one of his hands from my breast and slid it down my stomach to the juncture between my legs. I pushed one of his fingers between my lips and moaned as it pressed against my clit. I was too dry for anything more

than that at the moment, but I was sensitive enough that the light pressure sent a shiver of pleasure through me.

“You wanna get me ready with your fingers or your mouth?” I clarified my previous question.

His eyes got even darker and he raised his hand to brush his thumb across my bottom lip. “And do I get the same choice?”

“If you do it my way,” I said.

“Then tell me what your way is.” He pressed his thumb into my mouth. “Because I really want my dick in there.”

I scraped my teeth across the pad of his thumb before answering. “Get a condom and lay down on the bed.”

He immediately did as I said and I wondered how long it had been since he'd gotten laid.

“Before we get going, do I need the condom for this part too?” I didn't like the taste of latex, but better safe than sorry.

Evan shook his head. His cheeks flushed with embarrassment, confirming that he was telling the truth. “I haven't exactly been with many women.”

I grinned and climbed onto the bed. I put my knees on either side of his head and leaned over him. I would to have to stretch a bit, but it'd work. I stuck out my tongue and flicked it across the tip of Evan's cock. His hips jerked. I spread my legs wider and lowered my pussy closer to his mouth. He got the hint. His hands went to my hips and he thrust his tongue between my lips. He sucked and licked, plunging deep inside. I moaned and slid his cock into my mouth. The taste of soap and man burst across my taste buds.

I bobbed my head, taking him deeper and deeper as his tongue danced around my clit. For someone with little experience, he definitely knew his way around. I shivered as he thrust his tongue into my pussy, teasing at my walls until pleasure coursed through me. I was close and if he kept that up, I would come before we even got to the good stuff. Or, more accurately, the better stuff, because this was pretty good.

Then his lips were around my clit, sucking hard and I was crying out, the sound muffled by the hard flesh in my mouth. I shuddered as I came, automatically raising my head so I didn't accidentally bite down. Before I'd even stopped coming, I rolled off of Evan and reached for the little foil packet at his side. I tore it open with my teeth and winked at Evan as I rolled it over his throbbing erection.

“You're going to be on top?” Evan asked, his voice breathless.

I considered it, but I was in the mood for something different. I didn't do this often, but from what I'd seen, Evan would do as he was told. I got up on my knees, then turned around so I was facing away from him. I looked over my shoulder as I put my hands down on the bed. “Keep your hands on my hips and you can fuck me as hard as you want. Touch any other part of me without me telling you to and I'll cut your balls off.” I gave him a sweet smile.

Evan nodded and was immediately on his knees. I had a moment where panic threatened to hijack my arousal, but then he put one hand on my hip and used the other to position his cock at my entrance. He looked to me for reassurance and that's when I knew he would obey. I nodded and he started to ease in, one glorious inch at a time.

“Go for it,” I said as he stretched me. I was glad he hadn't used his

fingers. He was thin enough that if he had, I wouldn't have been so tight.

He pushed forward, burying himself inside me in one move. I groaned with pleasure and gave myself over to the sensation. The friction sent ripples of electricity through me and I reached beneath me to rub my swollen clit.

“Fuck,” I grunted as Evan began to pound into me. My fingers made rapid circles over that bundle of nerves, driving the fire inside of me toward the explosion I craved and needed.

“Fuck, fuck...” Evan's fingers dug painfully into my hips.

I looked over my shoulder again and saw Evan's face screwed up in concentration, and I knew he was fighting his body to prolong the experience. I pushed my ass back, forcing him deeper and harder until he let out a string of half-intelligible obscenities and came. I reached behind me with one hand and grabbed his ass, digging my nails in to hold him in place as I finished myself off.

My muscles clenched as I climaxed, and I let myself feel the pleasure coursing through my body. I was dimly aware of Evan continuing to swear as my pussy squeezed his cock until he made a pained sound. Only then did I force my muscles to unclench and he pulled out. I rolled onto my side as he flopped onto his back.

“Shit, girl,” Evan panted. “Where the hell did you come from?”

My stomach clenched in a way that wasn't pleasant and felt the darkness creep in. No. I sat up. I wasn't going to go there. I climbed off of the bed and started picking up my clothes. I'd gotten what I wanted and now it was time to move on. I didn't even glance at Evan when I answered his “can I see you again” question. Of course, my answer was a polite version of “no way in

hell.”

He'd been fun, but that was it. Just another guy.

Chapter 7

Things went back to normal on Monday. I went in for my usual two week diagnostic run for three of my regular clients – all simple businesses who were more worried about their neighbors stealing wi-fi than any real technological problems – and then did an emergency system purge for a law office that had a virus. I took it easy on Tuesday and worked from home, designing a system for a private security firm. It wasn't due for delivery until the end of October, but I was close to done and if I finished early, it'd only help my reputation. I had one job late Wednesday morning and then it was back to my system work until my phone rang at six-thirty.

I was engrossed enough in code that I didn't bother to look at who was calling before I answered it. “Lang Tech Consulting, Jenna Lang speaking.” Most people probably would've thought it strange that I answered my personal line that way, but I'd never had any problems. After all, when your calls are all business, there really isn't such a thing as a personal line.

“Jenna.”

I froze, instantly recognizing his voice. When he continued, however, I quickly snapped out of it. His tone indicated that this was indeed a business call. An urgent one.

“I need your help. A hacker got into my server and planted a virus. It would take me days to get it fixed by myself and by then...”

“Your entire system will be wiped out.” I completed the thought as I closed down all of my programs on my laptop.

“Can you come now?” he asked.

“I'm on my way,” I said as I put the laptop away and pulled out the one I used for jobs where viruses came into play.

“I was hoping you'd say that,” he said. “Because I already sent a car to your building. Like I said, time's of the essence.”

“I'm grabbing my coat and will be downstairs in two minutes.” I hung up even as I tugged on my boots and grabbed my leather jacket. I pulled my bag over my shoulder even as I headed out the door.

It wasn't until I was halfway down the stairs that I realized I was wearing my usual “work from home” attire of yoga pants and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt... no bra. I hadn't planned on going anywhere for the rest of the night. I'd even pulled my hair back from my face with a pair of clips. I looked more like a college student on a midnight munchie run than a professional, but Rylan had said time wasn't on our side, so I guessed he'd prefer me like this rather than waste time running back upstairs to change.

The car was already waiting in front of the building, which was good because the breeze was brisk enough to make me shiver. The driver opened the door without a word or even a look. Either Rylan had given a description of me or this guy was insanely professional.

I climbed in the back and warmed up during the relatively short drive to Archer Enterprises. I stared out the window at the mountains, barely seeing the view I normally relished. I'd come to Fort Collins because the mountains had appealed to me, but this evening, I was already focusing on the job at

hand. Even though I hadn't seen the problem yet, it had to be bad if Rylan needed additional support. It would take both of us working together to fix it in time to save his system. We just had to figure out the best way to divide up the work.

There were still a few people coming out of the building after working over but, for the most part, it looked dark and empty. A different security guard than the ones I met before greeted me when I came in. This time, when he asked if I'd been here before, I told him I had. He called up to Rylan and then waved me through.

"Boss said to send you right up," he said as he motioned for me to follow him.

I wondered if Rylan had also told him to escort me the whole way, but I didn't ask. I wasn't in a bantering mood tonight. This was serious and, while I might toe the line sometimes, I knew when I needed to behave. Besides, I already looked unprofessional enough. I didn't need to add snark to it.

When we got to the elevator, however, I saw why the guard had needed to come. One of the security measures must've been to lock down the elevators after hours because he had to swipe his badge before the doors would open. That was smart. As I stepped inside and pushed the button for the top floor, I wondered if all badges would get the elevators working or just a certain clearance level.

My thoughts on the process were interrupted when I reached the top and the doors slid open. Not surprisingly, Rylan was waiting. He glanced at my clothes and gave me a this-would-be-funny-if-things-were-different half-smile.

"Thanks for coming. Did I catch you at a bad time?" he asked as he

turned and walked toward the computers.

I followed. “Not really. I was just working on a project for a client, but it's not due for a while. It wasn't a problem to put it off.”

“Well, I'm glad you could.” Rylan ran his hand through his hair, giving it a sexy, tousled look that I thought suited him much better than how he'd styled before. “Because this is a serious mess.” He sat down and gestured toward the screens.

I took a look as I was sitting down and swore silently. He wasn't kidding. Whoever'd hit him had done it hard and done it right. I glanced at a couple screens to confirm my suspicion before asking a question, “Did they take anything?”

“I don't think so.” Rylan sounded frustrated and I wondered if that was at himself or the hacker from hell. “It doesn't look like anything left the system.”

“So whoever did this just wanted to screw with you?” I chose more polite phrasing than I would've done under other circumstances.

“I would've used a bit stronger word, but yes.” His face was grim and I found myself distracted by it. I was seeing more of the man under the professional mask now than when we'd gone out for coffee. I didn't know what it was, but something about this man fascinated me. I had to force myself to turn back to the computers and focus on the work to be done.

“We need to each work on separate sections, but in sync with each other,” Rylan said.

I nodded. My thoughts exactly. “I was thinking along the same lines.” I grabbed a piece of paper and wrote down what had been going through my

mind since I first looked into the problem. “If I do this...”

“It'll make an end run around the virus,” Rylan continued.

“Closing tighter and tighter, like a noose.” I was impressed he'd been able to figure that out. “Tell me again why you need me?”

“Because I never would've been able to write that code on my own in such a short period of time,” Rylan admitted.

“Well, don't be too impressed,” I said. “Because while I'm doing that, you need to be rewriting the damaged sections behind my code.”

He nodded, understanding dawning in his eyes. “So when we're done it's not just empty space.”

I liked that I didn't have to explain to him why it needed to be done. We could get started instead of him asking a million questions about why things wouldn't just go back to normal once we got rid of the virus. I'd never had a client who knew much of anything about software, much less how to do what I was asking him to do.

“Thanks again for coming so quickly,” he said, interrupting my thoughts as I flexed my fingers. “I'll be paying you time and half for this. With a bonus if we get it done without losing anything.”

I grinned at him. “Then we'd better get to work.”

He gave me a flash of a smile and slid his chair into the empty space next to mine. We were closer than I liked to be with someone not naked, but I was a professional. I could do this.

I began to work, my fingers flying over the keys as I created the code. Next to me, I heard the steady tapping of Rylan doing his part. Slowly, I

relaxed, letting the rhythm and familiarity get me to a place where everything else became background.

Gradually, as the night wore on, I became aware that we were sitting closer as we shifted into more comfortable angles. Our arms brushed against each other when we moved and I couldn't deny I liked the contact. A pleasant humming spread across my skin from every place we touched and I found myself intentionally turning in ways that made it happen more.

“It's working.”

I could hear his relief. “You doubted me?” I teased.

“Not for a moment.”

I nearly shivered. There was something in his voice that comforted and scared me. It made me want to run and turn toward him at the same time. If I hadn't been working, I'd have chosen the first option. But, I'd already done that once. Besides, I had a reputation to maintain and an imagination like no other. I told myself there was nothing there and I spun the chair around to face him.

“That's good to know.” I crossed one leg over the other and was pleased to see his eyes drop to watch. My nipples started to harden as they rubbed against my shirt, helped along by the memory of Rylan's arm sliding against mine. Maybe I should've taken the time to grab a bra. Then I saw the heat in his eyes and was glad I hadn't. He was even hotter when he was turned on. “Liking this more than my skirt?”

“Definitely considering it.” He smiled at me and stood. “Want some coffee?”

I stood too, my joints popping and crackling. All I needed was a snap

and I'd have breakfast. "That'd be good. We're at a bit of a stuck point, waiting for the programs to finish their run."

He glanced at the clock on the computer. "Damn. I didn't realize it was this late."

I hadn't paid attention either and was surprised to see it was closing in on midnight. Then again, I knew how I could be when I got in the zone. Looked like Rylan was the same way.

"You want it black or with sugar and cream?"

"Black," I said. "We'll probably be here at least another couple hours, so the stronger, the better. No decaf this time."

"You don't have to stay," he said as he walked over to a counter against the far wall. "I can keep an eye on things, then run the system check when it's done."

"And if something happens?" I asked as he pulled out one of those single serving things that I'd seen but never paid much attention to. If I was going to brew coffee, I was going to make enough for it to be worth the time.

"What do you mean?" He busied himself with the coffee.

"What happens if we miss something or if anything goes wrong?" I leaned against the back of the chair and glanced over my shoulder to confirm everything was running smoothly. "What if the hacker planted something deep?"

"Seems unlikely," he said. The smell of coffee filled the room.

I shrugged. "True. But do you want to risk it?" I told myself I was just looking out for my client; that I wasn't trying to stay because I wanted to

figure out why he fascinated me. Or how much I liked looking at him. I'd never act on it, of course, because I was under contract with his company, but that didn't mean I couldn't enjoy the view.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd say you wanted to stick around.” He smiled as he carried over two mugs of coffee. He handed me one and a jolt went through me when our fingers touched. “That bored? Or is it just my charming personality?”

“Are you like this with all your employees?” I arched an eyebrow.

His expression sobered and then he frowned. “I'm sorry. It's a bad habit of mine.”

“Flirting?”

His frown twitched for a moment. “Deflecting with humor... and some flirting, I admit.”

I took a sip of the coffee. It was the expensive stuff, but I barely tasted it. Instead, I was curious about why he felt the need to deflect. “Do I make you nervous or something?”

I watched myriad emotions flicker across his face before one settled, a new one, one I hadn't seen. I supposed I could've described it as dark, but it wasn't the kind of dark that haunted my nightmares. No, this was the kind of dark that made things low inside me twist and turn.

“Yes, Jenna. You make me nervous... or something.” He took a step toward me, putting his coffee mug next to mine.

Now he was making me nervous. Still, I couldn't move.

“I don't know what it is about you, but I haven't been able to get you out

of my mind,” he confessed. His voice was low, husky, and it struck a chord inside me. “You're one of the most brilliant, beautiful women I've ever met.”

Shit.

This was not how tonight was supposed to go. I started to protest, to tell him we needed to keep it professional, but then his mouth was coming down on mine.

Oh, fuck.

Oh, yes.

The man could kiss.

His lips were the right combination of firm and soft. He took control of the kiss from moment one, but I felt no panic as his tongue traced my bottom lip, then slipped into my mouth. All I could think was how amazing it felt to have his tongue caressing mine.

His hand on my waist broke the spell and I jerked away. His eyes looked almost purple and his breath was as hard as mine.

“We can't do this. I work for you.” I retreated behind logic and didn't give him the chance to refute it. “I'd better go.”

I grabbed my bag and, for the second time, left Rylan Archer staring after me while I ran from his office. Only this time, I wasn't confused about what had happened, just about how I felt.

Chapter 8

He called me twice the Thursday after our kiss, but I didn't answer the phone. I listened to the voicemails though and they were both of him apologizing for his unprofessional behavior, but also asking if we could meet. He wanted to talk, discuss whatever this was between the two of us. I didn't want to talk. I didn't even want to think about what had happened. Unfortunately, my brain seemed to disagree with my desire and seemed intent on remembering what his lips had felt like moving with mine. How they'd somehow managed to be hard and gentle at the same time. I'd felt the strength there, and knew he'd held back. I had no doubt he was the kind of man who could do the kinds of things I liked, but I was equally as certain that he didn't give over control.

Which meant I needed to stay as far away from him as possible. I was reluctant to give up a client, but I didn't have much of a choice. I sent my invoice off and tried my best to forget the entire thing. Technically, I was supposed to be Archer Enterprises' tech company on call, but I hoped by ignoring Rylan, he'd get the hint and leave me alone.

Nearly three weeks went by and, after those first couple of calls, I didn't hear anything from Rylan at all. Finally, by the middle of the third week in

October, I started to relax and let myself focus on the big weekend I had coming up. Every year, there was a big tech conference in Denver where the best and the brightest in their fields came together to talk shop. I'd gone last year and had actually enjoyed myself, which was surprising considering I'd been in a hotel full of strangers. This year, the conference was being held at the Hilton Garden Inn and the show-runners were putting the panel members up in their own rooms, so when they asked me to speak on a panel about the growing security risks in an ever-changing technological field, there was no way I was going to turn that down. Denver was only a short drive if traffic was iffy, so I could've technically just driven in, but I wasn't about to pass up a free room.

I'd gotten the list of the other panelists a couple weeks ago and was impressed by the names. Two had Ph.D.'s in computer science and one had written one of the most secure systems to ever be created. The other two I'd heard of, but weren't as well-known. The moderator was coming in from LA and his bio said he was some computer whiz, but I didn't recognize the name. That didn't surprise me. His job was to ask questions and guide the people on the floor so that things kept on schedule, not be an expert.

After what happened with Rylan, getting out of Fort Collins, even if just for the weekend, was looking even more appealing than it had before. Just enough of a change of scenery to help me relax. Plus, it had been a while since I'd gotten laid and I was starting to get the itch again. It might be nice to get some out-of-town action. No risk of awkward encounters afterwards, especially if I steered clear of the other techs.

As I packed a bag Friday afternoon, I made sure to include some sexy underwear for when I went out on Saturday night after the panels were done. A miniskirt and halter top joined them despite the fall chillness in the air.

Other than that outfit, I kept the clothes fairly simple. Plain black dress pants and simple blouses. I had a hard enough time being taken seriously. I didn't need my wardrobe to make it worse. Not that I gave a big damn about what others thought.

The drive was eventless and traffic light. When I reached the hotel, I followed the signs into the room reserved for registration. I was surprised when I didn't meet any resistance getting my ID badge and hotel key. In fact, the woman who took my information barely gave my hair a second look.

The room was amazing, the bed soft. I took a long, hot bath and then sprawled on the bed to watch some TV. I'd brought my laptop so I could work if I wanted to, but at the moment, relaxing sounded like more fun.

I should've known that a smooth beginning meant that the shit had to hit the fan at some point.

That point came just after lunch on Saturday when I walked onto the stage for my panel, took a seat, and then saw the moderator walk toward the podium. Fashionably messy dark brown hair, full lips... oh shit.

What the hell was Rylan Archer doing here?

I barely managed to keep my face blank as he addressed the room and then introduced us, one by one. I was last and he said my name as easily as he'd said the others. I supposed it was a good thing. It meant he wouldn't treat me differently because of our history. I couldn't, however, completely stop the stab of disappointment that went through me when his eyes briefly connected to mine and I saw none of the desire I remembered so clearly.

I didn't know how I made it through the panel, only that I must've answered my questions well because I didn't get mocked and more than one person offered compliments as I hurried from the room. I needed to get away from him. I didn't want to see if he would approach me or ignore me. If I were honest with myself, I wasn't sure which I wanted.

And then, he was in front of me. I barely stopped quickly enough to stop myself from running into his chest. I immediately regretted it; felt a pang of sorrow for not having an excuse to touch him. My fingers itched to trace his abdominals, feel the firm muscles I was sure were hidden under his carefully pressed dress shirt.

“Hello, Jenna.”

“Rylan.” I gave him a curt nod and crossed my arms. “I'd surprised to see you here.”

“I got the call yesterday asking if I could fill in for Addison Vorak. I guess he's in the hospital with gall stones.” He took a step closer, not enough to make me panic, but enough that he was edging toward the line between professional and personal. “I have a confession to make. I was glad when I saw your name on the panel list.”

“I got your messages,” I said, scrambling for a change of subject. “Apology accepted. No need to repeat it.”

“I wasn't planning to.” He smiled and something behind my belly button jerked. “I wanted to know if you'd like to go to dinner with me. Maybe drinks afterwards.”

I shook my head. “That's not a good idea.”

“Completely professional, I promise,” he said. “I still want to convince

you to come work for me.”

Fuck. Did he emphasize the word ‘come’ or was it my imagination?

“No, thank you.” I stepped around him, desperate for air. “If you'll excuse me...” I was walking before he could respond. I needed to get a drink and then find someone I could bring back to my room and fuck until all thoughts of this man were scrubbed from my brain.

Things didn't go as I planned. It was too early for the good clubs in the city to be open so I decided to get something to eat. By the time I was finished, I was even more ready for a drink, but I no longer wanted to be around a lot of people. I could still find someone to sleep with, but it might be a better idea to just do it from the hotel bar. The idea of playing the seduction game didn't appeal to me anymore. My relaxing weekend away was turning into a gigantic disappointment, and I knew exactly why.

The hotel bar was packed with people from the convention, including a couple of guys who looked to be in my age range and were giving me appreciative looks as I walked toward the bar. I was pretty sure some of the people who'd been at my panel were giving me double-takes, but I focused only on the men checking me out. At least three looked promising.

I ordered a shot of tequila, downed it and asked for another. I didn't get drunk – ever – but I'd eaten enough that two shots would only take the edge off and that's what I needed. It always surprised people that I was careful about what I drank, but I didn't care. Loosening up was one thing. Losing control was another.

I heard a shrill outburst of laughter and automatically turned toward the sound. Two barstools away sat a brassy blond with enough cleavage to get lost in. She was laughing as she put her hand on the arm of the man sitting

next to her. A man I instantly recognized and wished I hadn't.

My mouth tightened. It looked like he didn't care who he went to drink with. Not that he owed me anything. We'd kissed. Once. And I'd been the one to run away, to say there couldn't be anything else. It was a good thing he'd moved on to someone else, it would take his attention from me. I just hadn't thought it'd be so fast.

I rolled my eyes. Of course he'd found someone quick. Why did I expect from Rylan anything different than every other man I'd ever known? With his looks, his money, his charm... it shouldn't be a surprise that it had landed a replacement so easily.

I looked down at the tequila I'd intended to sip. After this shot, I could manage a beer or some wine, but I couldn't take any more hard liquor once this was gone. Fuck it. I tossed the shot back and pushed the glass back toward the bartender. I closed my eyes and let myself feel the burn of the alcohol sliding down my throat.

Still, I could hear her laughing. And then I heard her talk.

“Wow, look at that freak. How could they even let her in here? I mean, I get a couple extra piercings, but that hair? And check out what she's wearing.”

Time was suspended as her words floated around the noisy room. How many eyes had turned to me? A dozen? More?

“I am.” Rylan's tone was mild, but the two words held power. I sensed an undercurrent of something else.

I opened my eyes, braced myself, and turned to face the pair. Rylan's gaze was steady as it met mine.

“Rylan,” the blonde whined as she tugged on his arm. “I’m bored. Let’s go to your room.”

He didn’t even look at her as he spoke. “I told you before, we’re not going to my room.”

“Why not?” The whine was more pronounced. “Because of her? Is that what you’re into? Blue-haired Goth freaks?”

“Sammy,” Rylan snapped. “Shut the fuck up.”

My eyes widened as he walked toward me. He didn’t take his eyes from me, not even when he had to shake her hand off of his arm. I waited. His gaze held me in place. He stopped before he touched me, but he was only a couple inches away, close enough that I could smell the fresh scent of soap mingled with... him.

“I know I’m probably being a glutton for punishment here, but would you please have a drink with me?”

I opened my mouth to say no, to repeat what I’d said before about this not being a good idea. Instead, I heard myself saying what I really wanted.

“Okay.”

Chapter 9

I wasn't entirely sure when I made the decision to go to his room. It hadn't been when he'd bought us both a beer or when we'd talked tech while we sipped the alcohol. I knew we'd skirted any too-personal discussions, sticking with the basics like why we'd chosen our respective colleges or what had gotten us into our fields. They'd been questions that we could've easily found interview answers for, but they'd also been open enough that we could share a bit more if we wanted. He'd been surprisingly easy to talk to and I'd found myself, for once, having to remind myself not to share too much. If I'd been the kind of person who made a habit of lying to myself, I might've blamed the alcohol. I couldn't. I'd known I was still in control of myself.

That hadn't made me feel any better about wanting to share a bit more about the real reasons I'd gone into computer science. It was more than the standard 'I'd always wanted to help design programs to protect people.' I kept quiet.

As I walked with him to the elevator, I wondered when exactly a drink had turned into a not-entirely-unexpected invitation I'd accepted without allowing too much thought. That wasn't like me at all. Something about this man messed with my instincts and it unnerved me, but not enough to stop where I knew this was going. I'd set myself on this road and I intended to see it through. I needed to.

It had been a simple enough moment, nothing anyone around us would've noticed. There had been longer and longer pauses between conversation and we'd both finished our beer within a few seconds of the other. Then we'd looked at each other and I'd seen the familiar flash of desire in his eyes. I'd waited for some sort of smooth line, but it hadn't come.

He'd straightened, turned, and said a single word, "Coming?"

There was a quiet authority in his voice, the kind some powerful men have. It was the kind of voice that set men like him apart from men who thought power made them important or made them real men. Rylan was the kind of man people followed because he was a good leader. He had power, but didn't covet it. He pushed his people to work hard because he worked hard. He didn't demand respect because he thought he deserved it, but carried himself with a confidence that said he knew he'd earned it.

It had been that confidence and authority that had drawn me to my feet. Usually, I liked my men submissive, pliant, but there was something about Rylan's quiet strength that made me go with him. Trust him. Besides, if he was half as good in bed as I suspected, I was in for an unforgettable night.

He leaned against the wall in the elevator, a couple feet away from me, not touching me, just watching, waiting. I was surprised he hadn't tried to kiss me again, but I was glad he hadn't. Not here. I didn't like being in elevators with just one or two people. Better too many people, giving me safety in numbers. I could cope if it was just for a short time and I wasn't being crowded, but if he tried to get too close, I would've had to move away and the mood would've been ruined.

Fortunately, the doors opened on his floor without incident and he motioned for me to follow. I'd expected the penthouse but, instead, he led me

to a large, but not opulent, room. When he shut the door behind me and then turned toward me, I could see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to decide what to do next.

I took off my shoes and wondered if I should initiate or wait for him to do it. Then he was walking toward me, a determined expression on his face. The ball was rolling.

One arm went around my waist while the other grasped my chin. He held me firmly, but not so tightly that I felt like I couldn't pull away if I needed to. He didn't hesitate as his mouth came down on mine, which I found surprising considering how our last kiss had ended. But then his lips were moving, parting mine, and I put all thoughts aside and concentrated on now and the sensation of his tongue sliding across my bottom lip and then into my mouth.

I moved my hands between us, pushing up the fitted sweater he was wearing so I could get to his skin. His stomach muscles tensed as I ran my fingers along them. Damn. He was even more cut than I'd thought he was. I was suddenly very eager to see the rest of his body.

I pulled my mouth away from his. "Too many clothes." I tugged at the hem of his shirt.

"I agree," he said as he reached down to help. He pulled his shirt over his head, revealing washboard abs and a muscular chest that my fingers itched to touch.

I was still staring at him when he reached for my shirt. I jerked back, but smiled so the mood wasn't ruined. "I undress myself."

He grinned and made a gesture with his hands as he gave a little bow.

“Please do then.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled my shirt over my head.

“Slowly.”

I glared at Rylan as I reached behind me to unzip my skirt. “I don't do the whole striptease thing.”

“Pity,” he said mildly. “However you want it.”

It was odd, I thought as I stepped out of my skirt. He wasn't pushing what he wanted, but it still didn't sound like he was giving up control. The idea both frightened and thrilled me.

He let out a low whistle and, for a moment, I thought he was going to comment about my scars or even say something about my tattoos. But he didn't. There was admiration and lust in his eyes, but only the kind that made heat spread inside me.

He held out his hand. “Let's move this to the bedroom.”

I took his hand and let him lead me. As we walked, I enjoyed the view. Not only did I get to see the intricate artwork of a Celtic cross that ran the length of his spine and across his broad shoulders, there was also the way his firm ass moved beneath his tight black boxer-briefs as he walked. I could only imagine the way it would look flexing as he pumped into me.

Fuck, he was hot.

His room was bigger than the one I'd gotten, but I was focused more on the bed itself. Then Rylan kicked off his underwear and I found myself distracted from everything except the thick, heavy cock that curved up from the dark curls at its base. I could tell he wasn't fully hard and my pussy

throbbled at the thought of just how big he'd be when we finally got down to it.

He reached for my hand again, pulling me to him. One hand went to the back of my neck the other hand splayed across the middle of my back. I could feel the desire radiating from him even before we kissed and when our mouths came together, it was like a jolt of physical energy. I pushed my tongue between his lips and heard him growl, pleased.

I wasn't sure when he undid my bra, only that his hand was cupping my breast. I moaned as his thumb brushed over my nipple and then gasped when he rolled it between his fingers. His cock hardened against my stomach and I slid my hand down his back, running my fingers down the tattoo on his spine until I reached his ass. I ran my hand over the firm muscle, pulling him more tightly against me.

When I felt him start to lean us down onto the bed, a flare of panic went through me. I rotated my hip, maneuvering us so that we landed side-by-side. His hand slid down my ribcage to the waistband of my panties and his mouth broke away from mine to start a trail down my neck.

Little ripples of pleasure fanned across my skin as he kissed his way down to my breasts. He put pressure on my shoulder and I knew he wanted me on my back. I stiffened and felt him look up at me. With his eyes locked on mine, his tongue flicked across the tip of my nipple and it instantly hardened. As he took it between his lips, he pushed himself up on his knees so that our bodies weren't touching anymore. He lowered his head at an awkward angle and licked a stripe of flesh across the side of my breast. This time, when he pushed against my shoulder, I let myself be turned slightly. I wasn't flat on my back, but it was a far more submissive position than I'd ever let anyone else get me in. If he'd have tried to lay on me, I would've

panicked, but he stayed where he was, only taking advantage of the access he had to my other breast.

While his mouth was busy on my breast, his hand slid down my stomach and beneath the waistband of my panties. I moaned as a finger slipped between my folds, brushing over the top of my clit before dropped down to slide inside me. I wasn't sure where I wanted to look, at the place where his lips were creating the most delicious suction or where his hand was moving beneath my underwear.

“Harder.” I dug my fingers into his hair. His teeth scraped across the sensitive flesh and I shivered. “Yes.”

He sat up, removing his hand from between my legs, and I pushed myself up onto my elbows. He held his hand out to me. “Taste yourself.”

I opened my mouth and took hold of his wrist, guiding his hand to my mouth. I sucked on it, cleaning off every last drop. I'd wanted to watch him while I did it because I liked seeing on a man's face when I had them completely under my control, but I was afraid of what I'd see on Rylan's face.

“My turn.”

I started to tell him that I had rules when it came to me performing oral, but to my surprise, he didn't even ask it. Instead, he climbed off the bed and moved between my legs.

I kept myself propped up so I could watch as he slid my panties off and lowered his face to my pussy.

“Fuck!” I cursed as he used his tongue with the same skill and enthusiasm he'd used on my mouth. He applied just the right amount of pressure as he moved over and around my clit before dropping down to slide

his tongue into my pussy. I'd never felt the urge to close my eyes more than I did right now. The pressure inside me was almost too much, each pass of his tongue sending another wave of pleasure through me. My hands went to my breasts and I tugged at my nipples, letting the little jolts of pain mix until I shuddered and came.

He kept his mouth on me, coaxing me higher until I called out his name, and only then did he sit back, a pleased expression on his face.

I looked down at him, still trying to catch my breath. "Please tell me you have a condom."

He grinned and reached over to grab his pants. He stood and rolled the condom on, stroking himself a few times before moving to stand between my legs. I shook my head and rolled onto my knees. I smiled at him and crooked my finger.

"Let me do the work this time."

For a moment, I thought he would protest as he looked at me with an almost curious expression, but then he climbed onto the bed and laid on his back. I straddled his waist and ran my eyes over the beautiful body stretched out in front of me. He was like a sculpted masterpiece. Except statues were rarely made with full erections, and none as impressive as this one.

I raised myself up and moved into position. My eyelids fluttered as I slowly lowered myself onto him and I fought to keep my eyes from closing. He felt amazing, stretching every bit of me as he entered me inch by inch. His hands grabbed onto my hips, fingers digging in until it drew a half-pained sound from me. I risked a glance down and saw Rylan's eyes dark with desire, but there was no malice there, nothing that said he'd go past the point where a little hurt turned things even more intense.

I ran my hands up my sides, watching him watch me. He swore as I rolled my nipples between my fingers and then it was my turn to curse as one of his hands slid around my waist until his thumb rubbed my clit.

“Fuck, Rylan!” I pinched my nipple and then dropped one hand to his stomach, his muscles twitching against my palm as he began to raise his hips to meet my downward motions.

“Come again.” His voice was strained. “One more time.”

I was getting there, pleasure coursing through me as his cock dragged across all those sensitive parts of me. His thumb didn't miss a single stroke, each pass pushing me closer. I clenched my muscles and he groaned, the hand on my hip flexing. I began to ride him faster and he matched my pace instinctively, our bodies moving together in a dance so familiar it was if we'd done this a thousand times before. I tried not to think about that as he tried to move himself into a sitting position. I used both of my hands to push him back down and then to give myself leverage to slam down on him, shoving him deeper and further than anyone had been in a long time, and it had never felt this good.

I exploded without warning, my body shaking and tightening around Rylan until he swore and I felt his cock pulse inside me. I dropped down onto him, grinding, holding him there until I'd wrung out the last possible drop of pleasure and he was calling out my name.

“Fuck,” I said breathlessly as I rolled off of him.

“That about sums it up.” Rylan chuckled, a low sexual kind of laugh that made me think of dark, sensual things.

He reached over me and I immediately rolled further away and sat up.

Little tingles of pleasure were still running across my skin, but it was time for me to go.

“Didn't mean to startle you,” he said as he propped himself up on an elbow. “I was just going to pull the blankets over us. Didn't want you getting cold.”

“I'm fine,” I said as I climbed off of the bed.

“You don't have to go anywhere,” he said, his face unreadable. “You can stay here tonight. No questions asked, no strings attached.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I need to get back to my room.”

He gave me another of those looks that made me feel like he was seeing deep inside me, and then he nodded. “All right.” He sat up and reached for his pants. “I'll walk you to your room.”

“I'm in the same building,” I said as I pulled on my underwear. “It's not like this was a date and you need to walk me to the door.”

“Still,” he said as he dressed. “It's polite.”

“Don't worry about it.” I finished first and started out of the bedroom. The sex had been amazing, but I needed to get out of there. Away from him. I didn't do the whole post-sex thing. “I'll see you around.”

Like I'd hoped, he didn't follow me as I left the room and headed for the elevator. If I could just focus on the sex and the two great orgasms I'd had, I be able to get a good night's sleep tonight. I just had to stop remembering the way he'd looked at me or how, each time I'd rebuffed a movement that would've given him control, I'd felt like he was filing it away for future analysis. I didn't want him to think this was anything more than what it was. A convention hook-up.

Nothing else.

Chapter 10

I didn't see Rylan again at the convention and I wasn't sure if that was how things worked out or if he was intentionally avoiding me. I was fine either way. I couldn't shake the feeling that he hadn't seen our encounter as some random moment of weakness or a need that had to be met. Did he see it as something more?

I didn't sleep well back in my own bed Sunday night and when I woke Monday morning, it showed. I had dark circles under my eyes and every inch of me looked as tired as I felt.

I was still in my pajamas and on my second cup of coffee when someone knocked at my door.

"Who is it?" I called as I walked over to it.

"Special delivery." A man's voice replied. "Certified letter you need to sign for."

I looked through the peep hole and saw a short, stocky, middle-aged man wearing a uniform. I wasn't stupid. That didn't necessarily mean anything. He was holding a thin, legal-sized envelope and an electronic signing pad.

"Who's it from?"

He glanced at the envelope. "Archer Enterprises."

My eyes widened. Had my night of fun screwed me over with them? Still, I wasn't about to throw open the door. I undid the dead-bolt and the extra lock, but kept the chain lock in place. I put my foot at the base of the door and shifted my weight so that, if the man tried to force his way inside, I'd have the leverage to shove the door back. Not that violent crime happened often here, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

I opened the door a crack. "Here." The pad came through first and I signed. The envelope followed and if the delivery man thought it was strange that I didn't open the door for him, he didn't say anything. I thanked him as I closed the door and then walked over to the table to sit down and read my mail.

It wasn't a letter ending my contract or a legal document of any kind. It was a job offer. An official offer to come work for Archer Enterprises in the capacity of Head of Security Technology. The letter detailed the perks as well as the yearly salary, which was enough to make me blink and look again, thinking it must've been some sort of mistake. But, no, there it was in black and white. Fifteen thousand more than Rylan had originally mentioned and a guaranteed minimum five thousand dollar raise every year, more depending upon performance.

I put the letter down on the table and leaned back in my seat. Questions swirled in my head. Had Rylan sent me this because he truly wanted me to work with him and thought this was the way to do it? Or was this a pay-off for what had happened the other night? Was he trying to buy my silence? He didn't seem like the kind of guy who worried about whether or not people would notice him having a little fling with someone like me, but what did I know? Maybe he saw it as a reward for services rendered. I felt a grin curving my lips. I was comfortable in who I was, and he wouldn't have been

the first man to think he needed to offer payment of some kind. I didn't take it personally. It said more about who they were than who I was.

If he hadn't tried to get me to work for him before, I might've just thrown the letter away and not bothered to answer it, but I knew this offer was legitimate. And I knew I couldn't answer him over the phone or through email. This was something that needed to be done face-to-face, especially considering we worked in the same field. I had to make sure I left things okay between us.

My stomach lurched at the thought of seeing him again. I avoided seeing the men I'd slept with after I left their rooms or wherever it was we happened to be fucking. One of the main reasons I tried to avoid sleeping with anyone I worked for or with. Rule number one... broken.

I ran my hand through my hair. Fuck it. If I was going to see Rylan, I needed to take a shower.

An hour later, I was standing in the elevator, on my way up to see Rylan. I'd called ahead, expecting I'd be seen later that week. Instead, after a couple minutes on hold, I was told to come in whenever I wished.

As I walked off of the elevator, a man was coming toward it. I felt his eyes on me, but I didn't make eye contact. I nodded politely and kept walking. I wasn't sure if it was rude or not, but I wasn't in the mood to make small talk with Christophe. I wanted to know what the hell Rylan was thinking.

He was sitting at his desk, but stood as soon as he saw me. I heard the

elevator close behind me as he walked around to meet me partway. The smile on his face was wide, his eyes shining.

“Jenna!”

As hard as I tried, I couldn't deny the way my heart twisted when he said my name. The memory of hearing it under other circumstances was too strong. Fuck it if my panties didn't get wet just thinking about it.

Then he was just a step away and I could smell him, the scent of his soap, of him. Then he was reaching for me and I knew what was coming. It would've been all too easy to let it happen. To let him kiss me and then to let things go further. We could fuck on the floor, in his chair, on his desk. I could picture it dozens of different ways, including a few positions I swore I would never do.

Instead, I took a step back, putting myself out of his reach. I shook my head even as disappointment crossed his face. “You sent me a job offer. I assumed this was a professional meeting. That the offer was genuine.”

He moved back, putting more distance between us. “I meant what I said.” His voice was polite and purely professional. “I want you to work for me. Exclusively. Not contracted out for random assignments.”

“And you always try to kiss someone who's applied for a position?” I kept my tone mild. I didn't want him to think I would yell at him or anything like that.

“No,” he said. The corner of his mouth twitched. “I just assumed—”

“That because we slept together, it was okay.” I finished his sentence.

He shrugged. “It's not exactly out of the realm of possibility.”

“Do you fraternize with many of your employees?”

The hint of a smile that had been playing at his lips vanished. “No.” The word was firm.

That made my decision. “I accept.”

He blinked and I found the idea that I could surprise him to be amusing.

“You what?”

I repeated myself. “I accept your job offer.” I held up the envelope with the offer he'd sent. “All of the terms here are agreeable. I just need to know if I sign these, or if there's something else you want me to sign.”

For a moment, he didn't answer and I wondered if he was trying to decide if he wanted me here now. He had to know I'd asked those questions intentionally, that I wanted to make sure that, if I came to work for Archer Enterprises, this wouldn't happen again. That this past weekend wouldn't happen again.

I felt a twinge of regret at the thought of the sex we wouldn't be having, but then reminded myself that we wouldn't have been having sex if I walked away. This was just my way of making sure a line was drawn between the two of us. Not that there was an “us.”

Rylan extended a hand and I took it, ignoring the charge that sparked at the touch. We'd come to an agreement, silent and otherwise.

From here on out, everything between Rylan Archer and me would be strictly professional.

End of the Prequel – Turn the page to continue to Forbidden Pleasures.

Forbidden Pleasures

Pleasures – Book 1

Chapter 1

“You stupid whore!”

My head snapped back, cheek stinging and burning from the slap. Tears automatically formed in my eyes, but I wasn't going to cry. At six years-old, a single backhand from my mother was hardly the worst thing I'd endured. In fact, from her, it was almost a loving touch.

“You think you're too good for this?” She grabbed my hair, the thick ebony-colored locks that had earned me the nickname Snow White. “Too good to get on your knees and earn your keep.”

“Let me go,” I begged. I reached up to grab her wrist. Even as I did it, I should've known better. After today, I'd never try to fight her again.

My mother swore at me and wrapped her hand harder around my hair. Then I saw her use her free hand to reach for something on the stove.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Intense, agonizing pain swept down my left side. I screamed in surrender, “I'll do it, Mommy. I'll do anything you want.”

She only laughed and kept up the merciless dripping until darkness caused the pain to stop...

I blinked and shook my head. The memories didn't come through often

during the day, but when they did, they left a thick, heavy darkness that colored everything else for hours. This wasn't how I wanted to start my time at Archer Enterprises, but I'd learned at a very young age that I didn't get what I wanted. I'd just have to do what I'd always done – deal with it.

It's kinda funny, in an out there, far off, ironic way. I'd thought that by accepting Rylan's offer, it would make things easier between him and me. A clear line would be drawn, a line that wouldn't be crossed. I could work in peace, knowing I wouldn't have to worry about him making another move.

That part, at least, ended up being accurate. Rylan played by my rules. He came down on my official first day to help me get set up, but we only spoke about work and the distance between us was strictly professional. I hadn't seen him since.

What I hadn't expected was how much it bothered me. How much I wanted him to move closer, to initiate physical contact. It confused the hell out of me and I hated it, but I still couldn't stop thinking that way.

At the most inopportune times, I'd remember how it felt for him to touch me, how his skin had felt sliding across mine, how he'd been inside me. It was only when I buried myself in my work, lost myself in the intricacies of code, that I could ignore everything else.

It was a prime job. I had my own office, and while I didn't have my own assistant, Rylan's assistant, Christophe, was always there to help. He came by every day to ask if I needed any help with anything.

The first time, Emmaline Kent had come with him, but I'd quickly gotten the impression that she'd come more to scope me out than anything else. I'd met her type a million times. She was about my height and flaunted her curves. Copper-colored curls and turquoise eyes, her coloring was flawless.

She had fine features and would've been quite pretty if she hadn't been scowling ninety percent of the time.

I wasn't sure if Rylan knew it, but Emmaline had a crush on him. She'd taken one look at me and I'd seen the look I recognized. *I wasn't competition.* That didn't bother me. I wasn't here to compete for Rylan. The petty part of me wanted to make a comment about how I'd already had her boss, but I was smarter than that. I didn't want anyone in the company to know Rylan and I had slept together because I didn't want anyone to think I'd gotten the job because of sex.

After the first week, I'd settled into a rhythm with the work and had almost stopped looking up every time Rylan came onto my floor. Almost. It drove me nuts, seeing him smiling and joking with the other employees when he barely looked my way. I kept telling myself that this had been what I'd wanted, for him to respect the professional boundaries between us and to stop trying to make what had happened into something more than a one-night stand.

I didn't understand why I was so drawn to him. Sure, he was hot, but so were other guys I'd fucked. He'd been great in bed, but so were other guys. I didn't care about the money he had. Money had never meant much to me and greed turned my stomach. To me, the only thing about it I liked was the freedom it gave, but I wasn't materialistic or lazy. The biggest draw to the financial aspect of this job had been the thought that I could put money away as a safety net for when things inevitably fell apart.

The beginning of my second week at Rylan Enterprises, I made up my mind to keep my head down and my eyes on my computer screen until this strange fascination went away. I was, unfortunately, following the first part of my self-advice when I stepped out of the elevator onto the next-to-the-top

floor and ran straight into a wall of solid muscle.

Hands caught my shoulders and I immediately jerked away, taking several steps back. I looked up as I went, trying to figure out whether I wanted to snap at this person or apologize. Eyes the color of moss looked down at me, a curious expression in them. The man's features were ruggedly handsome, his light brown hair fashionably styled. He was tall, probably close to six two or three, and muscular. He was close to Rylan's size, though there was a bit more bulk to him under his expensively tailored suit.

“Sorry.” I decided on an apology. “I was distracted.”

“It's okay.” He flashed me a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. “I'm Zeke Wesson.”

“Jenna Lang.” He didn't offer a hand to shake, so neither did I. “I'm the new security tech.”

He nodded. “I thought as much. Rylan's told me about you.” His tone was inscrutable, which made me wonder just how much Rylan had said. I didn't remember anyone mentioning someone named Zeke working here, but I hadn't met everyone yet.

“Zeke!”

I turned as I heard Rylan's voice, hating myself for doing so. My mood darkened even further when I saw that Emmaline was with him.

“I see you've met Jenna,” Rylan said. He glanced down at me and I was almost sure his eyes warmed for a brief moment.

“I have,” Zeke said.

“Excellent.” Rylan smiled at both of us, looking in my general direction

as he continued, “Zeke's PR company represents Archer Enterprises.”

“But we've actually known each other for years,” Zeke added.

I wasn't sure why, but I was getting a definitely hostile vibe coming off of Zeke. There was an undercurrent of something here. He wanted me to know that he and Rylan had more than a professional relationship. For some reason, he was letting me know they were friends.

“I've got the McAllister project due tomorrow.” I immediately turned the discussion to work. I refused to care that Zeke was staking some sort of claim or that Emmaline was glaring at me. They could think I was going to mess with Rylan or hurt him or take him away or whatever the hell they wanted to think. I knew the truth and that was what mattered.

“Oh.”

For a moment, I thought I imagined a note of disappointment in his voice, but I immediately pushed it aside.

“Carry on then,” Rylan said. He turned away from me toward Emmaline.

A flare of jealousy went through me, so strong I couldn't try to deny what it was. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Christophe coming off of the elevator. I didn't know what came over me, but I turned toward Christophe and gave him a bright smile.

“Hi,” I said as he came closer. “It's great to see you. How was your weekend?”

A pleased look crossed his face, confirming the suspicion I'd had for the past week. Christophe seemed to have a little crush on me. He was a bit socially awkward, so his attention could sometimes be a bit creepy, but he was nice enough. And if he could help me dish out to Rylan some of what he

was serving as he smiled and flirted with Emmaline, so much the better.

“I'm doing great.” He gave Rylan a nod and barely even looked at Emmaline or Zeke. He angled himself toward me, making it clear where his preference was. “How are you doing?”

I smiled up at him, letting my arm brush against his. “I think I'm finally getting settled in.” I risked a sideways glance in Rylan's direction. He was talking to his friend now, but Emmaline was still hanging on our every word.

“That's good,” Christophe said. “We want you to be comfortable here.”

I wasn't sure comfortable was the word I would use, but I wasn't going to try to explain I was rarely comfortable anywhere, and never around other people. The best I could hope for was to get through full work days without being tense. I knew how to cope with my life though, so people rarely saw me as anything but composed. I was a good actress. Always had been.

I'd hoped that talking to Christophe would make Rylan jealous, but I should've known better. He barely looked at me as he and Zeke walked by. His friend, on the other hand, shot me a glare I still didn't quite understand. Once they passed, I turned toward my office, sighing as Christophe followed. I didn't mind the guy, but I had a feeling I'd gone too far engaging him in conversation.

He stuck with me the rest of the day and was in my office again the next morning. I finally had to remind him that I had a job to do and he probably needed to get back to his own work. He was a nice enough guy, but I was already dealing with the awkwardness that came from having slept with a guy at work. I wasn't about to make that mistake again, especially for someone who was just 'nice'. There was zero sexual attraction between us.

As November got closer to Thanksgiving, I found myself still stealing glances at Rylan, remembering our night together. The more I tried to ignore it, the more it kept creeping up on me. And it wasn't like Rylan was doing anything to prompt it. Every once in a while, I thought I caught him watching me, but was never sure enough to say anything. All I knew for certain was that there was tension between the two of us and I didn't know what to do about it.

If I hadn't liked this job so much, I would've just walked away, but once I'd started, I couldn't give it up. It didn't have anything to do with Rylan, either. In fact, he was a drawback now rather than how I'd thought keeping him from pursuing me would be a perk. No, the biggest appeal was the job itself. It was challenging in a way that most of my previous jobs hadn't been. I was smart, genius most likely if I'd ever taken an IQ test seriously, and it was difficult sometimes to find things that kept my brain busy. The work I had at Archer Enterprises did it better than anything I'd ever done before. I didn't want to give it up.

Monday, I managed to avoid Rylan completely. In fact, I avoided pretty much everyone at work, arriving early and working late. The newest project I was working on had some nice complicated twists and turns, and I'd found myself caught up in the workings of cyberspace until the building was nearly empty. The same thing happened Tuesday night as well, but this time, when I got into the elevator, I wasn't alone.

“Jenna.”

My heart flipped as I heard my name. I could barely breathe as I looked over. There, leaning against the side of the elevator and looking as hot as ever, was my boss. He was in his usual after-hours casual: no jacket or tie, sleeves rolled up and the top couple buttons undone.

“I don't believe we've had the opportunity to speak privately since you've come to work for me.” He pushed himself off the wall and walked toward me.

Oh shit.

My chest tightened. I wasn't a big fan of elevators, but it wasn't because I feared small spaces or afraid of crowds. Actually, I was better if there were a lot of people in it. What I always dreaded was the possibility of being in an enclosed space with only one person – a man – and I couldn't get away. The fact that it was Rylan didn't make it any better. If anything, it was worse because I was torn. As he walked toward me, I didn't know if I wanted to tell him to stay back or to come closer.

I remembered how it had felt, the weight of his body against mine as we'd kissed. The firm pressure of his mouth against mine. His tongue sliding between my lips. It was as clear now as the night it had happened, and I craved feeling it again.

“How are you finding things at Archer Enterprises?” He gave me a slow, sensual smile that made me think of what it was like to have his mouth doing wonderful things between my legs. His gaze slid over me and I warmed under it.

I glanced at the numbers on the wall and willed the elevator to go faster. My heart began to pound as he got closer.

“Have you been avoiding me, Jenna?” he asked as he stepped between me and the doors.

Panic welled up as I saw my only way out blocked. I took a slow breath, telling myself that this was Rylan and he wouldn't hurt me, but it didn't help.

I needed him to take a step back but I couldn't get the words out.

“I don't understand,” he said as he closed the distance between us to less than an inch. He reached out and I flinched. A puzzled expression crossed his face. “I thought we had a good time together.”

I nodded, desperately hoping he'd understand that I needed him to move because I was holding on by a thread. My breath was starting to come in gasps and I couldn't get enough oxygen.

“Jenna, what's wrong?” Concern replaced confusion and he leaned toward me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but it didn't stop the flashes from coming. Other faces, other hands reaching for me. I whimpered as his hand touched my arm and I hated myself for the sound, but I couldn't help it. I had reached the point where I could tell when I was in the midst of a panic attack, but I still wasn't able to break myself from their grip. The best I could do was try to keep myself from lashing out.

My hands tightened into fists, my nails digging into my palms. I tried to focus on the pain, but then Rylan put his hand on my other arm and I sagged against the wall. My head shook from side to side as I fought to take deeper breaths. Spots danced behind my closed eyes and I knew I was only seconds from passing out. It didn't happen often, but it had happened in the past.

Dimly, as if from a distance, I heard Rylan calling my name, but I barely noticed it. The darkness I tried so hard to keep at bay was coming for me and there was nothing I could do about it. Logically, I knew I was hyperventilating and I needed to calm down, but there was no logic when it came to panic.

Still, I kept trying to fight it until the world faded away.

Chapter 2

I didn't know how it was for most people, but for me, waking up after being unconscious was different than waking up normally. I didn't dream or have nightmares when I was unconscious. It wasn't like sleeping where sometimes there were dreams and sometimes there weren't. I'd passed out more times than I cared to think about or count and I'd never had a single dream or nightmare.

I'd woken up to nightmares, but that wasn't anything I wanted to think about again. Ever.

Like most people, I sometimes woke up from sleep with a start, sometimes with a jolt. If I was having a nightmare, there were times I'd bolt upright in bed, going from asleep to awake almost too fast for my body and mind to process. Other times, I'd be stuck in the darkness, trying to claw my way to reality. When it came to waking up from being unconscious, it only went one way for me.

One moment, I'd be in the cold dark, no matter how warm or light the place was where I'd passed out. The next, the panic or emotion that had shut me down came rushing back, flooding my system with enough chemicals to force me into a fight or flight response before I knew what was happening. Basically, I always came to fighting.

This time wasn't any different.

Panic clawed at my throat and I struck out with feet and hands, trying to make contact with whatever had triggered a panic attack bad enough to make me pass out. The only thing I knew for certain was that I wasn't in any physical pain. That's how I figured I hadn't been assaulted. Or, at least, I hadn't been assaulted in a way that had knocked me out. While I'd been unconscious, that could have been a different story.

My hands hit something solid, sending pain through my knuckles even as I opened my eyes.

I'd hit a wall.

A wall I didn't recognize.

I looked around, thrashing against whatever was holding me down. I couldn't get my arms or legs free. I was trapped and the panic from before spiraled again.

What had happened? Where was I?

“Jenna, it's okay.”

A man's voice cut through the chaos in my head and my terror escalated. My head was turning from side to side, but I couldn't see anything. My eyes were open and it was light, but the shapes and colors were foreign. Nothing registered.

Then I saw a shadow move and let out a half-cry, half-whimper as I struggled to get away. He was big and coming toward me and...

“Jenna!”

Arms wrapped around me, pinning me against a solid chest. I gasped, feeling myself heading toward hyperventilating again.

“Please. Please. Please.” I heard a small voice whispering, and then realized it was me.

“Shh, it's okay.”

A deep, familiar voice repeated the words even as I struggled and fought against him. I twisted and squirmed, my teeth clenched so tightly my jaw ached, but he still held me, shushing me; hushing me. He wasn't groping me or forcing me down, but restraining me from lashing out.

“It's okay, Jenna.”

I focused on a spot on the wall and willed my breathing to calm, willed my mind to begin processing again. Slowly, so very slowly, both things began to happen.

Taupe.

That was the first thing my brain registered. The walls were taupe. Other details began to come together to paint a picture of my surroundings.

I was sitting on a couch and the thing that I'd thought had tied my hands and feet was actually an afghan that had been covering me up. I didn't recognize the colors of the room, the feel of the couch or afghan, but there were two things I realized I did know. The voice and the smell of the man whose arms were around me, holding me so very close.

“Rylan?”

I hadn't realized how tense he was until he relaxed when I said his name. His grip on me loosened and I pulled back. He must've sensed that I no longer was fighting him because, this time, he let me go.

I looked up, my eyes automatically seeking out his despite the fear

welling inside me. It wasn't fear carrying over from the past this time. It was fear of what I would see in his eyes. Would it be pity? Disgust? Would he think I was weak or crazy?

Over the years, only a handful of people had ever seen me like this and all but one had been a professional who'd known the reasons behind the episodes. The only other person had been a guy I'd gone to bed with when I was about nineteen. He had been the third or fourth person I'd slept with and he'd tried to cuddle with me afterwards. I hadn't passed out, but I'd freaked out badly enough that he'd run out of his room, stark naked, and yelled for security. I'd managed to get out before anyone had come to haul me away, but I'd been more careful after that, making sure my partners knew the guidelines of what was acceptable.

Rylan's fingers brushed my cheek as he tucked hair behind my ear and the touch pulled me from the past. I studied his face, not daring to believe what I saw there. Concern. Worry. Compassion. Something warmer I didn't want to explore any further, definitely not here. Not like this.

"I'm going to give you some space now." His voice was calm, gentle. He was being cautious, but not condescending.

The knot in my chest eased.

He let me go completely now and moved from where he'd been half-kneeling next to the couch, to sit in an armchair. Now I got a better look around me. I was in a living room and a look out the nearby French doors said I wasn't in the city and I wasn't in an apartment building. I also had a feeling this was only one of many rooms.

"Where am I?" I asked the question as I pushed myself up into a more dignified sitting position. I was pretty sure I knew the answer, but I needed to

center myself.

“My house.” He didn't offer an explanation or an apology.

I raised an eyebrow and folded my arms, trying to suppress a shiver. I didn't succeed. For a moment, I thought he would come over to me again, but he didn't. He gestured toward the afghan still lying on my lap. I pulled it around my shoulders, finding it comforting and warm now.

“Why didn't you take me to a hospital?”

He hadn't offered an explanation, but I wanted one. Something about him told me I could trust him, but past experience told me to suspect dark motives from everyone. No exceptions.

“My friend Curt used to have anxiety attacks,” he said. “One of the reasons why he decided to cash in after his car accident. He figured what better way to avoid anxiety than retiring in the Bahamas.”

“So you knew what was happening?”

“I strongly suspected. I just didn't know why or how to talk you down,” he said. “When you passed out, I knew your breathing and pulse would go back to normal. I figured it'd be better for you if you woke up someplace safe with someone you knew rather than in a hospital, surrounded by complete strangers.”

That made sense, I supposed.

“Are you okay now?” he asked.

I nodded automatically, so used to saying it that I didn't even stop to consider if it was true.

“Are you claustrophobic?”

Something about the way he said the question told me he didn't actually think *that* was the problem.

I shook my head, looking away from him. There was a fire going in the nearby fireplace. I stared at the flames, willing the sight of them to heat the part of me that couldn't be reached by the blanket around my shoulders. I didn't want to think about what had triggered the panic attack. I could still feel the darkness there, fluttering at the edge of my mind. On a good day, it took me a couple hours to shake off a mild attack, but this had been anything but mild.

Movement caught my attention and I turned back to see Rylan moving to kneel in front of me. He put his hands on either side of mine, but didn't grip onto them. “Jenna, you know you can trust me, right? Whatever it is, it's okay.”

Near-hysterical laughter bubbled up inside me. “Okay? It's pretty fucking far from okay.” I pulled my hands out of his and pressed them against my mouth to keep myself from continuing to laugh. All it did was muffle the sound while I fought it down.

After a panic attack, my emotions were always very close to the surface and so much harder to control. All of the exercises my therapist had taught me were harder to access and took longer to take effect. I started to count slowly, trying to pace my breathing with the numbers.

I ducked my head so I didn't have to see Rylan's face.

“Jenna.” His voice was soft as he put a finger under my chin. “Look at me.”

He raised my head and I didn't have the strength to stop him. I was

suddenly exhausted.

“You're safe with me. Whatever you're scared of, you don't have to be, not here. Not with me.” His thumb brushed across the side of my mouth and tears welled up in my eyes. “Tell me what you need me to do.”

What *I* needed *him* to do? It was the first time I'd ever had anyone ask me that. People had told me what I needed to do for them, what I needed to do for myself, but never asked me what I needed from them. Certainly never in a kind, concerned tone, one that lacked any sort of patronizing aspect to it.

That simple statement broke the last of my control and the tears spilled over. I tried to turn away, but he gripped my chin. Not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to know that he didn't want me to look away.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I said and dropped my gaze. He could keep my face where it was, but he couldn't make me look at him. “No one can do anything. I'm broken. Have been for a long time. I'm just holding the pieces together for as long as I can. That's all I can do.”

“Bullshit.”

He didn't say it angrily or with any force, but it still made me look at him, startled out of my tears.

“This isn't some child's nursery rhyme where no one can put you back together again.” He released my chin and smoothed down my hair, letting his fingers brush across my cheek.

“You don't know.” I shook my head and wiped at my cheeks. My shoulders slumped. “You don't know what was done to me.” The weight of the years bore down on me, the memories threatened to come forward. I took

a shuddering breath.

He wasn't some random stranger I'd hooked up with who would run screaming. He wasn't someone who I'd never see again, a person I could let write me off as an unstable nutcase. He deserved to know, at least enough to explain to him why his newest employee went off the deep end in the elevator.

I'd never told anyone who wasn't a court-appointed shrink, and it had taken me a long time to trust them enough to tell it. Starting was always the hardest part. With Rylan, I decided to keep it simple.

“I was abused as a child.” The sentence came out flat, like it was someone else saying it. I'd always wished that could've been the case with the memories. They never felt like they'd happened to someone else. It was always me, right there. My hand went to the left side of my stomach, the same place it always went when I thought about back then.

Rylan's eyes flicked down to my hand, but I looked away before I could see the realization in his eyes. He'd seen me naked. Only the scars on my back had been covered by the angel wings tattooed across my shoulder-blades. The others had been visible, but he hadn't asked about them back then.

“I figured that was the case.”

Again, he surprised me enough to look at him when I hadn't planned to. There was anger in his eyes, something I hadn't seen since Lily had died, and the heat from it warmed me more than the fire or the afghan. The people who were horrified or sickened by what had been done to me were better than the ones who didn't understand why it was wrong or the ones who thought it was my fault. But it was the ones who were mad that I was grateful for.

I forced myself to continue. “I don't even know how old I was when it started, only that my earliest memories are ones of pain.”

“Jenna,” he interrupted. “You don't have to tell me the details.” He took my hand, wrapping his fingers around mine. “Not unless you decide to. I don't need to know.”

I sighed in relief. Even if I ever did manage to someday wanting a relationship with someone, this was why it would never happen. I could never tell anyone everything that had happened, and I could never ask a man to be with me without knowing. Just telling Rylan that little bit had been more than I'd ever told anyone not bound by patient-client privilege.

“Come with me.” He stood and held out his hand.

I blinked. All of the chemicals that had been keeping me going were slowly ebbing away and the exhaustion I'd felt before was seeping into my bones.

“I'm not letting you go home like this.” His voice was firm. “I have plenty of rooms here.” He paused, and then added, “You can even lock the door behind me if you want.”

I took his hand, surprising myself when I didn't let go as soon as he helped me stand. There was something comforting about his hand on mine, something I didn't have the energy to try to analyze right now. Instead, I was just going to accept it and follow him through what I now realized was an insanely huge house.

“Would you be more comfortable in a room near mine or far away from mine?” he asked as we stepped into a massive kitchen. Stone walls, marble floors and state-of-the-art appliances.

“Close.” I was getting too tired to be surprised by how differently I responded to Rylan. If I had been in any other man's house, I would've been heading for the door, insisting on a cab. Even if, through some strange occurrence, a man had been able to convince me to stay, I would've taken the room the furthest away from him and done as he said and locked the door behind me. Now, all I could think was that I needed him nearby. I felt safer with him than I had with anyone since Lily. The only person since Lily.

Tired as I was, I still managed to gawk as I followed him up a winding staircase that led to the second floor. I wanted to ask if he lived here by himself, ask why he'd buy such a big house if it was only just him. I didn't though. I told myself it was because I was having a hard enough time not tripping on the steps, but I knew it was really because expressing interest about the details of his life would make me admit to myself that I cared more about him than I should have.

We turned left and walked halfway down the hallway before he stopped and opened the door on the left.

“Here.” He stepped out of the way so I could enter. “Light's on the left.”

I felt along the wall and turned on the light. The room was tastefully decorated with furnishings that were obviously top quality but not ornate. A large bed sat in the middle of the room and a door on the other side was open. The colors were warm and inviting, a perfectly designed guest room.

“That's your own bathroom.” He motioned to the door across the hall. “And there's my room. There's no direct access between the two rooms, but if you need me, I'm right here.”

I took a step and a wave of dizziness washed over me. I reached out and caught the doorframe, fighting to keep my eyes open. I'd already worked a

long day and the clock glowing from inside the bedroom said it was past one in the morning. Add that to the emotional upheaval and the physical toll and I was surprised I'd actually managed to make it this far. I looked at the bed. It was only a few feet away, but I wasn't sure I could take another step.

“I've got you.” Rylan's voice was right behind me. “If you permit me.”

I knew what he was asking and I nodded my answer, wondering if he understood how big a step it was for me. Then he pick me up in his arms and carried me into the room. He held me securely, but not so tightly that I felt like he was restraining me. He set me on the bed and immediately took a step back, giving me room to breathe.

“Do you want something else to wear?” he asked. “I can get something out of the dresser and give it to you. I always keep a couple extra pairs of pajama pants and t-shirts in the guest rooms.”

I wiggled my toes, realizing for the first time that, at some point, Rylan had taken off my shoes. I looked up at him and nodded. I wanted the familiarity of my own pajamas, but at least what he had would be more comfortable than the skinny jeans and fitted sweater I'd worn to work today.

He went to the dresser, rummaged for a moment and then came back with a pair of flannel pants and a plain gray t-shirt.

“I'll be across the hall if you need me,” he said. “It's a simple turn lock and there is a key, but it's downstairs. I'll get it for you if you want it though.” He stepped out into the hallway and reached behind him to close the door.

“Wait,” I said.

He stopped, but didn't turn to look at me.

“Will you stay?” I asked. “And sit with me for a while?”

He gave me a soft smile and I saw another glimpse of anger cross his eyes before disappearing into a warm emotion I wasn't going to think about. "Of course. I'll just step out into the hall until you're done changing, then I'll come back in."

"Okay." I watched as he closed the door and pulled off my clothes. Everything went into a pile on the floor and then I pulled on the clothes he'd given me. I kept glancing at the door, wondering if he'd do what he'd said. The fear ingrained in me through experience said that he would come back in before I was done dressing and take advantage of the situation. Another part of me thought he'd get tired of waiting and leave. A tiny bit hoped that he'd keep his word. And I wasn't sure which of the three ideas terrified me more.

I slid under the covers and then risked it all. "I'm dressed."

For one heart-stopping moment, nothing happened. Then the door opened and he came back in. He left the door half open, giving me privacy and an escape route. He started toward the expensive-looking chair in the corner.

"Sit here, please." I patted the edge of the bed. "It's a strange place and you're familiar."

He smiled again and came over to the bed. He sat exactly where I'd asked him to and didn't try to touch me. "I'll stay right here until you fall asleep. How about that? And then I'll be right across the hall if you need me."

"Thank you." I settled back against the pillows, knowing the exhaustion would take over my self-preservation mode and my eyes were going to close. That was okay this time though. He wasn't going to touch me.

I was safe.

Chapter 3

I wasn't safe. I was never safe. When I fell asleep, I never knew if I'd wake up in the same place, if I'd be alone or if there would be others with me. In my bed. In another bed. A warehouse. Basement. There could be one or twenty. Old, young, mostly men but there'd been a couple women. Women, like the one who was holding down my wrists while her husband was pumping away inside me, tearing me apart.

They wanted me to scream and fight, and I did what they wanted. I'd heard my mother negotiating with them before they'd come into my room. I'd been pretending to sleep, hoping and praying that this time, it was just a nightmare. That I hadn't heard my mother telling them it would cost extra if they left marks. That I hadn't heard in her voice that she wanted them to agree to pay more, no matter what it did to me.

They'd agreed and my breasts ached with the bite marks they'd left, but they were nothing compared to what else they were doing. Once he was done, they turned me over and it was her turn. My throat was raw from screaming by the time she was done and he was hard again.

They took turns for hours and when they left, my mom took a belt to me for ruining the sheets. I begged her not to throw away my blanket, the only consistent thing I'd ever had. It had never protected me from the horrors of my childhood, but it had always been there to bring a tiny bit of comfort. I

didn't care that it was a mess. She burned it in front of me and laughed when I started coughing and choking from the smoke.

I stayed home from school three days after that one. Mom even left me alone. Or she forgot about me. When I crawled out of bed after two days without eating or drinking, she was passed out on the couch. It was a very real possibility that she's forgotten about me. She hadn't been giving me time to heal.

When I got home from school after my first day back, the man Mom called Uncle Ronny was waiting. He had another baby doll dress for me. Mom said I should be thankful that I wasn't developing young because once I started getting real boobs, Uncle Ronny wouldn't want me anymore.

I prayed every day that I'd start growing like the other twelve year-olds in my class. Until it happened, I would have to do all of the disgusting, humiliating things Uncle Ronny made me do, things that left me retching and crying... all after he'd left of course. I'd learned the hard way what happened if I threw up when Uncle Ronny was still here.

The memory bled into another, then another.

Fingers, then hands, inside me.

A thick shaft shoved between my lips, choking me.

Hard objects being shoved into me, bottles and sticks, whatever happened to be lying around.

Hands around my throat as I tried to scream.

Gasping for air.

No air.

I was dying...

I fought my way awake, pushing at the darkness, at the past. I felt my heart pounding in my chest, blood rushing in my ears.

I reminded myself that I hadn't died the time my mother had tried to choke me. She'd left my throat bruised and swollen for days, but I'd lived. I'd survived that and more. I clung to that truth as I tried to wake myself up.

I heard someone screaming and knew it was me, but I couldn't stop myself. I was aware that I was dreaming, that the things happening in my head were a mix of memories and the dark imaginings of a mind twisted by the past.

Uncle Ronny had been real enough, but only half of the things in the nightmare had been his particular fetishes. There had been a nameless man in a mask who'd liked the other things. He'd been the one who'd punished me for throwing up.

I kept trying to talk myself out of that space between sleep and waking; the place I sometimes hated worse than the nightmare because I knew it was up to me to get myself out of there and I often doubted my ability to do so. The more I doubted, the longer I stayed.

I was sure this time would be bad, that I'd be stuck in this state for what would feel like years. Then, I heard it.

“Jenna, shh. I'm here.”

That voice.

The voice that broke through my panic before.

“Wake up.”

There were strong arms around me. Arms I recognized. Ones that protected and strengthened rather than hurt and restrained.

“It's okay, Jenna. I'm here.”

The screaming stopped.

Lips pressed against the top of my head.

Soothing noises filled my ears, repeated words being murmured, mixed with nonsense sounds.

Little by little, I felt my muscles begin to unclench and other sensations started to come through.

A gentle rocking motion.

The steady thumping of a heart.

The scent of him, fresh and clean, as if he'd taken a shower before he'd gone to sleep.

“Go back to sleep,” he whispered. “I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay here with you until morning.”

I wanted to tell him he didn't need to do that. He needed his sleep because he had to work tomorrow. I had to work tomorrow, but I wasn't as important. If I fell back asleep, I could have another nightmare. I could get violent. More than once, I'd woken up after a nightmare to find scratches on my arms, or even bruised knuckles. I'd cracked a knuckle once putting a hole in the drywall. I didn't want to hurt him. Especially since I'd given him a black eye the first time we'd met.

The memory made me smile and I heard him sigh in relief.

“That's right. Good dreams now. Go to sleep and I'll be here.” His arms tightened around me for a moment, then loosened.

I pressed myself closer to him, not wanting him to let me go.

“Shh.” He shifted, cradling me against his chest. “I've got you.”

He said he'd stay. He'd respected every decision I'd made about the physical contact between us. He'd never lied to me or gone back on his word. Everything I knew to be true said I could trust him. Even my heart was daring to hope. It was only my instincts that still wanted to push back.

I was exhausted physically, mentally, emotionally. My defenses were down and I couldn't fight anymore. And, if I was honest with myself, I didn't want to fight. I was tired of fighting. When I woke up tomorrow, I'd probably be back to my normal self, pushing people away and keeping up the walls I'd built over the years.

For tonight, however, I would sleep.

Chapter 4

I slept and didn't dream. No nightmares, no dreams. Just blissful rest.

I woke slowly, but it wasn't that strange, sluggish feeling I usually had when I woke up after being asleep for only a few hours. I felt rested. I couldn't remember the last time that had happened. It wouldn't last, I knew, but I planned on enjoying the moment.

Then, the events of the previous night came flooding back to me and my eyes flew open. It hadn't been a dream. I was really in a guest room at Rylan's house. My face flooded with heat as I remembered asking him to stay with me. At least it looked like he'd lied and left after I'd fallen back asleep. That was good. I didn't want to wake up in his arms. It would've been too weird. Like we were in some sort of relationship where we were sleeping together... literally.

A noise from my left drew my attention and, as I turned my head, I saw Rylan hadn't left after all. He was there, just stretched out and fast asleep. At some point in the early morning hours, either I'd pulled away or he'd let me go. My cynical nature said he'd let me go, tired of me, but I knew it was more likely that I'd pushed him away in my sleep.

He looked younger asleep. I'd read somewhere that everyone did, but I wasn't sure I agreed with that. Whatever anyone else looked like when they slept, Rylan did look younger. I imagined this was what he must've looked

like back in college, when he'd first started Archer Enterprises.

His dark hair fell across his forehead and I started to reach for him, my fingers itching to brush it away from his face. I hesitated before I touched him, then told my misgivings to shut up and pushed back his hair. It was just as soft as I remembered. Before I could stop myself, I ran my fingers down his cheek, giving myself permission to enjoy the moment before he woke up and things went back to the way they had been.

The tip of my index finger hovered over his bottom lip. It had been almost a month since we'd slept together and I still couldn't get the memory of those lips out of my head.

I didn't understand him. In my experience, there were two kinds of men in the world. The ones who took what they wanted from me and the ones who looked the other way. Rylan was neither. He'd never forced anything on me or from me, and he hadn't dumped me at a hospital and walked away. No one would've blamed him if he'd just called for an ambulance when I'd passed out. I certainly wouldn't have. I would've been grateful that he hadn't tried anything or left me in the elevator. This... this had been above and beyond. More than I'd ever expected anyone to do for me. He wasn't like any man I'd ever met before. Any person of either gender... except Lily.

As I often did when I thought of her, I put my hand on my hip. Beneath the comfortable flannel pants was a lily tattoo. No one had ever asked me about it, and I wouldn't have told them if they had. The pain was still too fresh.

Officer Lily Wright had been one of the people on the task force who'd come into my house that night. I'd been thirteen, underfed and terrified. I'd lashed out when one of the police men had tried to touch me and the only

other woman present had given me such a look of disgust that I'd cussed her out. Lily had been the only one who'd cared enough to put her arms around me despite the filth I was covered in. She was the first person to show me true kindness and not expect anything in return. The only one who hadn't been paid to do it – until Rylan. My social worker and therapist had been good, but I'd always known I was their job. Lily had only been on site for crowd control. She hadn't needed to come to me, comfort me.

She'd stayed with me in the ambulance and at the hospital, holding my hand the entire time. She'd stayed for nearly twenty-four hours, and then she'd come back every day to visit until it was finally time for me to be released. That day, she'd brought me a lily and given me her card. She'd told me she'd always be there when I needed her. All I needed to do was call.

She'd kept her promise for two years. And then some bastards in a turf war had gunned her down. Hundreds of people had attended her funeral and the nineteen year-old who shot her got life in prison, but that hadn't been much comfort to me. It still wasn't. Those first two years in and out of the hospital, in group homes and talking to psychiatrists who kept wanting to put me on meds... I never would've gotten through any of that if it hadn't been for her.

“You look thoughtful.”

I jerked my hand back, hoping Rylan hadn't see or felt me touching him. He smiled up at me, but his expression revealed nothing. I pushed myself back and up, putting space between us as he sat up.

“I should get going.” I looked at the clock for the first time. “Shit! I really do need to go!”

He glanced over his shoulder and laughed, a genuine sound that

managed to stop my frenzied movements. “I think your boss can excuse you.”

I started to shake my head as I walked around the bed and began picking up my clothes. “I don't want anyone thinking... I mean...”

“You'd rather both of us go in late, you wearing the same thing you did yesterday?” He raised an eyebrow, seemingly amused at my stammering.

I glared at him. “I'll go home and change first.”

“You wouldn't make it back to your place and then to work until after lunch,” he reasoned.

I threw down my clothes, annoyed. “Then what do you suggest?”

He folded his arms behind his head. “Well, considering I've already sent in an email saying that, due to us having to work late on a security glitch, I was giving you today off and I was going to take a day myself, I'd say the first thing I suggest is that you relax.”

“You sent an email,” I said.

He nodded and sat forward. “Last night while I was waiting for you to wake up.”

“Because you knew then that neither one of us would be getting much sleep?” I felt a tinge of heat in my cheeks and refused to let my mind go where that question wanted to take it.

“Because I knew then that you needed to sleep without worrying about going in to work.” He paused, the expression on his face sobering. “And because I wanted to talk to you and this seemed like the best way to make sure you didn't have any excuses to avoid me.”

“I haven't been avoiding you,” I argued.

“Good,” he said. He swung his legs over the side of the bed. At some point, he'd changed into pajamas similar to mine.

I wondered if he wore them all the time or if he slept in less...

“Aside from pajamas, I usually try to keep some clothes people can wear in a pinch. Generally, it's my sister or Zeke.” He stood and ran his hand through his hair as he yawned. He motioned toward the bathroom. “Towels are already laid out. Take your time, find something to wear and then come downstairs. Bottom of the stairs, turn left and keep going straight. You'll end up in the kitchen. We'll talk over breakfast.” He looked at the clock again. “Or brunch, more accurately.”

He didn't give me a chance to protest, to tell him that I was perfectly fine taking a cab back to my place and we could talk business at work tomorrow. My stomach twisted as the thought occurred to me that whatever it was he wanted to talk about probably wasn't work-related. He hadn't said so. In fact, he'd deliberately called us off work so we could talk here. If he hadn't been such a gentleman last night, I would've suspected he had something devious in mind.

What could he possibly want to talk about, I wondered as I went into the bathroom. It would've been a master bath in most houses. Marble countertops. Double sink. Large bathtub on one side and a glass-enclosed shower on the other. I wanted a nice long soak in water hot enough to make my skin pink, but I went for the shower instead. The more I put off the talk, the more anxious I would be.

I showered quickly, appreciating the assortment of available shampoos and soaps he had set out for his guests. Well, not him personally, because I

assumed he had a housekeeper who did all of that, but the fact that he was willing to spend money on varieties of quality stuff for guests was nice. I chose lavender and let the scent soothe me as I cleaned up. When I was done, I headed into the bedroom and over to the dresser. I cringed as I looked through the selection there and in the closet. It wasn't that the clothes were tacky or cheap, they were generic. I shrugged. It didn't matter. They were clean and it wasn't like I was actually going anywhere.

I pulled out a pair of men's jeans – there was no way I would wear one of the dresses in the closet – and then cuffed the pants until I could walk. They hung dangerously low on my hips and if they fell even just a bit more, they'd show my lack of undergarments, but I wasn't planning on doing any sprinting or jumping jacks, so I figured I'd be fine. I was starting to get a bit chilly, so a hoodie came next. I didn't pick the biggest one because I would've been swimming in it, but I didn't choose the smallest either. I wasn't wearing a bra and didn't feel like making that public knowledge. Once I washed my face, dressed and ran a brush through my hair, I knew it was time to head downstairs.

I glanced in the mirror as I passed. I didn't wear make-up at home and there were plenty of times I lounged around in comfy clothes like these, sometimes even sans bra and underwear. I just never let anyone see me like this. Although, I supposed, after last night, this wasn't really a big deal.

I followed his directions and by the time I had gone a couple feet from the stairs, I could just follow my nose. Something smelled delicious. When I entered the kitchen, I was greeted by a sight I'd never thought I'd see.

Rylan was cooking. He was standing at the stove, wearing an apron and doing something with an omelet. There was a streak of flour on his cheek and his feet were still bare.

“You don't have a cook who does that for you?” I blurted the question out.

He jumped, apparently startled by my sudden appearance, but he didn't miss a beat with his cooking. The spatula moved from the pan with the eggs to another one where he flipped a pancake.

“I wasn't sure what you liked, so I made a little of everything.” He gestured toward each of the three pans on the stove. “Pancakes, bacon and a cheese omelet.” He glanced at me. “There's already toast, jam and fruit on the table.”

I stared at him.

“I know, more breakfast food than lunch, but on the rare occasion I get up late, I like to have breakfast anyway.” He turned off the burners and began putting the food onto a trio of dishes. “And to answer your question, no I don't have a cook. I have a cleaning crew who comes in once a week, but that's because the house is huge, and I have a grounds crew who keeps the outside nice because six acres is a lot to manage on my own.”

My jaw dropped as I watched him balance all three plates and carry them to a small table I hadn't noticed before.

“I only use the dining room when there's more than a couple people here, or it's something formal.” He set down the plates. “Please, sit. The drinks are all here too.”

I walked over to where he stood and took a seat. He waited until he'd poured me a small glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee before he joined me.

“You wanted to talk?” I asked

“Eat first.” He pointed at my plate. “Then we’ll talk.”

I expected the silence between us to be awkward, especially considering all that had happened in the past few hours, but it wasn't really. In fact, it was quite nice to sit and relax. Eating nice and slow, no rush with somewhere to be, no pressure to have to maintain a conversation or pretend like things were normal or that I was tough. I could just be and he was okay with it.

When we finished, however, I began to get nervous. One of the reasons I dressed the way I did was because I used my appearance as a shield, a protection from people. I still had the tattoos, piercings and hair, but dressed this way, I didn't feel the same.

He drained the last of his coffee and turned his chair so that it was angled toward me. I hadn't thought anything of it when he'd sat next to me instead of across from me, but now I realized he was closer than I thought. His knee brushed mine and a warmth spread through me from the point of contact. If that happened through two layers of clothes, I suspected I might combust if he did anything else. There was a tension between us that hadn't been there before.

“These last few weeks,” he began. “Working with you. Talking to you. Watching you with the others at the office.” His lips twitched. “With Christophe in particular.”

I pressed my hands together, forcing myself not to think of all the different ways this conversation could go.

“It's forced me to admit something I'd been trying to deny.” He leaned toward me, but didn't try to touch me. “Then last night, seeing you so... seeing how hurt you were, knowing someone had caused you so much pain...” His hands curled into fists. “I hate it. I hate that anyone could hurt

another human being, but you..." He shook his head. "It tears me up that I can't protect you from your past."

My heart did a funny skipping thing and it was getting hard to breathe. Not like before. This was different. Part of me wanted to tell him to stop right there, that I didn't want to hear what was coming next, but another part wanted to beg him to continue. It didn't matter what my internal debates were, however. He kept going.

"I care about you, Jenna." He covered my hands with his. "I want to be with you."

Chapter 5

I was already starting to shake my head before he'd even finished saying it. This had to be a trick. A lie. A joke. A misunderstanding. Anything but the truth.

“You can't, Rylan,” I said as soon as he paused. “I mean, the sex was good, but—”

“You think that's all I care about?” His fingers curled around mine and I couldn't deny the way the words and his gesture made my stomach twist. “I don't want to sleep with you.” He grinned, his gaze heating up. “That's not true. I do want to sleep with you, but that's not all I want. And if I have to keep my hands to myself to gain your trust, then that's what I'll do.”

I swallowed hard, my eyes dropping. Any other man, I would've called bullshit and maybe even given him a slap for good measure, but Rylan wasn't just some random man. He'd proven it more than once.

“Look at me, Jenna.” His voice was gentle.

I looked up and found my gaze captured by his. It was open and frank, letting me see everything he was feeling, thinking. I was drawn to what I saw there. He meant what he said. There was desire and heat, but it was tempered by tenderness and something that sent a thrill of fear through me. When he'd said he cared about me, I'd tried telling myself that he'd meant it as a friend and employee... just one with non-traditional benefits. What I saw there now,

however, told me that when he said he cared, he meant that what he felt for me could become something more, something that terrified me.

“I know it's probably not a good idea, with you working for me and all, but I tried to just see you as an employee and it was killing me.”

I had to tell him that work was the last on a long list of reasons why this was a bad idea. He didn't understand what he was asking for and as much as my heart begged me to take this chance, I couldn't do that to him. He deserved so much better.

“Rylan, when I said last night that I was broken, it wasn't just the panic attack talking.”

He got out of his chair and knelt next to me. I had to look down now to meet his eyes. He reached up and cupped the side of my face. “Please, Jenna. If there's any chance you feel anything for me...”

“I...” How was I supposed to think clearly when he was touching me? “I don't know if I can, Rylan.”

“Let's start with full disclosure, then.”

Panic flared as he stood and held out a hand. I'd already shared more to him that I have shared with anyone for a long time.

“From me,” he clarified, his voice gentle. “There are some things about me that you need to know to make an... informed decision. Let me show you the rest of the house.”

The anxiety inside me lessened when I realized he wasn't going to ask me to talk about my past. I slid my hand into his, trying to ignore the tingles of warmth that went through me. I didn't know what I would do, or even what I wanted to do about him, but I was going with him now. I wasn't entirely

sure why, only that I couldn't find it in me to put a stop to this now.

After first touring the bottom part of the house, we walked back up the steps and kept going until we past the room where I'd slept last night.

“Will you promise to hear me out? No matter what you think about what I'm going to tell you?”

Now I was curious. “I promise.” After all he'd done for me last night, listening was the least I could do.

“When we slept together, it was great,” he began. “But it wasn't the way I usually do things.” I kept glancing into the many bedrooms as we passed them, one more luxurious than the other until finally we stopped in front of the last door on the right-hand side of the hall. “I tend to be a little... less than vanilla.”

My eyes widened. Of all the things I'd expected out of him, that hadn't been it. Nothing about him had hinted to me that he was a bit kinky. Now, just how kinky remained to be seen. I wasn't exactly vanilla either. My stomach twisted at the thought of being able to share that part of me with Rylan. Then it twisted again – and not in a good way – as I thought about some of the things he might want to do.

He hesitated in front of the closed bedroom door and turned. “Well, that’s it. Let’s go back to the kitchen.”

He began to walk back the hallway but when I didn’t move, he paused.

“What’s behind this door?” I asked curiously.

Rylan took a deep breath and looked almost nervous. “This is – well, this is my playroom.” He gave me a grin, but I could see that there was some worry in that smile. He opened the door and stepped back to give me a look

inside.

I stepped inside and felt him right behind me. I didn't look at him though. I was too busy staring at everything around me. The room itself wasn't red or black or any of those kinds of colors most people would associate with the room's contents. Instead, the walls were a light brown with a warm brown trim, the kind of color scheme that would've looked perfect in a living room or bedroom. In fact, it matched most of the other décor I'd seen in the house. This wasn't just a regular room though, even though there was a giant bed at the far wall.

That bed, however, had intricately crafted tall metal posts at each corner of the bed, the top two attached to the equally elaborate headboard. From where I was standing, I could see leather cuffs at the base of the bottom two posts and assumed there would be matching ones at the top. My blood ran cold. I knew what those were for.

Lining the walls on either side of the bed were chests of drawers. I didn't need someone to tell me that those drawers didn't hold clothes. At least not like the ones I was wearing. Hanging on the wall to my right were a row of floggers, crops and paddles. On my left was a wooden X with leather cuffs at the top and bottom. I looked up. The ceiling was a bit higher here than the other rooms and in the center of the room were a set of chains. I knew if I followed them back down, I'd see a winch or something similar that would control how they would be lowered and raised.

I focused on my breathing, willing myself to stay calm. These things weren't the enemy. They weren't bad, just like my little kinks weren't bad.

“Most people don't understand this.” Rylan stepped up beside me and I noticed he was being careful not to touch me. “They think of S&M as being

something with leather and chains and whips.”

I glanced over at him and then gave a meaningful look to the chains overhead. Sarcasm and attitude were two of my most often used defense mechanisms.

“You know what I mean.” A smile played around his lips and I could see a bit of relief in his eyes that I hadn't run away screaming. “The average person believes that BDSM is about pain and humiliation, but it's not.” He turned toward me, an urgency on his face. Without him saying it, I knew he was asking me to understand. “It's about trust.”

I swallowed hard. It was easier to breathe when I looked at him, but there was still that fear creeping up my spine. In this room were all sorts of things that triggered the darkest of memories. I focused on him, on what he was saying.

“It's about trusting your partner to say when they've had enough or trusting them to stop when you say the word. It's about giving and taking control. Letting someone take care of you, to know you so well that they know what you need even more than you do.”

A shiver ran through me as his words caressed my skin. His voice was even more sensual than I remembered.

“The heightened pleasures of the senses brought about by selection and denial.” He took a step toward me, closing the distance without bringing us into contact. “The intensity of just the right amount of pain with your pleasure.”

That one, I understood, and I wondered how much better things would be with someone who knew what he was doing. I'd never considered the

BDSM lifestyle, despite liking things a bit rough. The bondage part of it scared the shit out of me and I never wanted to tell anyone why. Rylan, however, already knew that there were issues in my past. He could understand.

“There are safe words, negotiations. Things that can or cannot be done. Rules and guidelines that are always respected.” His finger ghosted across my cheek and my skin hummed under the faintest of touches. “If you would let me I could teach you pleasures of this world that you never thought possible. Some would even say... forbidden pleasures.” He hesitated for a moment then he looked straight at me, our eyes locked together. “Let me prove to you that you can trust me.”

For a moment, all was silence. We stood there, our bodies a mere inch or two apart. I could see that he was telling the truth, that he wanted me to be a part of this, not to dominate me or hurt me, not because he wanted to control me or degrade me. He believed every word of what he'd said.

I just wasn't sure how I felt about it.

He gestured toward the door and we walked back into the hallway without saying a word. He closed the door behind us and we walked back down to the guest room where I'd stayed last night.

“Get your things together,” he said. “I'll have my driver take you home. Take the day. Rest. Think about what I said.” His expression was serious. “And if you decide this isn't what you want, it will be business as usual between us at work. No matter what, I don't want to lose you as my employee. You're far too valuable.”

“Ah,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. “I'm a valuable employee. Good to know.” I started to smile.

“Jenna.”

The way he said my name was so full of emotion that it stopped my smile immediately. I'd never heard anyone say it like that.

“I want you to be so much more than that.”

He took my face between his hands and lowered his head. He kissed me fiercely, possessively. His tongue pushed between my lips, exploring my mouth as if he was trying to memorize it. His teeth scraped across my bottom lip before he sucked it into his mouth. I made a sound in the back of my throat. Fuck, I liked that. Then he released my lip and devoured my mouth again. There was an intensity radiating off of him, desire so strong that it almost hurt. He pulled away first, his eyes blazing.

“Get your things together. I'll meet you downstairs.”

My head was still spinning as I went into the room and gathered my clothes and my purse. It wasn't until I was heading for the stairs that I realized I didn't know where my shoes were, but then I came downstairs and saw Rylan holding them. He handed them over and I put them on, neither of us saying anything. I knew I didn't have a clue of what I should say, and I had a feeling he didn't know either.

The car that pulled up was a nice town car, nothing so flashy that people would stare, but definitely nicer than a cab. Rylan opened the back door for me, then put his hand over mine when I went to climb in. We looked at each other for a moment and then I looked away. I slid into the back seat, sighing as Rylan shut the door. I still felt physically rested, but my emotions were a mess.

The car was quiet as it headed back into the city and we were almost to

my apartment building when it hit me, what I'd been feeling from Rylan when he'd kissed me. I hadn't been able to place it then because I'd been too busy trying to process my own feelings about what had happened. Now, even though I still had no clue how I felt about the events of the past twenty-four hours, I was able to recognize the look in his eyes, the desperation in his touch.

It had been a good-bye kiss. The kind of kiss someone gave before going off to war or some equally dangerous venture. One that carried with it all of the pent-up desires and the anguish over the possibility of never seeing each other again. He'd kissed me because he didn't know what my choice would be and if he'd ever have the chance to kiss me again.

I touched my fingers to my lips. I could still feel his mouth lingering there, taste the cinnamon he'd had in his coffee. If that had been our last kiss, he'd made it a good one.

Now it was up to me to decide if I wanted more.

Chapter 6

I couldn't take being here anymore. I'd spent the good part of the afternoon pacing around my apartment, unable to concentrate. My head kept telling me that it wasn't worth the risk to see if there was anything to Rylan's offer. That the reactions my heart and body were having were only because we'd had great sex together and I hadn't gotten laid since. I liked that explanation since it meant that everything about me and my world would stay the same. I wasn't changing.

Finally, I decided there was one way to take care of this once and for all. I'd go out and hook up with some random guy. I'd get off and that would be the end of it. No sexual tension mucking things up. I'd be able to think clearly and offer Rylan several honest and logical reasons as to why we shouldn't try to have a relationship, not the least of which would be that sex wasn't emotional for me. It was physical. Only physical.

I needed a reminder of that.

I didn't bother showering again, but I did change my clothes. The ones from Rylan were comfortable, but not exactly conducive to hooking up. Sure, I could probably find someone who wouldn't care about what I was wearing, but I didn't want to work for it right now. I wasn't in the mood for a hunt. I wanted to fuck and get my head cleared.

It was November, so even though the weather had been mild, I still had

to dress warmly if I wanted to walk. I went with an ankle-length black skirt made of a flowing material I liked and a long-sleeved, off shoulder matching shirt. It was clingy, so it showed off my curves, and the low cut neckline revealed a good deal of cleavage. I finished things off with knee-high leather boots, did my make-up and headed out.

I felt better now that I was back in my own attire, but I had to admit that I did miss the comfortable clothes I'd been wearing. Mostly the smell. They'd carried with them the scent of Rylan's house and his detergent. It hadn't been quite the same as him, but it had been close. Not exactly what I wanted when I was trying to hook up with someone else.

As I stepped into the restaurant of the Marriott Hotel, I pushed thoughts of Rylan aside. The whole point of this excursion was to forget about him. I didn't usually come here, but I wanted to make sure I'd never see this guy again. A man on a business trip would be perfect. And I wanted someone older than my usual college fare.

I scanned the nearly-empty room. It was about four o'clock, which meant most people weren't coming in for dinner or drinks just yet. There were a couple of people at the bar though, including one that looked promising. He looked like he was in his late twenties or early thirties, probably a year or two older than Rylan. Sandy-colored hair and a ruggedly handsome face. I couldn't tell how tall he was, but he had broad shoulders and looked fit enough.

I smiled and walked toward him. He turned when I was just a few steps away and gave me a once over. When his eyes lit up, I knew this wasn't going to be hard at all. Less than ten minutes later, we'd exchanged first names – his was Daniel – and we were going into his hotel room. Daniel didn't offer much by the way of personal information, but I was fine with that. In fact, I

preferred it. I wasn't looking to get to know him.

He tasted like scotch when he kissed me and I pulled away as soon as I could without insulting him. I pulled my shirt off and tossed my bra onto the floor next to it. The boots went next and I felt Daniel's eyes on me when I bent to pull them off. When I straightened, he was already stripped down to nothing. He was about average build and his cock looked like it'd be the same once he was fully erect.

“Condom?” I asked as he began to stroke his cock.

“On the dresser.” He gestured but didn't take his eyes off of me. “Will you leave the skirt on?”

“Sure.” As long as he was fine with me being on top, I'd keep on whatever clothes he wanted me to keep on. I picked up the package and tossed it to him. “Get on the bed.”

He climbed onto the bed and I followed. Neither one of us said a word as I moved up toward his head, settling my knees on either side. I pulled up my skirt and lowered myself down until his questing tongue found my pussy. I made a pleased sound and dropped my head, taking his half-hard cock between my lips.

His mouth was busy, lips and tongue working around my clit and pussy while I sucked on his hardening flesh. He tasted salty and musky. Not bad, but not exactly appealing either. I shifted my weight onto one arm, balancing me so I could use the other hand to play with his balls. I wanted him hard because I wasn't getting anything from what he was doing. He was trying, but couldn't quite get me there. I wasn't a quick trigger, but after a couple minutes, I could usually tell if I was going to get off from oral. It didn't look like it would happen for me tonight.

Finally, he was hard enough and I climbed off of him. I picked up the condom, tore the wrapper open and rolled it on. I grinned down at him as I straddled his waist, pulling my skirt over to cover us both. I slid down, grimacing a bit as he entered me. He'd gotten me wet, but I wasn't nearly wet enough for it to be easy going. Fortunately, he was on the thinner side so there wasn't any pain.

His hands went to my breasts as I began to move, riding him with a slow, steady rhythm. My body reacted to the friction and to his fingers playing with my nipples, making him slide more easily in and out of me. I leaned forward slightly, hoping that some friction on my clit would get me out of my head and into the sex.

The problem was, all I could keep thinking was all the ways Daniel wasn't like Rylan. His body. The way he touched me. There was none of the intensity or confidence I'd felt with Rylan. Daniel wasn't exactly bad, but he didn't seem to know my body the way Rylan had. The instincts that Rylan had displayed when we'd been together, knowing what I wanted without me having to ask. Daniel didn't have any of those, despite how hard he was trying.

“I'm close,” Daniel grunted. “Are you?”

I appreciated that he asked, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him the truth. It wasn't his fault that I wasn't feeling anything beyond a bit of pleasant friction. Honestly, I'd gotten more out of masturbating before. It looked like I would have to fake it if I didn't want to hurt his pride.

I nodded and began to ride him faster, contracting my muscles the way I'd been taught. I started to moan, making sounds of pleasure I wasn't truly feeling. I was convincing. Considering all of the practice I'd had, it wasn't

surprising.

After just a minute or so, Daniel groaned and his hips jerked up against me. As he came, I cried out, my body tensing as I pretended to join him. I stayed where I was for a moment, giving myself a few seconds to maintain the lie. Then I climbed off of him and started to get dressed. I waited for Daniel to say something, but he didn't. When I glanced back, I saw he'd fallen asleep.

“Typical,” I muttered. I wasn't annoyed though. Not at him. I was angry at myself.

And, honestly, at Rylan. Why had he needed to tell me all of that emotional shit? I was grateful that he hadn't taken me to the hospital, but if it had meant avoiding everything else, maybe it would've been better if I'd gone. I hadn't asked him to care about me, and I certainly hadn't asked to know about it. He should've just let it go, moved on, found someone better.

Emmaline's face popped into my head, those glittering turquoise eyes, lips twisted into a sneer. I shook my head. Not Emmaline. I didn't know her well, but I didn't like her, especially not with Rylan.

I glanced down to make sure my clothes were all adjusted and then smoothed my hand over my hair. I headed for the door, my thoughts returning to Rylan.

If he'd only kept his mouth shut, everything would've been fine. I'd be going about my business today, taking advantage of the day off and thinking about going to a club over the weekend. Why had he ruined it? I'd been happy. I scowled at the voice in my head that questioned that particular statement. It was the truth, wasn't it? I'd been happy not knowing, going about my business the way I always had, the way I couldn't seem to do it

now.

I went home, my entire body throbbing with unfulfilled need. It hadn't been much, but it had been enough to get me wound up, to want to finish things off. I wasn't going to though. I didn't masturbate often and when I did, it was always some nameless, unknown fantasy man. Tonight, however, I had a feeling if I tried to get off, Rylan's would be the only face I'd see. I didn't want that. I didn't want him in my head any more than he already was.

I showered and climbed into bed although it was still early. It had been a long day and I had work tomorrow. Which meant I was probably going to see Rylan, whether I wanted to or not. I needed to clear my head and prepare myself for the questions that would inevitably come my way. Of course, all that busyness in my head meant it took me hours to get to sleep, but when it came, it came fast and hit me hard. I didn't even remember when I started dreaming.

"It's okay, Jenna." His voice was gentle. "Trust me."

"I trust you." I looked into the blue-violet depths of his eyes. "I trust you."

The restraints around my wrists and ankles were secure, but not overly tight. They held me, spread eagle on the bed, every inch of me exposed. My nipples were hard pink points, the flesh around them marked from Rylan's mouth. He'd made me come so many times already that I was dripping, and we weren't done yet.

He knelt between my legs, his cock sticking straight out, hard and swollen. I licked my lips and smiled as it twitched. He'd already gone in my mouth once and the taste of his cum was still on my tongue. It was mixed with my own flavor, thanks to the deep kisses that he'd shared after going down on

me.

“Roll over.”

I did as he said, the leather tying me up disappearing before I could pull too hard on it. I laid on my stomach, feeling no fear as I lost sight of him. I meant what I'd said. I trusted him, completely.

I felt his hands on my ass, palming the firm muscles. Then his tongue was there and I began to writhe and moan. Every inch of me felt like it was on fire, all of my nerve endings singing with pleasure. I'd enjoyed sex before, but never like this. I'd never known that giving myself over to someone so completely would make it so much better. It was everything I'd always heard it was supposed to be, but had never truly believed it could be. Two people connecting in ways that defied physics, becoming one and all that.

Then he was pulling up my hips and pushing inside me. The feel of skin against skin should've freaked me out, but it didn't. I wanted nothing between us. Wanted to feel every delicious inch of him as he filled me. He pounded into me, each thrust making my nipples rub against the sheets in a way that chafed in the most enjoyable way.

When his finger teased my asshole, I moaned, pushing back against him. He chuckled, a low sound that made things low inside me twist and turn.

“That's my greedy girl.”

He never missed a beat as he put his other hand on my back, holding me down against the mattress even as he worked his finger into my ass. My eyes rolled back in my head and then I squeezed them shut. It was so intense, the pressure in my ass, then the burn as he alternated strokes with his cock, keeping one part full while the other emptied. My hands opened and closed

convulsively, needing something to hold on to.

“Look at you,” he said. His middle finger teased at the ring of muscles fluttering around his first digit. “I love seeing your pussy stretched wide around my cock, love the way you beg for me to do what I want with you.”

I whimpered. It was true. All true. I had begged him. Begged him to spank me. Use the flogger and the crop on every sensitive inch of me. He'd used a variety of nipple clamps, each one offering their own unique version of pain. He'd even attached a chain to a pair of them and then taken me from behind, holding the chain while he fucked me. We'd tried dozens of different positions. He'd spent hours making me come until it hurt. Denied me until I was crying with the need for release.

“And you're going to let me fuck your ass tonight, aren't you?”

“Yes,” I moaned. The pressure inside me was building again and the thought of his cock where his fingers were just made me hotter.

He groaned. “Your pussy is so fucking tight, but your ass is going to be like a vice. I'm going to love being balls deep inside you, fucking you until you scream.”

I shuddered as I came, my muscles tightening around him. He swore, but kept fucking me, driving me into the most explosive orgasm I'd ever had. Then he was on top of me, stretching his body out over mine, his front flush against my back. He put his mouth against my ear even as his hand moved beneath me to rub my throbbing clit.

“I love you, Jenna Lang,” he breathed the words even as he came, pulsing and spurting inside me, filling me. “I love you.”

I came again, crying out his name and an agreement. “I love you too.”

I jerked awake, breath coming in pants, heart racing. My pussy was pulsing, the insides of my thighs slick. Had I come in my sleep? I'd never done that before. Hell, I'd never had a dream like that before.

I stared up at the ceiling. I knew that sex dreams were completely normal, that even climaxing during one of those dreams wasn't entirely unusual. I'd just never experienced either one before. The only kind of sex I'd ever experienced in my dreams had been of the nightmare variety. Terror-inducing half-memories of only pain and violence, never pleasure.

I ran my hands through my hair. Why did the only sex dream I'd ever had have to be about Rylan?

I sighed. Fuck it. I knew the answer. I'd known it all along, ever since we'd slept together, maybe even before that. I'd known he was different the moment he'd come to my apartment to apologize for startling me instead of pressing charges for me hitting him. I'd felt something in that first kiss and there'd been an attraction from the first moment I'd seen him. Sleeping with him had just made it worse. Then, seeing that non-sexual side of him when he'd taken care of me last night had solidified it.

I was still absolutely petrified by what I was feeling, by the possibilities it represented. But, I hadn't overcome a horrific childhood of abuse and become a college graduate with a successful career by lying to myself or hiding from things. I didn't dwell on my past, but I didn't pretend it hadn't happened either. I owed it to myself and Rylan to give this the same attention.

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes.

“Dammit!”

The word sounded loud in the otherwise silent room, but it didn't stop me from asking my question the same way.

“Why the hell did I have to fall for him?”

Chapter 7

With my decision made, I found it surprisingly easy to fall back asleep. My alarm woke me a couple hours later. As I showered and dressed, I tried not to think about what I would do when I got in to work today. If I thought about it too much, I'd start to second-guess my decision. Not because I wasn't sure of what I wanted, but because it would be one of the most difficult things I'd ever done. And it would be only the beginning. What came after would certainly be harder than anything I'd experienced in a long time. I'd come to the conclusion years ago that losing trust was much easier than regaining trust in someone.

When I walked into work, I half-expected there to be rumors flying as to why both Rylan and I had been out yesterday, but no one gave me a second look. One of the things I'd liked about Archer Enterprises from moment one had been that, after the first glance, no one had seemed to care about my appearance. Not anyone whose opinion I cared about anyway.

I'd come in early so I could speak with Rylan before I started without looking like I was trying to take advantage of whatever this was going to be. One of the things I would address is how we interacted at work. I didn't want this to affect the company.

I took the elevator all the way up, pausing when I stepped off so I could knock on the wall to announce my arrival. While I liked how open Rylan was

with his employees, it did sometimes get a bit inconvenient, him not having a door.

“Come in,” he called from the back of his office.

I'd come a few feet when he turned and saw me. I watched myriad expressions pass across his face. Happiness. Joy. Fear. Anxiety. Something that could turn into love... and then it was all hidden behind a professional mask.

“Jenna, please, sit.” He gestured toward the chairs we'd sat in before when we'd been in here.

Instead of going where he told me to, I walked over to a long leather couch against the far wall. I suspected this was where he slept sometimes when he worked too late to bother going home. He looked puzzled, but followed me and sat down as well. He was careful to keep distance between us, but I noticed he was still within arm's length.

“I have to tell you a few things.” I decided that he deserved to know everything that had happened yesterday before we went any further. “Yesterday, when I left your house, my head was a mess. That's not an excuse, but I just want you to know where I was mentally.”

“Okay?” Now he really looked confused.

“I decided I needed to get you out of my head, prove to myself that what I was feeling wasn't real.” I forced myself to keep my head up. “I slept with a guy. Not someone I knew. It was just like the other times I'd found someone to fuck. Sex, nothing else.” I paused, waiting for him to get angry, to tell me to get the hell out and that I was fired. Or, at the very least, tell me it changed how he felt about me.

“Did it?” he asked quietly.

“What?” Now it was my turn to not understand.

“Did having sex with a stranger clear your head? Convince you that what you felt was fake?”

“No.” I shook my head. “If anything, it made matters worse.”

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

“The sex was bad,” I admitted. “I kept comparing him to you, how you touched me, how you knew what I wanted without me asking.” I heard him catch his breath, but he didn't interrupt. “Then, after I went home, something happened that's never happened to me before.” I took a deep breath and wondered if he'd understand the significance of what I was going to say next. “I dreamed about you.”

Both of his eyebrows went up now, but he still didn't speak.

“About us. Making – having sex.” I couldn't say the 'I' word. “Things I'd never done before, not with anyone. Because I've never... never trusted anyone enough.” My eyes fell. “When I woke up, I had to admit what I knew.”

“And what was that?”

I could hear the cautious hope in his voice and that gave me the courage to look at him. I reached out and laced my fingers between his. “I care about you too. I can't – I don't know what it means, because this isn't something I've had to deal with before.”

His fingers tightened on my hand and he slid closer, still not invading my personal space, but at the edge of it. The intensity in his gaze made me

flush.

“Before any of this.” I made a gesture between us. “Before we can see if this can be anything, I need to tell you...” I took a deep breath. “You deserve to know the truth. All of it. Yesterday, when I said I'd been abused—”

“You don't have to tell me anything until you're ready.” He lightly rested his hand on my cheek and I leaned into his touch. “I may ask you things that you don't feel comfortable telling me, but I'll never push if you say you're not ready.”

I turned my head and pressed my lips against the palm of his hand. I smiled as I heard him make a sound in the back of his throat. A thrill went through me that I'd caused that sound. I'd had men tell me they wanted me. I've had them talk about the things they wanted to do to me, but I'd never wanted someone to want me. Not like this.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

Silence fell and butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I didn't know what was supposed to happen next.

“Rylan.” I decided honesty was a good idea here. “You're going to have to take point from here. I've never done this before.”

He looked startled by the admission. “But, the other night...you weren't...I mean...”

I didn't need him to ask the question. “No, I haven't been a virgin for a while.” I was purposefully vague. That wasn't a conversation that would lead anywhere pleasant. I continued on with the explanation. “The whole relationship thing. That's what I haven't done before. The other guys I've slept with, it's all been one time things. Maybe twice. Never anything more than

fucking.” I chose the word deliberately.

“All right then.” He smiled at me. “What do you say we make this simple instead of going through all of the shit normal couples go through when they're first working things out? No games.”

I nodded. I liked that idea. With my trust issues, I always preferred honesty over games. That was one of the reasons I'd always preferred my little flings to trying for a relationship. The men I'd fucked always knew where they stood and I'd never expected anything from them.

“Okay, first thing then,” he said. “Always the truth between us. No matter what it may mean.” He smiled and reached up to take my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “Like right now, I honestly want to kiss you.”

A flush of desire went through me. “I want you to.”

His eyes lit up and he leaned forward. Instead of something deep and passionate, however, it was the lightest of touches, his lips brushing against mine.

“If I did any more than that,” he said as he sat back. “I'm not sure I'd be able to stop there.”

I warmed at the thought.

“And maybe that's a good place to go next.” He seemed to gather himself as he took my hand again. “Stopping.”

I gave him a puzzled look.

“If, at any time, I do anything that you don't feel comfortable with, whether it's a word I use or a touch, tell me.” His expression was serious. “I'll

stop when you say to stop.”

“And if we're having sex?” I asked. “The room you showed me... I know enough about that kind of thing to know that stop sometimes doesn't mean stop.”

“If you want it to, it will,” he said. “Or we can come up with safe words.”

“I like that idea,” I said slowly. “Something, maybe, to signal that I'm not sure about what we're doing, and something else to stop?”

He nodded. “In a BDSM relationship, safe words are essential.”

“Is that what you want?” I asked. I hadn't considered that. “A BDSM relationship?”

“I'd be lying if I said I didn't want that to be part of our relationship,” he said. “But I don't want that to define us.”

“Okay,” I said. “So, safe words?”

“How about we keep it simple,” he said. “Yellow for slow down, you're not sure. Red for stop.”

“Yellow for slowing down, red for stop,” I repeated. “That's easy enough.”

“And if you can't say them, we need a hand signal.”

I held up my hand, thumb and pinky finger out, the other three down. “Do you know the sign language alphabet?” He nodded. “So a 'y' for yellow, 'r' for red?”

He smiled. “I like that.” His smile widened and he shook his head. “I

can't believe I'm having this conversation with you.”

“Why's that?” I asked.

He reached up and tucked some hair behind my ear. “Because I've wanted it from the moment I first met you.”

I shivered at his touch. “Then what comes next?”

“Guidelines,” he said. “There are a lot of things that can happen during sex and I don't ever want to do something you don't want me to do. I know there are things I might want that maybe you'll need talked into, but I need to know if there are definite things that are off the table. Do you want to talk about them now or wait until we're in the moment?”

“Are you going to want an explanation?” I asked, wondering if it'd be better to get into it now or later.

“No,” he said. “Not unless you want to give me one.”

I nodded, thinking for a moment before answering. “You can't tie me up or restraint me. I don't do bondage.”

“Okay,” he said.

I thought I saw a flash of disappointment in his eyes, but he didn't sound upset. Part of me hoped that, maybe, someday, I could give him everything he wanted. A bigger part feared that I wouldn't ever be able to do it and I'd lose him, but I silenced that part of me for the moment. No use borrowing trouble.

“There are some other things that I'm not sure about,” I said. “But part of learning to trust you will be overcoming some of those things.” This time, it was me who reached up to push back wayward hair. His eyes closed for a

moment as I ran my fingers through the silky strands. "Let's take that as it comes, shall we?"

He opened his eyes and they were nearly purple. "Then I think there are only two other things we need to talk about. First, work." He glanced toward the elevator. "I can't show favoritism or treat you any differently here."

"I know," I said. "And I wouldn't want it any other way. At work, it's employer, employee." I looked down at where we were holding hands.

"Once we're done here." He grinned as if he could read my mind.

"And two?" I asked, holding his hand tighter.

"This Saturday evening, are you free?"

"Um, yes." I thought I knew where this was going.

"Then will you go out with me?" he asked. "A date. A real, proper date." He winked at me. "And we can see where things go from there."

"I'd like that." I smiled. I'd never been on a date before. Sure, there had been guys in school who'd tried to ask me out, but I'd never gone. Especially back then, I'd been too anxious, worried about what would happen if they got me alone in their cars, or wherever they were taking me.

"I'll pick you up at six?"

I almost asked if he needed my address, but then I remembered he'd been there before.

He stood and pulled me up with him, pulling me into his arms. His eyes shone as he lowered his head and kissed me again. His mouth was firm on mine, but not demanding. I felt his tongue tease the corner of my mouth, then disappear before the kiss could deepen. He broke away, but kept me in his

arms.

He sighed. “How am I going to be able to work with you and not do this?” He brushed his lips across mine again, then released me. Reluctance was clear on his face as he took a step back.

I knew what he would say next, so I said it first. “I should go now. I have work to do.”

“Yes, you do,” he said. “And a boss can be a real bastard if it's not done on time.”

I laughed and the mood shifted into something lighter. Still, I stayed a moment longer, enjoying a feeling I rarely got to have. Peace. Finally, I turned away, knowing I'd get behind if I stayed too much longer. If I could make myself leave at all. Being around Rylan made me feel different, better, and I knew I would come to crave that feeling. If I wasn't already.

As I walked toward the elevator, it opened. Christophe's eyes widened in surprise when he saw me.

“Jenna,” he said.

I smiled at him. “Good morning.”

He smiled back. “Same to you.” As I stepped onto the elevator, he continued, “Maybe I'll come down and see you when I'm done here?”

“I have a lot of work to do, Christophe.” I pressed the button for my floor. “But feel free to stop in to say 'hi' if you happen to be around.”

When his face brightened, I wondered if I should've made that invitation. I'd have to think of some way to let him know I wasn't interested without exposing my new relationship with Rylan. The doors slid closed and I pushed

the thought from my mind. That was something for another day. Today, I was going to have a hard enough time focusing on the project I had waiting for me.

Chapter 8

Maybe this hadn't been such a great idea. Put me in a situation where I'm going to fuck someone's brains out and I'll know exactly what to do. Sit me in front of a computer and I could write and rewrite systems forwards and backwards in my sleep. Confrontational sleaze-bags I could handle. Self-righteous bitches were no problem. I had my walls, my shields, all of the things I'd spent years cultivating, but they weren't going to work here. In fact, if this thing with Rylan was going to work at all, I had to let him in.

And I wanted it to work. I wanted it so badly. I'd never thought I could want someone like this.

And I would fuck everything up, I knew it.

As I paced the short distance between my second-hand couch and the door, those thoughts kept going round and round in my head. I could feel myself heading toward that place where the cycle of thoughts would overwhelm me. I forced myself to stop and slow my breathing, counting each deliberate breath. I could do this. I'd survived things no one should ever even imagine. I was stronger than anyone realized.

I kept telling myself that as I waited for Rylan to arrive.

My hand fluttered nervously across my outfit. Rylan hadn't told me to dress a specific way so I'd taken the risk and decided to go with something different than the 'tough girl' clothes he was used to seeing me in. Okay, so it

wasn't some frilly girly thing, but I wasn't wearing boots either.

A couple weeks ago, Rylan had given me my time-and-a-half check from my work the night we'd kissed for the first time, and there'd been a nice bonus in there too since the work we'd done had solved the problem. Since there was quite a bit of extra I hadn't been counting on, I'd put it aside for something special. Yesterday, I'd decided to use it to buy a new outfit.

It was black, setting off my fair skin and pale eyes, the material clingy enough to show off my curves. I'd picked one with a short skirt, remembering what Rylan had said once about my legs. The hem hit just a couple inches below my ass, making it possible for me to walk and sit without flashing my panties at anyone... if I was careful. The neckline was modest, showing enough cleavage to be attractive but not so much that I could be considered inappropriate for a fancy restaurant. To compensate for the late November weather and short skirt, I'd gone with long sleeves. The fact that they also covered the scar on the inside of my left arm and only hinted at the barbed wire tattoo around my right wrist was just a bonus.

As I looked in the mirror, for the first time, I wondered if I should have changed my hair color to something more normal, more acceptable. No, I told myself. I'd made a promise years ago, back when I was starting to heal from all the shit that had been done to me, that I'd never be anything other than myself and, right now, myself had blue hair. If Rylan couldn't accept that, too bad...but he had accepted that, I realized. He hadn't once commented about any of the things that made people look at me like I was a freak.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts and I was grateful for it. One of the things I always had to be careful about was getting stuck in these cyclical thoughts or memories that would play over and over again. Living a nightmare for the first thirteen years of my life had made it difficult to accept

that bad wasn't my normal state of being. Often, the better things got, the harder those things hit me.

I hurried over to the door, hoping that Rylan liked the way my new heels made my legs look. When I opened the door and saw his eyes widen, I knew they'd been worth every penny. His eyes slid up my legs and over my body. By the time his gaze met mine, his eyes were as dark as they had been the night we'd kissed, as dark as the night we'd slept together for the first time.

I swallowed hard. Shit. I'd said 'for the first time,' which meant I was already thinking about there being a second time. With him looking at me that way, though, it was hard not to think about sex. The man practically breathed it.

“Wow.” He finally spoke. “Now I'm starting to wish I'd chosen a better first date.”

Considering he was wearing a pair of dark gray dress slacks and a black sweater that showed off his amazing physique, I would've been happy to spend the entire night staring at him. Instead of doing that, I asked a question, “What did you choose?”

He smiled at me and my stomach twisted.

“There's a concert at the college tonight. They're doing a whole hors d'oeuvres with cheese and wine thing beforehand.” His expression turned sheepish and he ran his hand through his hair. “I thought it sounded nice and now I'm thinking it's a bit—”

“It's perfect,” I interrupted. A thrill went through me when I realized he was almost as nervous as I was. I didn't know why. There was absolutely no way this was his first date.

“Can I be honest?” he asked.

I braced myself for something bad.

“I’ve never met anyone like you before.” He took a step toward me, his gaze burning. “You’re this crazy combination of strength and vulnerability.”

I flushed. I should have hated that he could see beyond the tough exterior I put up, but instead, it made me want him even more.

He was close enough to touch me now and that’s what he did, putting his hand on my cheek. My heart did a stutter-step.

“I feel like if I take one wrong step, I’m going to lose you.” His eyes flicked down to my lips and then his thumb brushed over the bottom one. “Tell me that you’ll give me a chance, an honest chance to make this work. Promise me.”

I let my tongue dart out against the tip of his thumb and his fingers flexed on my face. “I promise.” And then I did something I’d never done before. I asked him to kiss me.

His mouth came down on mine a moment after the words were spoken and I leaned into him. My hands gripped the front of his shirt as one hand cupped the back of my head and the other slid down my spine to rest at the small of my back. He pushed his tongue between my lips, making it clear who was in control of the kiss. It should have panicked me, but instead sent a jolt of arousal straight through me. I doubted that I’d be able to so easily give up control in sex, but right now, I closed my eyes and let him thoroughly explore my mouth. He took his time, scraping his teeth across the bottom of my lip, then lightly biting down. I moaned, pressing my body more tightly against him. I could feel his cock hardening against me and felt a burst of

pride that I could make a man like this want me.

“Oh, Jenna,” he breathed my name and it sent a shiver down my spine. “You have no idea how badly I want you.”

Considering how damp my panties were, I thought I had a pretty good idea. I wondered what he'd say if I suggested we skip the date and head in to my bedroom.

He took a step back and I could see the reluctance on his face.

“But I want to do this right,” he said. “I meant what I said before. I don't want this to be about sex.” He smiled, his eyes glinting. “Or, only about sex.”

“So, concert, cheese, wine?” My entire body was still tingling from the kiss and I was ready for more, but knowing he was willing to stop rather than take care of what his body obviously wanted meant more to me than he could know.

“You really don't think it's a stupid idea?”

I shook my head. “I was worried you were going to take me to some expensive restaurant where I'd use the wrong fork.”

He laughed and held out his hand. I took it, enjoying the way it felt as my palm slid across his. His fingers threaded between mine and the gesture made me feel safer than anything else ever had. I let him pull me against his side as we walked toward the stairs.

“You know,” he said. “You should probably look into moving somewhere that has a working elevator.” He grinned down at me. “I'm all for working out, but I'm not looking forward to having to climb three flights of stairs every time I want to see you.”

I smiled back. “I guess that means we'll have to spend more time at your place.”

Chapter 9

I'd been joking when I'd said we'd have to spend more time at Rylan's place, but after an amazing night of music and expensive food, he'd asked me if I wanted to call it a night or come back to his place.

Of course I wanted to go with him. I loved that we'd gone on a real date, but every moment I'd spent touching him tonight had left my body craving more. I would explode if he just dropped me off at home with only a good-night kiss.

We made our good-byes to the few other alumni who'd remembered Rylan from his days at CSU and made our way to his car. I'd been a little surprised when I'd realized that he'd driven and even more so when I saw that his car wasn't some flashy sports car but rather a hybrid. If it had been some other rich guy, I probably would've suspected that he'd driven a hybrid to make it look like he was some environmentally conscious do-gooder. Everything I'd observed about Rylan, however, said he was as genuine as could be.

When we'd walked into the concert hall, there were plenty of looks sent my way, but Rylan had ignored them all. He'd put his hand at the small of my back and steered me toward a waiter who was serving champagne. Each person who'd come up to talk to him about being one of CSU's most successful alumni, he'd made a point of introducing me the same way. While

I knew most of it was due to the fact that I was here with him, I had to admit that it was nice to be recognized for my accomplishments rather than my appearance.

Now, as I sat in the passenger's seat, I couldn't help but look at him and wonder how this had happened. How had someone as fucked up as me managed to find someone like Rylan? Not just a half-way decent guy, but a great guy. The kind of man who any woman in her right mind would want to be with.

“Is something wrong?” Rylan asked as we headed out of the main part of the city toward the lake that his property edged.

“No, why?”

“You keep staring at me like you expect me to do something strange like turn into a pumpkin or a monster or something.”

“No, not a pumpkin,” I mused, more to myself than to him.

“You know we don't have to do anything.” His voice was gentle. “I don't have any expectations.”

I smiled at him and took his hand, placing it on the bare skin of my thigh. “You might not, but I do.”

I heard him catch his breath, but he didn't remove his hand from my leg.

“And what might those expectations be?” The tone of his voice had shifted and I knew I was responsible for it.

I also knew he was giving me the chance to set the boundaries for tonight. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I'd known when I told Rylan that I wanted to try to have a real relationship with him that it would be full of

these moments. Full of moments where I would have to decide what step I was getting ready to take, and how much I was going to tell him when I set the guidelines.

I'd been thinking about this moment from the time I'd woken up from my first sex dream. I was equal parts terrified to say it but also wanting it so badly that I could feel every part of me throbbing in anticipation.

"I want you to be in control." My heart hammered against my chest as I said the words.

"Are you sure?" He raised his hand from my leg to wrap it around mine.

"Yes." The word was shaky, but I was certain. "No tying me up, but the rest we can take one step at a time." I risked a look over at him. "Is that okay?"

He made a sound that I couldn't quite identify and raised our hands to his mouth, turning them so that he could brush his lips against the back of my hand. "You can't know how much it means to me that you're willing to try." He squeezed my hand. "Just promise me one thing."

"Yes?" I made it a question rather than an acceptance.

"Do you remember the safe words we discussed?"

I nodded.

"Please promise me, no matter what, you'll use them." He pulled into the driveway of his magnificent house, but didn't get out, rather turning to me with a serious expression on his face. "I mean it, Jenna." He reached out with his free hand and cupped the side of my face. "I never want to do anything that could hurt or bother you. I don't care what it is. A touch. A word."

My heart clenched at the intensity in his voice. It wasn't the bad kind or even the sexual kind. This was the sort of intensity that came with wanting to make sure that there was no misunderstanding.

“What I'm going to say may sound crude, but it's the best way to make you understand what I mean.” He dropped his hand from my face. “I don't care if I'm buried deep inside you, ready to come, and you need me to stop, all you have to do is say the word.”

Weird as it may have sounded, that was the most amazing thing anyone had ever said to me.

“Promise me,” he said.

My voice was tight as I answered, “I promise.”

He held my gaze for a moment, as if trying to decide if I was being honest with him, and then he nodded. I wasn't sure what the nod meant, but I didn't have a chance to ask. He got out of the car and came around to open my door. In the short time it took him to cover that distance, the familiar dark voices of doubt reared their heads, whispering all of the reasons why this was a bad idea, how he was going to hurt me.

Then he opened my door and held out his hand. The moment we touched, the voices quieted. They didn't fully go away, and I didn't think they ever would, but they at least went back to the part of my mind where they usually slept.

Even though I'd been to his house before, I hadn't truly been able to appreciate the absolute beauty of the structure. Now, even as I admired the stone structure, my focus still wasn't wholly on it. It didn't matter how expensive the place was or how many rooms it had. I registered all of that on

one level, but most of me was just thinking about that room, the one Rylan had shown me.

The one where the bed had been designed for bondage.

We walked into the house and up the steps in silence. I could feel my heart pounding, my chest tightening. I trusted Rylan enough to not try the one thing I'd told him not to do, but I wasn't sure I could keep myself together in that room. Not yet.

But we didn't go to that room. We stopped in the hallway next to the door of the spare room where I'd slept before. That was enough of a surprise, but Rylan shocked me when he opened the door across the hall.

The door to his room.

My expression must've shown what I was thinking because he smiled down at me.

“Nothing crazy tonight,” he said. “And I thought you might feel more comfortable if you weren't around all of the bondage stuff.”

Relief flooded me. I kept my gratitude simple. “Thank you.”

He stepped into the bedroom and I followed. It was bigger than the guest room I'd stayed in with a massive bed in the center. An open door to my right showed a glimpse into a bathroom that I was sure was even more lavish than the one I'd seen. Other than the size of the space and the quality of the furnishings, there wasn't any of the usual shit that made up the bedrooms of rich bachelors. No massive electronic systems. There was a flat screen on the wall opposite the bed, but it wasn't anything gratuitous. No gaming systems, no flashy decorations that said he'd given carte blanche to an interior designer.

The one thing that did make me raise my eyebrows and turn to him with a question on my face was the vase of roses sitting on the end table to the right side of the bed. “Not exactly what I expected to find in a man's bedroom.”

He grinned at me, a surprisingly boyish smile that made me wonder if that's what he'd looked like as a child. “I was telling the truth when I said I didn't have any expectations about tonight, but I was hoping.” He walked over to the end table and plucked one of the red roses from the vase. “Rose petals are extremely soft,” he said as he walked back over to me. “But you can never truly appreciate them until you feel them on the most sensitive parts of your body.”

I shivered as his voice slid across my skin. Something had shifted when he'd picked up that flower and while he never did anything dominating, I knew I was no longer in control.

I waited for the panic to come, but as my eyes met his, I felt the same safety I'd felt when he'd held my hand. I had to spend a couple years learning to enjoy sex, but even since then, I never connected with anyone, never let down my guard. Because I never felt safe. Even in my own apartment, there was still always something in the back of my mind telling me that I was reachable, that people who wanted to hurt me would find me. I knew it wasn't possible, not after I'd reinvented myself so thoroughly, but I'd never been able to get rid of that feeling. I'd accepted long ago that being safe enough to sleep with just the bathroom light on was the best I was going to get.

“I've got you, Jenna,” Rylan said softly.

I didn't know if it was the words, the tone or the look in his eyes, but I believed. I believed him enough that I accepted the fact that I was safe. A

weight that I hadn't known I'd carried was lifted off of me and I could breathe more freely than I ever had before.

A slow smile curved my lips. "And now that you have me, what are you going to do with me?"

Rylan made a sound low in his throat and I saw something flash across his eyes. My arousal spiked. Oh, he would do some very good things to me.

"Clothes," he said. "Off. Now."

Fuck.

I'd always hated it when people tried to give me orders, but there was something about him, about the way he said those words that turned me on rather than freaked me out.

I reached behind me and unzipped my dress, letting the straps slide down my shoulders. The first time we'd slept together, he'd wanted me to undress slowly and I'd refused. Now, I would give him what he wanted.

His gaze was hungry as he watched the material slip off and pool at my feet.

"Damn." The word came out in a breath.

I suddenly felt shy even though I was still wearing my bra and panties. While not exactly conservative, they were far from ridiculously sexy. Though they probably did look more so at the moment since I was wearing a pair of high heels.

"Bra."

I reached behind me, unhooked it and let it drop to the floor.

“Panties.”

He was still completely dressed, but as I slowly pulled down my panties, I saw him toe off his shoes, leaving me wearing the only thing he wasn't. When I straightened, he closed the distance between us, but only to within reaching distance. He held out the rose, brushing the petals across my cheek and down to my lips. He hadn't been kidding about how soft the flower was.

“Will you close your eyes?” he asked.

I shook my head and waited for a question. Instead, he moved on, running the rose down my neck and across my collarbones. He circled around behind me, taking the flower with him. I felt him tracing the angel wings and wondered if he was studying them closely enough to see the scars beneath.

“Do I get to look at your tattoo?” I asked.

He came back into my line of sight. “Maybe after. If you decide to stay the night.”

“And if I want to go home?” I asked.

“Then I'll take you,” he said. “Or you can sleep across the hall again.” He used the rose to circle my right breast, lingering on the nipple. “But I'm hoping you'll stay.”

I didn't give him an answer and he didn't press for one. He ran the rose down my arm, then back up, before moving to my left breast. My nipples were hardening under the gentle touch, my skin humming. When the rose went down the scar on the inside of my left arm, I waited for a question again, but it didn't come.

The rose went across the sensitive skin of my stomach, neither avoiding nor lingering on the six inch burn scar that ran down my side to my hip. He

teased at the stud in my bellybutton, the tickling sensation making me smile. He moved behind me again, letting the rose drop to my ass. My eyelids fluttered as the petals teased at the crease between my legs, its touch almost too light. When he came back around the front, he was closer, watching as the rose glided over the thin, dark curls that covered my pussy. I pressed my lips together, swallowing the moan that wanted to escape. I didn't know if he wanted me to speak.

As if he could read my mind, he said, "Don't hold back. Be as loud or quiet as you want. It's your choice."

I nodded my understanding.

"Now, spread your legs."

He had that tone in his voice again, that authoritative sound that made me impossibly wet, wetter than I'd ever been.

I did as I was told and was rewarded by the gentle touch of a rose against my lower lips, softer than anything I'd ever felt before. He rubbed the soft petals against me until I moaned, desperate for a firmer friction.

He made a pleased sound. "I could listen to that all day."

When he raised the rose, the flower glistened with my juices. I flushed in embarrassment, the faint shame from my past coming forward, telling me that it wasn't supposed to be like this. Then he held the rose in front of his face and inhaled deeply.

"Exquisite."

A different kind of heat spread through me.

"Now," he said, setting the rose aside. "What do you say we get those

shoes off?”

I glanced at the bed, intending to sit and take the heels off, but then Rylan knelt in front of me and I sucked in a breath. His hands slid down my right leg first and I put my hands on his shoulders to steady myself as he pulled off my shoe, then turned his attention to my other one. I gasped as he kissed the side of my calf, then moved higher up my legs. My breathing quickened the higher he got, until, finally, his mouth was there.

I swore as his tongue went to work, dancing around my clit and down to my pussy. I'd never had anyone go down on me like this and it was amazing. I slid my hands up his neck and into his hair, digging my fingers into the thick, silky locks. His hands cupped my ass, holding me firmly against his mouth until I could feel my orgasm building inside me. As his lips closed around my clit and he began to suck, I came. I called out his name as my body shook and he kept going, drawing out my climax until it took all my willpower to keep my eyes from closing.

As he stood, he kissed his way up my stomach, pausing to lavish attention on both of my breasts, teasing around my nipples with his tongue before taking them into his mouth.

“Fuck!” A jolt of electricity went straight through me as his teeth scraped my nipple.

He froze, looking up at me. I knew what he was waiting to hear. Instead, I said, “Please.”

His teeth found my nipple again, worrying at it until I was pulling at his shirt, desperate to feel his skin, to touch him. As he slid his hand between my legs, I felt the beginnings of another orgasm building low inside me. His finger slipped easily into my pussy, the heel of his hand rubbing against my

clit. His mouth moved to my other breast even as he added a second finger, stretching me even as he coaxed me higher.

I cried out as he bit down on my nipple, not hard enough for real pain, but rather the exact right pressure I needed to get me to the boiling point.

Then his mouth was gone, his fingers curling inside me, pressing against my g-spot. His lips brushed against mine as he spoke, "Come for me, Jenna."

I couldn't have disobeyed that command even if I'd wanted to. And I didn't. Pleasure exploded over me, every muscle in my body tightening. Rylan swore as my pussy contracted around his fingers and he wrapped his arm around my waist, holding me as I came.

It wasn't until I began to come down that I realized Rylan was still fully dressed. I reached for the front of his shirt as he removed his fingers from me.

"No," he said, pushing my hands aside. "On the bed."

I climbed onto the bed and settled back against the pillows, eager to see what would come next. To my delight, Rylan began to slowly unbutton his shirt, revealing inch after inch of tanned, muscular torso. His eyes were impossibly dark, watching me watch him. I felt a throb of arousal as he tossed his shirt onto the floor. His pants went next, revealing a pair of tight, black boxer-briefs that showed just how much he enjoyed what he'd been doing to me. When those came off, I let my eyes run down his body to the thick, hard cock that was waiting for me.

He reached into the top drawer and pulled out a condom. I swallowed hard as I watched him roll the condom over his cock, remembering what it had felt like to have it inside me. He climbed into the bed, resting on his knees as his fingers skimmed over my ankles and then up to my calves. I

could see in his eyes that he was remembering our last time together.

“Open your legs, Jenna.” His voice was soft, but the words were a command nonetheless.

This was a deciding point, I knew. If I did as he said, I knew what would come next. Something I had never allowed before. It had been done to me, but never with my permission.

I moved my legs apart and gave permission. Fear tried to overwhelm me, but I looked up into Rylan's eyes and reminded myself that I was safe. He moved slowly as he came toward me, giving me the chance to stop him with every pause. I didn't though. I kept my eyes on his even as my heart began to race.

He lowered himself over me, keeping his weight balanced on his arms so that he was never resting on me. I felt his cock nudge against my entrance and I tensed.

“Yellow,” I whispered. I could feel the fear clawing at the back of my throat.

“We don't have to,” Rylan pushed my hair back from my face. “It's okay.”

“I want to,” I said. I reached up and lightly touched his lips. “I just – I don't –” I didn't know how to explain it.

“You're always in control,” he said with an understanding smile. “Never in a position of vulnerability.”

I nodded.

He leaned down, careful not to press his body against mine, and gently

pressed his lips against mine. “We can switch,” he said. “You can be on top.”

I shook my head. “I want you,” I confessed. “Like this.”

“So, yellow?” he asked. “Not red?”

“No,” I said. “Not red. Just slow.”

He smiled. “Slow is good.”

I nodded and ran my hands across his shoulders and down his back. My fingers brushed across the top of his ass. “Slow.”

He kissed me again as he began to push his way inside me. The stretch was familiar, but the angle was new and made me gasp. He swallowed the sound and slipped his tongue into my mouth. I flexed my fingers as he filled me, my nails digging into his ass. His teeth pulled at my bottom lip, biting, then his tongue soothing, each sensation mingling with the feel of his cock coming to rest inside me.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead against mine. I marveled at the strength he had to hold himself off of me.

“Yellow?” He made it a question.

“No,” I said. “I'm okay.”

Still, he moved leisurely, keeping his strokes even and deliberate. Each one rubbed the base of his cock against my already sensitive clit, the pleasure driving away the last of the doubt and fear I had. I ran my hands up his back and pulled down on his shoulders.

“Jenna?” His voice was hoarse.

“Please.”

He lowered himself slowly, watching my face carefully, I knew, for any sign of discomfort or panic. I raised myself up to meet him, wanting to feel his body along the length of mine, feel his weight on me. It wasn't this place that made me safe. It was him.

I wrapped my legs around him even as my arms went around his neck. I pulled his body down on mine, pleasure coiling in my belly as I heard him moan at the contact. As his face pressed against my neck, his thrusts shallow now as we kept our bodies tight together, I looked up at the ceiling, my eyes wide.

“Yes, yes.” I knew he needed to know I was okay, and I repeated the affirmation until the words turned into more sounds than syllables. My grip on him tightened as I came, more intensely than I'd ever come before.

I was still shaking as he buried himself deep inside of me and called out my name. His body tensed and he clung to me as we rode out our pleasure together. Then he rolled off of me, settling on his side. He rested his hand on my stomach and looked down at me, a concerned expression on his face.

“Are you okay?”

I laughed. “Are you kidding me?” I placed my hand over his. “That was amazing.”

A smile broke out across his face. “So this is going to work?”

I didn't let myself overthink it. “Yes. I think it is.”

He leaned down and kissed me, a thorough kiss that made my heart race again. When he pulled back, he sat up and then climbed off of the bed. “I'll be right back.”

He went into the bathroom and I heard the water running. I stared at the

ceiling. This was usually the time I would be up and getting my clothes on, ready to leave my latest conquest before he decided to get too clingy or started asking awkward questions.

“You're still here.” Rylan sounded surprised.

I turned toward him. He hadn't done anything to cover himself up and there was no need to. He was like a work of art, his body flawless. Not like mine.

Before my mood could turn maudlin, I responded to his comment. “You said I had to stay if I wanted to see your tattoo up close.”

He smiled as he handed me a warm, wet cloth, then moved to stretch out onto the bed. He lay on his stomach, his arms crossed beneath his head, his face turned toward me. “Explore away.”

I fell asleep tracing the patterns of his tattoo, and as I slipped into the darkness, I heard him whisper, “You're safe.” And, for the first time, I believed it.

Chapter 10

When I woke up Sunday morning, Rylan was in bed next to me, watching me sleep. If it hadn't been for the totally sappy expression on his face, I would've thought it was a bit creepy. He brushed back my hair, then slid his hand down my spine, moving beneath the covers to continue his exploration. I could hardly handle the weight of his gaze and looked away, pushing myself up onto my elbows.

“I seem to recall the last time I spent the night, you made me breakfast.”

He chuckled, a low sound that made every part of me throb with desire.

“I'll get right on that.”

I thought for a moment he was joking, but then he rolled over and got out of the bed, giving me a fantastic view of that amazingly firm ass. He looked over his shoulder and winked. “Like what you see?”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. I'd always enjoyed the momentary release that came after sex, but I'd never felt this relaxed before, certainly not this long after.

“Any requests?” he asked. “How do pancakes sound?”

“Perfect.” I sighed.

“Come down whenever you're ready,” he said. He half-turned at the door

and grinned at me. “Preferably wearing the same thing you are now.”

I supposed I disappointed him when, after a shower, I walked into the kitchen wearing one of his shirts, but that quickly disappeared – the disappointment and the shirt. I'd never spent an entire day with a guy before, certainly not a guy I was fucking. And even more surprising was, as the day wore on, I didn't feel that anxious need to go.

I did eventually go home, but it wasn't like any other trip home after sex. For the first time, I knew I'd be seeing him again, that there would be more. Talks. Hand holding. All of the things I'd never had and never thought I'd wanted until I'd met Rylan.

I suddenly couldn't wait to get to work the next day.

Except work was a lot harder than I'd expected it to be. Not the work itself. No, that was challenging, but not exactly difficult. The hard part was keeping everything between Rylan and myself a secret. I wasn't sure where things were with us, but I did know that it was way too soon for us to make any waves, especially since all it would do was make people at work think that I'd slept my way into the job.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from sneaking glances at him every time he walked by, thinking about what he looked like without those fitted jeans and long-sleeved shirt. My fingers tingled every time I looked at his back, remembering what it had been like to trace over the ink on the skin there. The best part was, it wasn't just me either.

When I walked into work Monday morning, I felt Rylan's eyes on me. Not in a creepy way, but rather with a familiarity that warmed me. He didn't say a single word to me, but his gaze spoke volumes.

When I got to my office, a thrill went through me as I saw a vase of lilies sitting on my desk. Most guys probably would've sent roses, but Rylan had been paying attention. There had been a specific reason for roses the other night, but this was about sending me flowers at work. I hadn't told him the story behind my tattoo or the importance of Lily, but he'd understood that for me to make it something permanent, it had to mean something. There were half a dozen pure white lilies and they smelled amazing.

“Secret admirer?”

I turned to see Christophe standing in the doorway. He was smiling, but it didn't reach his eyes. Not for the first time, I wondered if he'd been hoping for something romantic between the two of us. Part of it I knew was my own fault for being so friendly when I'd first started and had been trying to make Rylan jealous, but I hadn't ever done anything overtly romantic or sexual.

“Something like that,” I answered mysteriously.

“Who are they from?” he asked, coming into the office.

I looked down at the vase, hoping Rylan had been smart enough not to leave a card. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that he hadn't.

“Did you have something for me?” I asked, purposefully avoiding his question. I didn't want to lie outright, but I wasn't about to answer honestly either.

Christophe scowled as he held out a stack of papers. “You'd asked for some results to be printed out. I figured I'd bring them to you.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took them. “That was nice of you.” I waited for a moment, and when he didn't leave, I went behind my desk and sat down, hoping he'd take the hint. A few seconds passed and he finally left, allowing

me to focus on my work. Or, at least, focus as much as I could while catching glimpses of my flowers.

Monday morning wasn't the only time I received something from Rylan. At lunch, along with some mail, I received an unsigned note that simply said "Thinking of you." On Tuesday, there were fresh lilies, accompanied by a snide comment from Emmaline regarding what I must've had to do to get flowers two days in a row. I would've been more upset with her if I hadn't gotten a text around the same time.

I wish we weren't so swamped trying to get this new system perfected because there are so many things I would love to do to you tonight.

Of course, I'd responded.

Looking forward to getting to cash in that rain check.

The rest of the day was spent waiting for those little notes, reminders that what had happened between us wasn't some fluke or that my trust had been misplaced. Rylan did want a relationship with me and, as much as that terrified me, I wanted it too.

I'd been hoping that we'd see each other after work, but with it being the week of Thanksgiving and Rylan giving everyone a half day on Wednesday as well as the rest of the week off, we had a lot to do before the holiday. Even the thought of the upcoming holidays wasn't enough to bring me down. I usually despised this time of year, not for others though, just for myself. I'd long since gotten past the jealousy toward those who spent their holidays with their families and loved ones while I did nothing. My Thanksgivings were usually spent lounging around my apartment working on code. Basically, the same thing I did any night I wasn't out. The main difference this year was that I wouldn't be going out on Friday night looking for a post-

holiday hook up. Rylan and I hadn't defined anything between us, but I wasn't about to fuck things up by repeating bad habits.

“Jenna.”

Rylan's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. It was Wednesday morning and I had a couple hours left on my shift, a couple hours to see Rylan before a long weekend, during which I wasn't sure what would be happening.

The first thing I registered was that he looked even more amazing than normal. The second was that he wasn't alone. Next to him stood a tall, slender woman with short, dark brown hair and hazel eyes. She had fine, delicate features, the kind that a model would've killed for, and an attitude that suggested any comparison to a model wouldn't be appreciated. She was smart and, judging by the way she was looking at me, came from money.

My stomach sank as I thought he was going to introduce me to one of his exes. After all, this looked like the kind of woman he usually dated, the kind that most people would expect him to be with.

“I'd like you to meet my sister, Suzette Dougall.”

My eyebrows went up. A sister? The research I'd done hadn't said anything about him having a sister. Granted, I hadn't delved too deeply into his personal life, but usually family stuff was the first to show up. Then I remembered that his parents had divorced when he was a kid. Different last name, no ring – she was probably his half-sister or stepsister. And I did have a vague memory now of him mentioning something about a sister that first night I'd been at his house. I'd had a lot of other stuff on my mind that night, so it wasn't surprising that the statement hadn't registered until now.

“Suzette, this is Jenna Lang, my new security tech.”

I stood and extended a hand. Suzette took it, but her eyes were narrow, as if she didn't like what she saw. Normally, I wouldn't give a fuck, but this was Rylan's sister and I wanted her to like me.

“Not really your usual employee dress code,” Suzette said as she took her hand back.

Rylan gave her a sharp look. “Jenna's special.”

I flushed and watched Suzette's eyes go from Rylan to me and back again. I heard her sigh and felt more than saw Rylan stiffen.

“If you say so, big brother,” she said. “Don't you think we should go? Zeke's waiting.”

Zeke. Yet another person in Rylan's inner circle who wasn't that fond of me. I wasn't sure if he knew that Rylan and I were together, but he didn't like me either way.

“Go on ahead,” he said. “I want to talk to Jenna for a moment.”

Suzette sent a not-so-nice look my way, but did as her brother asked, closing the door to my office behind her.

Even as the door closed, Rylan's arms wrapped around me.

“I thought we agreed, none of this at the office,” I protested, but it was only half-heartedly. I loved being in his arms.

“We did,” he said. “But that was before I realized how insanely difficult it would be to keep my hands off of you.” He ran one of his hands up my spine to wrap around the back of my neck.

My fingers curled in the front of his shirt as his fingers found all of the right pressure points across my neck. I tilted my head so that as he bent his, our mouths were perfectly aligned. His lips were firm against mine and my mouth willingly opened beneath his. His tongue slid inside and I met it with my own, twisting and tangling even as I pressed my body closer.

When he finally broke the kiss, we were both gasping for air, but he didn't let me go.

“If I thought for one moment that you'd feel comfortable, I'd ask you to come to Thanksgiving dinner with my family tomorrow,” he said. He smoothed down my hair.

I sighed, letting myself relax against him. “If I thought for one moment that I could be comfortable, I'd accept,” I said. “But you're right, I would feel out of place and things would be awkward.”

He pulled back enough so that he could look down at me. “Do you want me to spend the day with you instead?”

His sincerity was clear on his face.

“No,” I said. “You should spend the holiday with your family.”

He kissed my forehead. “I'll be thinking of you the whole time.”

I smiled. “Not the whole time, I hope.”

His eyes were twinkling as he answered, “I suppose I will have to behave myself. Wouldn't want to have to explain my hard-on in the middle of dessert. I don't know if my family would appreciate me sharing a fantasy where I was covering you with whipped cream.”

I laughed, trying to ignore the way his words were turning me on.

“Yeah, I don't think that's the mental image I want in their heads when you talk about me.”

“Well, dessert aside, you're going to be on my mind.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “And I'll be counting down the time until I see you again.”

He brushed his lips across mine and left me wondering, not for the first time, why we were taking things so damn slow.

Chapter 11

Coming back to work after Thanksgiving was crazy. I showed up Monday morning to find that a gaming system we'd released for Black Friday sales was glitching – though fortunately not from any mistakes on my part – and a security system we were designing for some government contractor had suffered a couple of set-backs. Well, not so much set-backs but a pair of morons who'd taken advantage of Rylan's good nature. No one was entirely sure exactly what had happened, only that several spilled beverages had a couple days to soak into everything in Derek and Harrison's office, ruining everything they'd been working on.

Everyone worked overtime, though no one as much as Rylan. And as much as I wanted to spend the late nights working with him, I knew it wasn't a good idea. After having been away from him all weekend, with just a few texts between us, I wasn't entirely sure I could keep my hands off of him. Since I didn't see him all day Monday or Tuesday, I could only hope he felt the same way.

On Wednesday, I got my answer.

I picked up my phone without missing a stroke on my keyboard. I'd almost finished fixing one of the many problems with our government contractor system and I wanted to get it done before lunch.

“Jenna.”

Heat flooded through me. That wasn't the way a boss said an employee's name.

“I need you.”

I closed my eyes. Fuck. There could be something completely innocent about what he was saying, but I definitely wasn't thinking innocently. My grip tightened around the phone.

His next words told me he wasn't thinking that way either.

“All weekend, I kept thinking about how I couldn't wait to get back to work so I could see you, but this is just making it worse.” His voice was low. “Knowing you're here, just a floor away, and I can't touch you... it's excruciating.”

My stomach tightened. Men talked during sex and I let them, but I never listened to anything they said. I'd spent too many years having to listen to the filth that spilled out of men's mouths, talking about what they wanted to do to me or have me do to them. I'd always given what was needed, but this was the first time I'd felt anything other than disgusted or indifferent.

“Did you miss me?”

The question made me catch my breath. Of course I'd missed him. I'd spent most of the weekend reading and working on code just so I wasn't thinking about how much I missed him.

“Jenna.” There was a hint of authority in his voice now.

“Yes,” I answered quickly. I wasn't sure where this was going, but I knew I wanted him to lead.

“Did you think about me?”

“Yes,” I answered again.

“Tell me.”

I felt a few icy tendrils of panic threatening to claw their way up and I pushed them down. “I thought about you.”

“More.”

The push was gentle but firm. He wanted me to do this, but I knew all I had to do was say a single word and he would let it go.

“I thought about you touching me.” I could feel my heart beating hard against my chest. “Your hands on my breasts, fingers on my nipples.”

“Sliding my hand down your stomach to slip between your legs.”

I swallowed hard and nodded, forgetting he couldn't see me. “Yes.”

“Is that what you want?” he asked. “My fingers inside you, stretching you? Preparing you?”

I made a sound that I didn't recognize.

“I think you need to get an ink refill for your printer.”

I blinked. The sudden change in direction threw me.

“Supply closet down the hall.”

I stared at the phone, my stomach twisting as I thought of the implications. We'd said we'd keep our relationship out of work, but that sounded a lot like he was asking me to meet him for some sort of tryst. I wasn't about to question it though. I'd been wanting him all weekend, craving his touch, his body, and I wasn't going to turn down the chance to have him.

Hoping that my face wasn't as flushed as it felt, I hurried down the

hallway toward the supply closet. I opened the door, glancing behind me to make sure no one was watching, and then stepped inside. I held the door open as I reached for the light. It turned on a split second before I got to the switch and I quickly shut the door behind me.

His arms were around me before I could even register that he was here. His mouth was hot and hard on mine, a near-desperate edge to the kiss. His desire fueled mine and I slid my hands under his shirt. His muscles were firm beneath my fingers and he gasped as my nails raked over his nipples. His hands slid down my back to cup my ass, and then he lifted me.

My teeth scraped over his bottom lip as he broke the kiss long enough to settle me onto a box of something. I didn't care what was beneath me, as long as he was going to be inside me. I reached for his pants even as he dug into his pocket and produced a condom.

“Damn,” he swore as my fingers closed around his cock. He cupped the side of my face, lowering his mouth to my throat. Teeth and tongue ran down the length of my neck, never leaving a mark, only the slight sting behind.

“Fuck me.” I pressed my lips against his ear. “Please.”

He looked down at me, his eyes dark. “I've been dreaming about this moment since I left work on Wednesday.”

His hands pushed my skirt up around my hips and I was suddenly glad I'd chosen it instead of pants. I moaned as his fingers traced my slit through my now-wet panties, then swore as he pushed the material aside. I grabbed his shoulders as his fingers slid into me.

“Just fuck me,” I said, letting all of my need bleed through into my voice.

“What do you want, Jenna?” he asked.

I gave him a puzzled look. I'd told him what I wanted. My eyes met his and it clicked. He wanted me to be specific. He wanted to hear me say it, and I knew that I needed to say it.

“I want you inside me,” I said. I squeezed his fingers with my pussy. “I need to feel your cock inside me, filling me. I want you to fuck me hard enough that I'll feel it the rest of the day.” I'd said some version of those words before, but I'd never meant them until now.

“Shit,” he breathed as he withdrew his hand.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, my legs around his waist. My heels rested just beneath his muscular ass and I felt it flex as he positioned himself. A full-body shudder went through me as he slowly pushed his way inside. My head fell back and I fought to keep my eyes open. I'd never dreamed that the initial penetration would feel this good every time, that my body would open to him like we were made to fit together. It was every cliché I'd always hated, but it was proving itself to be true.

“Faster,” I gasped. I pressed my face against the side of his neck.

He didn't ask if I was sure or if I was okay. I could feel him holding himself back and knew that he wanted it as much as I did.

“Harder.” I nipped at the soft flesh of his throat and he groaned.

His hands tightened on my waist and he began to slam into me, hard enough to drive the air from my lungs. I worked my body against his, moving so that each time we came together, he was deeper inside me, hitting against all of those spots that made me see stars.

“Fuck,” he growled the word. “So fucking perfect.”

Instead of the revulsion I usually felt at such sentiment, a rush of emotion went through me. I wanted him to feel that way about me, needed to know that he thought we fit together. My fingers curled around the thick hair at the base of his neck, my breath coming in sharp bursts as the pressure inside me reached the boiling point.

“Dreamed about this,” he said. His voice was breathless as he drove us toward our climax. “Buried inside you, feeling you so tight around me. Woke up every morning hard as a rock, aching to be inside you.”

I shivered at the image, the sensation giving me the last bit I needed to tip over the edge. I pressed my face against his neck, letting him muffle the cry of pleasure that escaped as I came. Two more quick thrusts and he followed, whispering my name over and over.

We clung to each other as we came down and I wondered if he was as reluctant to move as I was. I never felt as good as I did when I was in his arms. It didn't matter what was going on around us or whether anyone else approved of our relationship. I knew that, soon, we'd have to talk about things, make declarations, discuss intentions, but for right now, I was content like this. The world could go on existing outside those doors, but at the moment, it was just us.

“I guess I can take that to mean you really did miss me,” Rylan said as he pulled back.

I smiled at him, hoping the emotions on my face weren't as raw as they felt inside me. “Seems like as much as you missed me.”

He grinned, his dimples flashing. That smile twisted those things low inside me that said I wanted more. He fastened his pants as I adjusted my clothes. Then he reached for my hand, his expression serious again.

“I really did miss you,” he said. “And not just the sex. I wanted you there with me, not only in my bed, but by my side.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. I wasn't ready for this conversation. Not here. Not now.

As if he could sense my tension, he continued, “So I think we should start slow with the family thing.”

“Slow,” I repeated.

“Suzette and Zeke.”

I frowned.

“You've met them, but only as an employee. I want the four of us to go to lunch together. Let them get to know you as my... girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?”

“If you don't like that word, we can think of something else,” he said. His fingers tightened around mine. “As long as it means we're together.”

I smiled, a thrill going through me. “Girlfriend is fine. And lunch sounds great.” I hoped he couldn't hear my doubt in that last statement. I loved that he wanted to make it clear who I was to him, but I didn't think his sister or friend would see it that way.

Chapter 12

I was more nervous about this lunch than I was about anything else that had happened recently. As much as some of the circumstances with Rylan had scared me, at least with him I had known how he felt. While I was pretty sure I knew what Zeke and Suzette thought, it was far from a similar sentiment.

I chose my clothes carefully, knowing I needed to be the right combination of sophisticated and sexy. I was torn, wanting to be myself but also wanting to make sure they liked me. In the end, I went with a long-sleeved dress that covered my tattoos and complimented my figure. I chose a pair of heeled boots that added a couple inches to my height and kept the make-up simple. If it hadn't been for the blue hair and extra piercings, I could've passed for anyone in high society.

Rylan's eyes lit up when I opened the door. "You know, I like seeing those long legs, but I have to admit, there's something to be said for leaving something to the imagination." He brushed his fingers across my cheekbone. "And since I've seen it, my picture of what's under that dress is a very vivid one."

"Depends," I replied with a smile. "Maybe I bought some new lingerie."

His hand slid down my ribcage, burning through the cotton fabric of my dress, until it came to rest on my hip. "Maybe I should check and see." He

sighed. “As much as I'd like to strip that dress off and take you back to your room, my sister would never forgive me if I left her there with Zeke.”

“Your sister and Zeke don't get along?” I asked, curbing my disappointment. I knew he was right.

“Let's just say that there's some history between them,” Rylan said. His lips twitched.

“And you thought it would be a good idea to have them both come along to meet me?” I asked as the two of us walked downstairs. “So, what, there's someone they like less than me around?”

“They don't dislike you,” Rylan said as he opened the back door for me.

I raised an eyebrow.

“They just don't know you.” He raised my hand and kissed the back of it. “I promise, once they get to know you, they're going to love you.”

We'd only been at lunch for a quarter of an hour when I knew, no matter what I looked like, or how I behaved, they'd never accept me. Not for their precious Rylan. And that's what he was to them. To Suzette, he was the perfect big brother, the protector, the one who always made sure she was safe. No one was good enough for him.

To Zeke, he was not only a best friend but a brother. Zeke would do anything for Rylan. Right now, however, that 'anything' meant keeping Rylan safe from someone like me.

“So, you and Rylan have been dating for a few weeks?” Suzette asked as she sipped on her wine. “About the time you started working for him?”

“Actually,” Rylan answered. “She agreed to work for me before she

agreed to go out with me.” He gave me a sideways glance. “In fact, I'm pretty sure she thought coming to work for me would stop me from asking her out.”

“I did think that,” I admitted with a smile. I was glad he'd seen that part of me, even though I knew Suzette and Zeke didn't believe it.

“I'm just glad it didn't work,” he said, squeezing my hand.

“Me too.” The heat in my cheeks increased and, nor for the first time, I wished my skin was a bit darker so it didn't show the flush quite so well.

“You'll be taking her to meet Mom and Dad, I guess,” Suzette said. Her ruby-red lips were pursed and I wondered how much her lipstick had cost. “Or are you going to introduce her to your mom first?”

I'd been right. Half-sister.

“I hadn't decided,” Rylan said.

“Well, you know how that'll go,” Suzette said. She gave Zeke a meaningful look. Whatever had happened between them, it sure wasn't keeping them from working together to make me feel left out. She continued, “If you go to your mom first, she'll lord it over Dad and blame him for you picking someone... well, you know.”

“My mom gave up the right to have any say about my dating life when she tried to hire a prostitute for me on my eighteenth birthday.” Rylan's tone was mild. “Besides, you know that Dad and Lindsay will do the same thing if I introduce Jenna to them first. They always think that whichever one I talk to first is my favorite.”

“Whose turn is it then?” Zeke asked. “Which one did you tell first about Curt resigning?”

Rylan glanced down at me. “I take turns telling my parents things first. Neither one of them are happy with it, but at least they can't claim I prefer one over the other.”

“Remember when your mom tried suing Dad for custody?” Suzette asked. She shifted the way she was sitting, her body language making it clear that she wasn't including me in the conversation. “She tried saying that he was shooting heroin and was nearly bankrupt because of it.”

Rylan nodded, his expression tight. “I remember.”

I wanted to glare at Suzette. It was obvious Rylan didn't want to talk about that.

“It was the first Thanksgiving we got to spend together,” Suzette said. “Your mom was so angry that the court ruled against her, she claimed she had an anxiety attack and had to be hospitalized.”

“She always has been a drama queen,” Rylan admitted. “But Dad wasn't much better, hiring that PI.”

“Yeah, he doesn't like losing, does he?” Suzette chuckled. “It was a good thing the two of us always had each other.”

“Must've been nice,” Zeke said. “Having someone to go to when your parents were driving you nuts.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “When my parents started fighting, there really wasn't anywhere for me to go.”

“Sure there was,” Rylan said. “You've always been welcome at our house.”

“Well, his mom's house, anyway,” Suzette said. “We all know Dad doesn't like him very much.” She shot me a sideways glance. “Dad always had good taste in people.”

“Or he just doesn’t like the fact that your mom keeps hitting on me,” Zeke snapped back.

I looked over at Rylan, wondering what he was thinking of the exchange. He looked a bit amused. He leaned down, his breath tickling my ear as he whispered, “Yes, they're always like this.”

“What about you, Jenna?” Suzette turned toward me suddenly. “What's your family like?”

“Suzette—” Rylan began.

She kept going, not even acknowledging that he'd spoken. “Parents divorced, still together or never married? Not that it's a big deal. Even in our social circles, there are plenty of bastards.”

“Suzette!” Rylan snapped.

“Come on, Rylan,” Zeke said good-naturedly. “We're both curious. You have to admit, it's weird. You go for years without being in a relationship. Not since Lara, I think, and then you bring someone in to meet us out of the clear blue.”

“You said you wanted us to get to know her,” Suzette picked up where Rylan had left off. “That's what I'm trying to do. Asking questions. Trying to get to know her.”

“You're being rude,” Rylan said quietly.

“It's okay,” I said. I put my hand on his arm.

“What's the big deal?” Zeke asked. “It wasn't like we were asking for her complete sexual history or access to her finances. Suzette just wanted to know about her family.”

“Unless there's something about her family she wants to hide,” Suzette said.

I was getting tired of them talking about me like I wasn't there, but I curbed my annoyance. “Not a lot to say. Never knew my dad and my mom wasn't the best of parents. I moved away to college and never looked back.” I kept my voice even and hoped they wouldn't read between the lines.

“Jenna, you don't have to say anything,” Rylan said softly. He glared at his sister and then at his friend.

“It's okay.” I forced a fake smile. “They're just looking out for you.”

“That's right,” Suzette said. “We are.”

“And we always will be,” Zeke added.

“Good,” I said. “I'm glad. Everyone should have someone who watches over them, protects them. Rylan is fortunate to have the two of you.”

I supposed, in a normal situation, my acknowledgement of their caring about Rylan should've been enough to break the ice, but that didn't appear to be the case here. Whether it was my lack of disclosure or something else, it didn't matter. They didn't like me and nothing would change that.

The rest of our lunch continued in the same awkward atmosphere. Zeke and Suzette continued to bring up events from the past, not even bothering to try to hide their attempts to remind Rylan how much they meant to him. He did his best to keep them from shutting me out entirely, but I could feel the strain and it twisted my stomach. I ate very little, unable to stomach the idea of a heavy meal. I had a horrible feeling that, if things went further with us, Rylan's relationships with his best friend and his sister would suffer. If I'd thought it would do any good, I would've excused myself and gone home, but

I feared it would only make matters worse, drive a deeper wedge between them. Things were going to be hard enough as it was. I didn't need to make it worse.

Finally, after a couple long and agonizing hours, Suzette finally excused herself, saying she had Christmas shopping to do. Her good-bye to me was cursory and made it clear that she didn't expect us to meet again anytime soon. Zeke, on the other hand, lingered until Rylan said we needed to be going. He didn't even bother with a good-bye to me.

As we left the restaurant, I could feel Rylan's embarrassment over how things had gone and tried to make it better, making light conversation about work and the weather. I didn't think he was fooled, but he let me go. I was grateful when he took me back to my place and didn't ask if I wanted him to come in. As much as I'd missed him over Thanksgiving, I wanted to be alone right now. I needed to take a hot shower and curl up with a good book. Maybe, tomorrow, I'd feel more like spending time with Rylan, but right now, I couldn't get the lunch conversations out of my head. All I kept hearing were the hundreds of ways I wasn't good enough for Rylan, the ones spoken and the ones implied, as well as quite a few I came up with on my own. It would take some time to get over that. If I ever could.

Chapter 13

This is why I didn't like getting involved with people. A quick fuck and that was it. No baggage, no wondering about what the other person was thinking. Now, I was in a relationship. That meant meeting families and dealing with disapproval. Meeting friends and having them hate me.

Check and check again.

I spent the night after the disastrous lunch date curled up in bed reading a book that had monsters and things that went bump in the night but absolutely, one hundred percent, no romance. Not an easy thing to find.

Rylan texted me a couple times, but I kept the answers cursory and polite. I didn't want to get into a lengthy discussion about feelings and all that shit. I just wanted to close my brain down for a few hours.

That was easier said than done.

Aside from the fact that I kept seeing every look, hearing every snide remark, I also had an uncomfortable feeling that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I prided myself on how little I let my past shape certain aspects of my life. My fears and safety concerns, I felt, were well balanced. I didn't go to one extreme or the other. I had locks on my doors, but the only one I'd added had been a deadbolt. The regular one and the chain lock had already been

there. I took self-defense classes and knew how to shoot a gun, but I didn't own one. I carried pepper spray but not a Taser or anything like that.

Still, every once in a while, I'd feel the need to turn on every light in my apartment, double check all of the windows and the door. When that happened, I let myself do the checking, but I picked a single room and only turned on the lights in there. Tonight, I picked my bedroom and hoped that reading would be enough of a distraction that the nagging feeling that something was wrong would dissipate by the time I was ready to go to sleep.

It didn't work so I left my light on as I pulled my covers up around my shoulders and tried to sleep. Whenever my brain was too busy for me to sleep, I'd try to go over the plot of whatever book I happened to be reading, picking apart plot holes, theorizing about things to come or backstory not mentioned. Usually, it kept part of my mind occupied enough for the rest to fall asleep. Tonight, however, I found it difficult to keep focused, to follow through on whatever I tried to think about. My mind kept wandering, generally back to lunch.

Had I handled things wrong? I was sure I could've done better, but I had absolutely no experience dealing with families. Not even my own.

Maybe I should've told the whole truth. Let Suzette and Zeke have it all, every last little piece of shit that made up the first thirteen years of my life. I didn't know if that would've made them more or less sympathetic to me, but I knew it would've been horrifying enough that they would've felt like asses for pressing the issue. If I'd been one of those people who coped and grew through sharing, I might've done just that.

That wasn't me though. I'd spent years working through my issues and I didn't think it was anyone else's business. I supposed that I'd eventually need

to decide if I would tell Rylan more, but we weren't there yet. Even if I'd wanted to shock Suzette and Zeke, I wouldn't have felt right telling them something I hadn't even shared with Rylan.

I shivered and pulled my blanket even closer. I didn't like thinking about the past in general, but it was even worse at night. I needed to get my mind off of those things, off of the questions that would surely keep coming. If Suzette's behavior and attitude were any indication, Rylan's parents and step-mother weren't going to be fond of me either, and chances were, they'd ask about my family too. After all, wasn't that how we as a people learned about each other? We asked about family because we understood that family was what shaped us from the beginning, made us into who we were. If family wasn't so important, kids who were raised in orphanages, without human contact for years, wouldn't be any different than kids who were raised in traditional homes.

I knew enough psychology to know that wasn't true. Because of my own past, I wished familial influence wasn't important, if only so I could say that I was who I was by my choice – that my family hadn't played any part in it.

I sighed. When things got this busy in my head, nothing I could do would stop it, no matter how much I wanted it to. No, the only thing I could do was let things run their natural course and hope that I'd fall asleep before dawn and get at least a couple hours in.

I couldn't breathe.

I didn't know how long I'd been here, bent over this bench-thing, only that my arms and legs had fallen asleep a while ago. At first, I hadn't minded. Before my limbs had gone numb, the chains had been biting into my wrists and ankles. What I hadn't realized was how much that pain had distracted me

from everything else.

I was wearing only a thin, filmy dress. Nothing underneath. And the room was cold. It would warm up later, I knew. They kept it cold at first because if we started off hot, it would be sweltering by the time we were done. It didn't keep the goose bumps away or keep me from shivering. Only clenching my jaw was preventing my teeth from chattering. I hoped I'd warm enough to stop before they used my mouth. I knew that a bite, even an accidental one, would come with punishment.

The wooden bench had no padding on the top and the planks were rough. They'd probably made it that way, wanting me and others like me to get splinters. I knew that by the time they were done, my stomach and the bottom of my ribs would be raw and bruised.

The angle they'd bent me was making it hard to inhale, so each breath was shallow. All of my weight was on my knees and there was a deep ache in them. Even now, I knew the pain would be excruciating by the time they finished. Not a single part of me would make it through free from pain.

I heard them come in, but they stayed behind me so I couldn't see who they were or how many there were. I thought maybe ten, probably more. I heard women as well as men. They weren't talking loud enough for me to hear what they were saying, but I could hear the excitement buzzing.

I hated the waiting worst of all. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about all the different things they were going to do, all of the ways I was going to be hurt. When they started, at least then I could focus on the pain and it would block out everything else.

Then the pain began and it was everywhere.

Burning cigarettes were put out on my back.

Fabric cutting into my flesh as my dress was ripped off.

Fingers pinching and probing.

Then came the fucking.

They took turns everywhere they could, every way they could.

Some of them talked to each other, conversations about their lives as they waited for access. I heard one of the men talking about coaching his son's Little League team, then he stopped for his turn. Another woman kept petting my head.

No one talked to me, not unless grunts and foul names counted. At one point, I tried to keep track of the number of times I was called 'bitch' and 'cunt', but I lost count after a while.

Finally, I thought they'd finished, but that was when one of them said they were ready for the real show.

When the door opened, I screamed.

I screamed until my voice was gone.

I passed out and they woke me up again.

It went on for hours. For years. It would never end. Never stop. The pain and humiliation. I'd never get away...

My eyes flew open, then closed involuntarily at the light. I wrenched them open again, even though it hurt. I didn't want to be in the dark again.

I sat up and drew my knees to my chest, shivering as I wrapped my blanket around me. Of all the memories and the nightmares, that was the

worst. It was that night when I'd reached my lowest point. That night that I'd known, without the shadow of a doubt... I would never get out.

My fingers began to trace along the inside of my left arm. The scar there ran from my wrist to my elbow. I'd been lucky, the doctor had said, that it hadn't been deep enough to cause permanent damage. I'd been extra lucky that my mom had found me and had the presence of mind to put on a tourniquet.

I didn't tell him it wasn't luck. It was hell.

If I'd been older, I might've wondered why the doctor hadn't figured out that there was way more to my injury than what he'd been told. I might've asked why he hadn't done a full work-up when he saw the bruises on my neck that looked like fingers. The bruises on my arms and legs that held distinctive chain link patterns. The other obvious signs of abuse. I'd gotten my answer years later.

I looked down at the scar my fingers were tracing. It was funny, what I remembered about that night. The night I'd decided that it was pointless to hope for anything else, pointless to think that someone would come rescue me. I wasn't some fairy princess and there was no such person as Prince Charming. I still believed that last bit.

Rylan's face flashed in front of my eyes and I pushed it away. He wasn't Prince Charming because I wasn't a fucking damsel in distress. I'd needed someone to save me before. I didn't need to be saved now.

I shivered again. I wasn't going to get warmed up here with just a blanket. Not this kind of chill.

I climbed out of bed and went into my bathroom. I rubbed my arms as I

waited for the water to heat up. I'd done it in the bathroom that night. Broken a piece of glass in the mirror and climbed into the tub.

This time, when I stepped into the shower, my hands were empty. While the nightmare hadn't been pleasant and the aftereffects were bothersome, I wasn't that frightened, depressed child anymore. I'd survived the worst.

I hissed as I stepped under the steaming spray. It was hot, almost too hot, but that was what I wanted right now. It wouldn't wash away the nightmare, but it would help the cold.

It had been a long time since I'd thought about that night or had a dream about it. I must've been more stressed by what had happened at lunch than I'd realized. Judgment was usually the trigger that brought that particular night back. It was funny – not amusing but rather ironic – that the person who made me feel the safest had been part of the moment that had triggered the memory of the time where I'd been the lowest.

Rylan.

I made a pained sound as I thought of what Rylan would think of me if he knew the whole truth. No matter how much he seemed to be the perfect guy when it came to my past, I knew the truth. If he knew what happened to me, what happened that night...

He'd run.

I was surprised by how much the thought of that hurt.

Chapter 14

I didn't sleep much the rest of the night, but I hadn't expected to anyway. What little I did get, at least, was dreamless. Since it was a Sunday morning, I didn't have anything planned, so I let myself have the luxury of taking it slow. It was nearly noon by the time I changed out of my pajamas and ate. I spent most of the early afternoon messing around with my security program and wondering if I should text or call Rylan. I wasn't entirely sure what the proper protocol was for communication after an uncomfortable lunch with a – I couldn't believe I was about to use the word – boyfriend's sister and best friend.

Even as chaotic as my brain was at the moment, I couldn't stop myself from smiling. Boyfriend. I'd never thought I'd use that word in a positive way, in any way related to me, really. It hadn't been anything I'd ever considered. Now, I wasn't just considering it. I actually had one.

I frowned. If he still wanted me after Suzette and Zeke had made it perfectly clear how not right for him I was.

They were right, I knew, and the best thing I could do would be to let him go, but I couldn't do it. It may have been selfish of me, but the way I figured it, fate or the universe or karma or whatever it was that determined what happened to us owed me big time, and I would use it to keep Rylan for as long as I could.

I just didn't know how to do it.

I was still trying to decide if I should make the first move and call Rylan when someone knocked on my door. A moment later, I heard my name.

“Jenna, it's me.”

I opened the door, letting a new kind of warmth through me, the kind that had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with the man standing in the hallway.

He looked almost as bad as I felt.

The bags under his eyes said he'd slept as little as I had and his hair looked like he hadn't done more than run his hand through it. He was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that fit him perfectly, but they both looked rumpled, as if he'd either slept in them or picked them up off the floor.

“May I come in?”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. This was it. He was coming to tell me that he thought Suzette and Zeke were right. It was time to stop pretending. We needed to go back to employer and employee only.

I didn't want to sit so I was glad when he stayed on his feet too. I crossed my arms over my stomach, wondering if this would hurt as badly as I feared it would.

“At lunch yesterday,” he began. “Zeke and Suzette... they...” His voice trailed off and a look of frustration crossed his face.

“They don't think I'm right for you,” I stated it bluntly. I looked away when I got more specific. “I'm not good enough for you.”

“Jenna.”

He said my name firmly, but I didn't respond. He'd gotten too far past my walls already. I couldn't let him see what this would do to me. It was harder than I'd thought, especially after the rough night I'd had.

“Jenna, look at me.”

It wasn't a request, but the way he said it wasn't the same as the kind of demands I'd been given before. This was a command filled with emotion and it was the quaver that made me turn.

His eyes were blazing with something fierce as he closed the distance between us with two long steps. His hands cupped my face even as his mouth came down on mine. I gasped at the ferocity I felt radiating off of him and he took advantage of my parting lips to thrust his tongue into my mouth.

It wasn't a long kiss, but he was thorough as his tongue explored my mouth, his fingers digging into my hair. My hands grabbed onto the front of his shirt and I found myself daring to hope that this wasn't a good-bye kiss.

When he pulled his mouth away, he didn't step back or release my face. He rested his forehead against mine, his breathing heavy. I inhaled deeply, wanting to trap his scent, to keep it in my memory, something good I could hold onto during the bad.

“I'm sorry,” he said quietly.

I took a step back. I couldn't have him touching me when he did it.

“I should have told them both to go fuck themselves.”

My eyes widened. What?

Rylan reached out and brushed the back of his knuckles down the side of my face. “I don't want to scare you away by going too fast, and I don't want

you to feel any obligation.” His thumb ran along my bottom lip. “But I need you to know, I'm falling in love with you.”

Oh shit.

Fear, desire and something I didn't want to put a name to welled up inside me all at once, choking me. I didn't know what to say, what to do. How should a girl respond when her boyfriend said something like that? I'd never had anyone tell me they loved me, not for real. Sure, along with all of the 'fuck,' 'bitch' and 'cunt' commentary, I'd gotten the 'I' word before, but I'd known it wasn't real.

The look in Rylan's eyes said he meant what he said, and I felt frozen at the thought.

“Don't say anything,” he continued. “I don't want you to say anything just because you think I want to hear it.” He tucked some hair behind my ear. “When you say it, I want to know that you mean it. I'll wait.” He stepped toward me again. “I'll wait for you as long as you need me to.”

Tears pricked at my eyes. I'd spent my whole life having people take what they wanted, when they wanted it. Expecting to hear what they wanted, whether I meant it or not.

“Are you okay?” His voice was filled with concern.

I nodded. I wasn't sure I could say anything, even if I'd known what to say. I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair and around the back of his head before pulling him down for another kiss. His arm slid around my waist, bringing our bodies tight together. I twisted my tongue around his, drawing it into my mouth. He moaned as I sucked on it and I felt him get hard.

Just when I thought we were going to move things into the bedroom, he pulled back. The expression on my face must've been amusing because he laughed softly.

“I want to. Trust me, I want to.” He dropped his hand, purposefully brushing it against the side of my breast.

I bit back a moan.

“But I have an appointment in fifteen minutes.”

“Oh.” I hoped I didn't sound as disappointed as I felt.

“Did you have plans for tonight?” he asked.

“Does binge-watching a couple shows while eating ice cream count?” I kept my tone light.

“I don't suppose you'd want to put that off and go out with me, would you?” His dimples flashed as he smiled.

“I don't know,” I teased. “I am getting behind on my favorite shows.”

“I'll make it worth your while.” His eyes darkened, leaving no doubt to exactly what he meant. “So I'll pick you up at six?”

“All right,” I said.

“Some place fancy this time,” he said. “If that's okay with you.”

I nodded. “I'd like that.”

“Great!” He beamed at me. He started to lean forward, then stopped. “As much as I'd like to kiss you again, I don't trust myself.” He winked at me. “And I doubt the nuns at St. Paul's would appreciate me coming in to see them with a raging erection.”

I laughed, the tension diffusing from something sexual into pure amusement. Before it could get dangerous again, he left and I set out to find the perfect dress to wear tonight.

He said he was falling in love with me.

The words still didn't feel quite real. Then again, not much with Rylan did. Except, somehow, being with him made me feel more real – alive and present – than I'd ever felt before.

I thought I'd worked through the issues of self-worth that had come from my past, that I didn't need someone else's acceptance to know who I was. It wasn't that Rylan treated me as if I was only important because of him. There was just something about how he looked at me, talked to me. It made me feel more... solid.

I'd never had anything like that before. I'd been the invisible girl, there only to be used and discarded. Then I'd been *that* girl. The one the media – in their near-religious frenzy regarding the people's right to know overriding the protection of minors or victims – had painted as the poster child for pedophilia. The victim everyone wanted to treat like some damaged, fragile flower. Then I'd gotten away, remade myself, but still hadn't been real. I'd been the genius, the computer geek, the freak with the piercings, tattoos, scars and then the strange hair. There had always been a definition to fit me, a label.

Other than Lily, Rylan was the only person I'd met who I thought actually saw me, and even Lily had viewed me in part as a victim. She'd never treated me like one, but I knew that what she'd rescued me from had colored the way she saw me.

I felt a familiar pang as I thought about Lily. She'd been the first friendly

face I'd ever seen, the first person I'd met who hadn't wanted something from me. She'd stayed with me, kept me safe. But she'd also pushed me, told me not to make excuses. She'd shown me how to find my inner strength, given me an example of a strong woman.

I pulled one of my dresses from my closet and gave it a critical look.

I would've liked for Lily and Rylan to have met. They would've liked each other. I was sure Lily would've given Rylan a hard time, wanting to make sure he was a good guy. There probably would've been a background check done.

I sighed. Nothing I had was good enough. I wasn't hurting for money at the moment and the weather was surprisingly good for the beginning of December, so I decided to go shopping.

Four stores and three obnoxious saleswomen later, I found the perfect dress and hurried home to finish getting ready. I'd spent enough time out that I was putting the final touches on my make-up when Rylan knocked on the door. The expression on his face, however, made it all worth it.

I'd gone with a deep, rich blue that complemented my coloring, including my hair. The narrow skirt went to my ankles, but there was a high slit up one side that hit me high enough on my thigh that I knew I'd have to move carefully or risk flashing someone. I'd gone with long sleeves rather than having to take a heavy coat, and the back was high enough that only the tips of my angel wings showed. The neckline was a plunging V that barely left room to cover my bra.

“We need to go,” Rylan said after a moment. “Now.” His eyes rose from my chest to my face. “Otherwise, we're never leaving this apartment, and I'm starving.”

I laughed, taking his arm as he offered it. We made small talk on the way down to the car – a car service this time – and continued it as the driver pulled out into traffic. I asked about his appointment and he told me about the charity auction he was putting together for the church. He asked what I'd spent the day doing.

It was average, normal stuff, the kind of things that couples were supposed to talk about. I was surprised at how easily it came to me. As I leaned against Rylan, I thought that maybe it wasn't about me but about him, about how we were together.

I looked out the window as a moment of silence fell and I frowned. We weren't driving to downtown Fort Collins.

“Where are we going?” I asked. I looked up at Rylan and saw him smile. There was equal parts nerves and pride in that look.

“I love Fort Collins,” Rylan said. “But it doesn't have the kind of place I want to take you tonight. I want it to be special.”

“I don't care where we eat,” I said. My chest was tight with everything that he made me feel. “As long as we're spending the time together.”

He kissed my forehead, then threaded his fingers between mine. “When I was in college, freshman year, my roommate was a guy named Leland Wiles. He left halfway through the year because he decided he wanted to go to culinary school. Now, he's one of LA's hottest up and coming chefs.”

I still had no clue where we were going but I wasn't about to complain. I liked hearing about Rylan's life.

“We stayed in touch, mostly Christmas cards and the occasional dropping in when we were in the other's city,” Rylan continued. “Today, I

asked him to come make us a meal.”

My eyes narrowed at him and I felt my eyebrows draw together. “You asked a chef from Los Angeles to come to Fort Collins and cook us dinner?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Seriously?”

“Too much?” he asked. “I spent all of last night and most of the morning going over our lunch and...” He shook his head. “I wanted to make up for it and nothing in the city felt like it'd be special enough. But if you don't like it, I can tell the driver to turn around and we can go to a restaurant. Your choice. I can put away what Leland makes. Re-heat it tomorrow.”

I leaned up and kissed his cheek. “Don't you dare,” I said. “I'm hungry.”

His eyes warmed and he leaned down to brush his lips against mine. It was brief, but still sent a thrill through me. “I want you to know, just because we're eating at my house, I don't have any expectations beyond a lovely meal. Nothing happens that you don't want to happen.”

I rested my hand on his thigh and slid it up until the tips of my fingers brushed against the bulge in his pants. “There are a couple things I'm definitely thinking I want to happen.”

His hand tightened around mine as I moved my hand over, cupping his cock through the expensive material of his suit.

“Jenna.” His voice was nearly a growl.

“I'm glad you decided to use a car service instead of driving,” I said with a grin. “I don't think this would be a good idea if we were in your car.” I lightly squeezed him and glanced toward the front of the car. The driver

already had the window up between us.

“Jenna.”

I could hear the desire in his voice. I shifted in my seat even as I worked his zipper open. “I’ve always wanted to do this in a car,” I said. “And I figure you’ll have plenty of time to recover while we’re having dinner, and then you can repay the favor.”

I never gave head when a guy was sitting down – too much opportunity for him to take control – but I trusted Rylan to not do anything that would hurt me. He’d already proven that he would stop if I asked him to.

My hand dipped beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs, drawing his cock out, already hard and throbbing. The angle was awkward, but I didn’t mind. All I cared about was getting him into my mouth. I’d wanted to feel him go in my mouth from the first time I’d seen his cock, and that had been another first for me. I hardly ever let a guy finish in my mouth, and then only reluctantly.

I leaned down and felt him stiffen as I breathed on the head of his cock. My tongue teased at its head, flicking across the tip. He moaned and my body throbbed in response. I felt his hand on my shoulder, a light weight that should have freaked me out, but surprisingly didn’t. I lowered my head, wrapping my lips around the thick shaft.

His skin was soft, velvet beneath my tongue, and I began to work up and down his cock. I wasn’t quite sure where we were in relation to his house, but I did know that this wasn’t going to be a long, languorous blow job. I wanted to get him off quick, but still make it good.

I cupped his balls through his underwear as I dropped my head even

lower, taking him further into my mouth. I heard him swear as I hollowed my cheeks, sucking as I raised my head. His fingers brushed my hair and I froze for a moment, waiting to see if he'd put his hand on my head, take control.

“Nothing you don't want,” he repeated his previous statement, the strain evident in his voice. He didn't want me to stop, but I knew he wouldn't protest if I did.

I took a slow breath in through my nose and slowly slid back down his cock. This time, when it reached the back of my mouth, I didn't stop. I relaxed my throat and took him down to the base.

“Fuck!” Rylan practically shouted, his fingers curling around the bottom of my hair, but not high enough to freak me out.

I squeezed his balls as I swallowed, letting the muscles in my throat massage his cock. His grip on my hair tightened, sending pinpricks of pain down my scalp. I felt his hips jerking as he fought not to thrust into my mouth and I marveled at his self-control.

“Babe, I'm going to—”

I wanted to see him lose control. Wanted him to come apart beneath me.

I lightly scraped my teeth over him as I started to pull back. He cried out as he came suddenly, flavor bursting across my taste buds. I swallowed, milking out every last delicious drop before I let him slip from between my lips, his cock already starting to soften.

I started to push myself up when Rylan's hand fisted my hair, pulling me up and toward him. I didn't even have the time to start to react to the action before his mouth was on mine, his tongue thrusting between my lips. The hand that wasn't in my hair cupped my breast, squeezing it until I moaned.

My arousal spiked, hot and bright, but the car came to a stop before we went any further. We broke, my reluctance mirrored on his face. His hand slid around to the side of my neck and his thumb brushed across the front of my throat.

“I may want you to do that again.” His voice was rough.

“I enjoyed it too,” I said softly. When he didn't reply, I leaned forward and put my mouth against his ear. “My panties are soaked.”

His eyes closed. “Fuck, Jenna.”

“Later.” I leaned back, putting some distance between us. If I didn't, I wasn't sure I'd be able to control myself. “First, food.”

Chapter 15

Leland Wiles definitely deserved the reputation Rylan said he had. I'd always thought that the food at expensive restaurants sounded and looked pretentious rather than delicious. Snails? Caviar? No thank you. Fortunately, Leland didn't make anything like that. Filet mignon, steamed vegetables and homemade bread may have seemed like something simple, but the way Leland made it took it to a whole new level. Then there was dessert. Various types of fruit with both a crème sauce and a chocolate sauce. Finger food at its most decadent, and I made sure to use them to my advantage. By the time Leland came into the dining room to ask how we'd liked our meal, the air between Rylan and I was thick with sexual tension. I was pretty sure that was why Leland made a quick exit.

As soon as we were alone, the heat in the room ratcheted up a notch and my heart skipped a beat. I could still feel him in my throat and I wanted him inside me. More than that, I wanted him to push me again, to test my boundaries.

“Before, I showed you my playroom, but we haven't yet... played there.”
Rylan stood.

Even from where I was sitting, a few feet away, I could see his erection straining against the front of his pants. Most men, if they got off once and could get it back up again, took longer to come the second time. Based on

past experience, Rylan hadn't had any issues with stamina, but I wondered how much longer he was going to last this time.

I shivered at the thought of him taking me again and again, making me scream...

“Are you cold?” Rylan looked concerned.

I shook my head and stood. “I want to play.”

He swallowed hard, and his face went blank. It was only because the rest of his body was telling me how much he wanted me that I knew why he was trying to hide what he was feeling. He didn't want his own desires to pressure me into doing something I didn't want to do.

I took a step toward him. “Do you want to play with me?”

“Dammit, Jenna,” he breathed. “You have no idea.”

“Then tell me,” I said. “Show me.” I reached out and took his hand, drawing it to me and placing it over my breast.

He kept his hand there, his thumb brushing over my nipple until it hardened beneath my dress. “I want...”

He hesitated and I could see the conflict in his eyes.

“Tell me, Rylan,” I said. I put my hand on his cheek.

“I don't want to scare you away,” he said. He moved his hand to trace my jawline with the tip of his index finger. “Not now that I know how much you mean to me.”

My mouth went dry. Fuck. I promised myself that whatever he wanted, if there was any way I could do it, I would.

“Tell me.” My voice was hoarse.

“I want to... do things to your breasts.” He chose each word carefully, his eyes searching my face, I knew, for any sign of distaste.

“What do you want to do to them?” My heart was beating so loudly I was sure he could hear it.

“Mark them,” he said. The words came out faster now. “I want to lick and suck on your nipples until they're hard. Use my teeth and fingers on them, twisting and biting and pulling until they're sore.”

My pussy throbbed and my nipples were already hard.

“I want to put clamps on them.”

Shit.

I'd thought about that before, him using nipple clamps on me.

I took his hand. “I remember my safe words,” I said. “Let's play.”

His fingers tightened around mine and he led me out of the dining room, heading for the playroom and what I hoped would be a long and satisfying night.

“You haven't told me what you want,” Rylan broke the silence as he opened the door to his playroom.

I was confused. I thought I'd been pretty clear.

He turned toward me. “I want to know what you like.”

“I'll use my safe words if I don't like...”

“I don't want to know what you'll tolerate,” he said. He raised our joined hands and kissed the back of mine. “I want to know what you like.”

A rush of emotion went through me. “I like you.” I squeezed his hand.

He smiled but then his expression grew serious. “Jenna, I want to know what you want. I want to know what gives you the greatest pleasures.” His expression stayed serious as he bent his head and gently pressed his lips against mine. “I don't use some of the terminology from the BDSM lifestyle, not unless my partner is into it, but I know myself well enough to know that I'm what they'd classify as a Dom. When it comes to sex, I like being in control, being dominant.”

I still wasn't sure where he was going with this.

“But part of being a good Dom.” He kissed me again, this time a little harder. His teeth scraped across my bottom lip and I moaned. “Part of being a good lover is wanting to give your partner as much pleasure as possible. I don't want to only do the things I want and hope you like them.”

I'd given men instructions before, about what to do and how to do it, but generally only while we were having sex. And it was always me telling them, never them asking. I wasn't sure how to have a conversation like that.

“Please, Jenna,” he said. “Tell me something you like.” His voice held that edge of authority that I responded to.

He'd shared his kinks with me, then let me put restrictions on what he could do. He made me come harder than anyone I'd ever been with and here he was wondering if I was merely tolerating the things he did.

“I like it a bit rough,” I admitted and tried not to blush. “All the things you said you wanted to do to my breasts, I want.” I looked up at him. “Everything you said.”

“Don't just say it—” he began.

“I'm not,” I said firmly. I reached behind me and unzipped my dress, but didn't let it fall. “Do you want me to show you?”

“Show me,” he ordered. He shrugged out of his jacket as he crossed the room. He draped it over the X and then took a seat in a chair I hadn't noticed before. It was wide and plush, about halfway between a love seat and an armchair.

I let go of my dress and it dropped to the floor. I stepped out of it, then out of my shoes.

“On the bed,” he instructed.

I climbed onto the bed and leaned back against the pillows so Rylan would be able to watch. When I was settled, I unclasped the single front hook and let my bra fall open. I'd seen desire in a lot of men's eyes, but it had never made me wet before.

“Show me what you like.”

I cupped my breasts, then pinched my nipples between my fingers. A jolt of pleasure went through me. I rolled the hardening flesh, pulling and tugging on them. Rylan's eyes darkened to near-black as the tips of my nipples became hard bullet points.

“I like teeth,” I said softly. I twisted my nipple and moaned. “I want your mouth on me.”

“What do you want my mouth to do?” He began unbuttoning his shirt.

I flicked my nipples. “Lick, suck, bite.” I slid one hand down my stomach toward my panties.

“No touching yourself,” he said as he stood. “We'll get there, but not

yet.”

I resumed playing with my breasts, watching as he walked over to one of the dressers. He opened the top drawer, rummaged around for a moment, then pulled something out. He held them up as he turned. They were small and not the shining metal I'd pictured.

“We'll start with something simple.” He came toward me. “These are rubber. If you like them, we can work up to metal.”

He set the clamps next to me and took off his shirt. My pussy throbbed as I watched him undress. He had the most amazing body.

His cock was already mostly hard as he joined me on the bed, but he ignored it. His eyes were focused on my breasts. He settled himself into what I assumed was a more comfortable position and then lowered his head.

His lips latched onto my nipple and I moaned. He felt amazing. Wet heat and perfect suction, each pull of his mouth sending pleasure straight through me. His fingers began manipulating my other nipple, picking up where I'd left off. My back arched as his teeth scraped over my sensitive flesh. I wanted more.

When he switched to my other breast, his hand moved too, though not to my free breast. Instead, it made its way down my stomach and cupped my pussy over my panties.

He looked up at me. “You're wet.”

“Soaking,” I breathed.

Without taking his eyes off of me, he slid his hand beneath the waistband of my panties. I moaned as his fingers parted my folds and brushed over my clit. He grinned at me, then lowered his mouth. Even as he rubbed

across the little bundle of nerves, he bit down on my breast.

“Fuck!” I cried out. I felt him hesitate and looked down at him. “Again, please.”

That was all the encouragement he needed. His teeth and lips moved across my flesh, marking the paler part of my breasts and making my nipples throb. His fingers kept up their steady pressure and delicious friction before dropping down to slide a finger into my dripping pussy. As he added a second finger, he bit down on my nipple and I felt everything inside me explode.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” I slammed my palms on the bed even as I ground down against his hand. Pain and pleasure coursed through me. Not the kind of pain that had made up my childhood, but the kind that I'd always craved, even more than I'd allowed myself to admit.

When I came down from my orgasm, I saw that he had already gotten out a condom and put it within arm's reach. He held up the clamps and I nodded. My breasts were already aching, but I wanted it.

He fastened the first one on and I gasped. If my nipples hadn't already been sensitized from his mouth, it would've just been a dull pressure at first. Instead, it was closer to a pinch, but not one that let up. He attached the other and then moved to the base of the bed.

I parted my legs without asking, then realized that I was still wearing my sheer black panties. Rylan didn't seem to mind as he stretched out between my legs. He didn't say a word as he pulled the crotch of my panties aside and pressed his mouth against me.

I swore as his tongue began to dance, twisting and licking up and down

every inch of me. I writhed, every movement jarring the clamps and sending mixed pain and pleasure straight from my nipples to my core. Sometimes guys played with my breasts while they went down on me. More often, I did it myself, but either way, it was nothing compared to this.

“Shit!” I cursed again when his lips closed around my clit. He sucked on it even as he slid two fingers back inside me. I'd never had two orgasms so close together, but I could feel my second one building.

Then, he curled his fingers and pressed against a spot inside me that made everything go white. I dimly heard myself make a high pitched sound that I'd never made before, but all I could think about was the pleasure coursing through me.

I was still coming when I felt his cock pushing inside me. My eyelids fluttered as he stretched me. He wasn't going too fast, but he certainly wasn't going slow either. I looked up at him, our eyes locking. I could see what he wanted and I wanted it too. I nodded.

Rylan's hips snapped forward, driving the rest of him deep inside me.

“Fuck! Yes!”

He lifted my legs, placing my ankles on his shoulders. “If it's too much...”

“I'll say the words,” I promised. “Please, just fuck me.”

He leaned forward slightly, changing the angle of penetration and moving him even deeper. I gasped. The sound turned into a wail as he drew back, then slammed into me again. He didn't hesitate, trusting me to keep my word. He pounded into me, each thrust making my breasts shake and the clamps tug at my now-numb nipples. He was so hard inside me I thought for

sure he would need to come soon, but his pace was steady, and he showed no signs of slowing.

His hands slid over mine, his gaze telling me to trust him. He laced his fingers through mine, not restraining, not holding. It was a strangely intimate gesture in the midst of sex that was anything but gentle.

Not gentle, but fucking amazing.

My entire body felt like it was on fire, electricity coursing through my veins, across my nerves. Then I was exploding, erupting, coming so hard that I couldn't make a sound. Still, he didn't stop. Time lost all meaning. The entire world was only him moving in and out of me, the tip of him bumping against the end of me and making me see stars. My body shook, trembled, every muscle twitching and tensing. Even as my pussy squeezed his cock, he kept going.

And then his fingers tightened on mine and I knew he was finally close.

He released my hands and I knew what was coming next.

Without missing a stroke, he took hold of both of the clamps and pulled them off at the same time.

Blood rushed back into my nipples, bringing with it the pins and needles feeling of a limb gone to sleep. In a body part so sensitive, it was multiplied by a thousand and I grabbed his arms, my nails digging into his flesh.

My legs dropped to either side of him as he pulled me up against him, burying himself deep inside me. We came together, the orgasm that had been lingering inside me crashed into me with enough force to take my breath away. My nipples rubbed against his chest and I whimpered, but I still clung to him as I felt his cock pulsing inside me.

His breath was hot against my ear as he whispered, "I love you."

I pressed my face against his chest, tears pricking at my eyes. I wanted so badly to say it back, but I couldn't. Not yet.

As if he could read my mind, he spoke again, "It's okay. I'll wait."

His words only made me want to say it more. But he was right. When I said it, I wanted him to know it was the truth.

When, not if. When.

Chapter 16

I stayed the night and we spent it in Rylan's bed. After a long, hot shower and some even hotter shower sex, of course. The sight of water cascading down his body, the feel of his skin sliding against mine, would be masturbatory fantasies for a long time. Then again, every encounter I'd had so far with Rylan was better than any fantasy I could cook up on my own.

Monday morning, he asked if I wanted to either drive one of his cars or have a driver take me in so we didn't arrive together. Then he proceeded to go down on me until I had to beg him to stop.

He drove, I rode, and we came to the agreement that we wouldn't advertise our relationship, but we weren't going to be crazy about covering it up either. Taking two separate vehicles seemed a bit extreme. Still, we made sure we didn't walk in close together. Professional distance. No touching. No lingering looks.

Well, maybe a couple when it came to the last one. As we went through the week, we were working enough that we didn't have time for dates, just late night calls, and that made it harder not to look at him through the day. Watching Emmaline fawn over him and trying to keep Christophe at bay didn't help matters much either.

I wasn't jealous of Emmaline, not after this past weekend and the way Rylan had looked at me, but her entitlement attitude and high school cattiness

still made me want to punch that smug smile off her face. Or tell her about what an extraordinary lover Rylan was. Just to see the look on her face.

Christophe was only a little less annoying. He was constantly there, hovering around my office, asking me if there was anything he could get me. I appreciated the gestures and I didn't want to be rude to him since he'd never been anything but nice to me, but it was annoying to have to keep telling him that I was fine, that I didn't need anything.

I could've lied, I supposed, and told him that I was seeing someone. He had seen the flowers already. Well, telling him I was seeing somebody wouldn't have been a lie, but once he started asking about whom I was dating, that was when the lies would begin. While I was okay with keeping my relationship with Rylan quiet, I didn't want to start a whole web of lies that I'd have to try to keep track of. Aside from the fact that I didn't want that headache, I also knew it'd make things more complicated if and when Rylan and I went public. When, I told myself. It would be when, not if. He said he would wait as long as I needed, and I couldn't imagine opening myself up to any other man. It was him or no one. Not really a positive thought, but not exactly a negative one either.

At least my work didn't suffer. What did suffer was my level of sexual tension. There was only so much self-gratification I could take and, by Thursday, I was strung too tight for just my fingers to take care of. All day, I'd been debating whether or not to take the initiative and ask Rylan about his plans for after work, but then I'd gotten his text that Zeke needed him for something and he didn't know when he'd be able to talk.

I refused to be that selfish girlfriend who complained when her man wanted to spend time with his friends, especially when said friend already didn't like her. I sent a reply that I hoped everything was okay and that if he

wanted to call tonight, it didn't matter the time, and if he didn't, I'd talk to him tomorrow at work.

Then I decided that I needed to go to the gym and work off some of this excess energy. Not too long ago, I would've hit a club or checked out one of the finals parties that were going on around campus, found some hot, horny guy and ridden him to an orgasm that now seemed unsatisfying. I wasn't even tempted to look for another sexual outlet.

The fact that I was so willing to change the habits I'd established over the last couple years spoke volumes. Rylan had called me his girlfriend and I'd been thinking of him as my boyfriend. He'd said he loved me. But, we hadn't discussed what that really meant. The kind of expectations we had of each other. What was our view of exclusivity? When would we expect the other to choose us over family? Not that I had that decision to make for myself, but it was one of those things I assumed couples talked about.

Yet another problem I'd been experiencing more this week as I spent less time with Rylan. He didn't just make me feel safe and give me toe-curling orgasms. He kept my mind from dwelling on the past, kept the questions from running over and over again in my head. When I was with him, I could live in the present and not worry about the future. For the most part anyway. My busy brain didn't like to give up much.

I headed to the bus stop after work. I'd need to stop home for better clothes to work out in, maybe grab something to eat. I shivered as a gust of wind came down the sidewalk. It was heading toward Christmas and the weather was starting to show it. We hadn't gotten our first snow yet, but the nights were definitely getting colder.

As I joined a few others in the bus stop shelter, I shivered again, but this

time it wasn't from the cold. I turned, but there was no one behind me. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched.

I pushed the paranoia back. It happened from time to time. I'd feel like someone was watching me, but when I'd look, there would be no one there. The times when there were people caught staring, they'd generally look away, embarrassed, and I'd know that they were looking because of my hair or my tattoos and piercings. I didn't care about that. Hell, I expected it.

My therapist probably would've said that was the reason why I dressed and accessorized the way I did. Typical misdirection or something like that. Draw people's attention to the things I could control to prevent anyone from seeing the things I couldn't.

I hadn't taken any psychology classes in college. I didn't want to relive the memories I knew those classes would bring up. Instead, anything that I wanted to know about, I studied on my own. Probably how I knew what my therapist would say even though I hadn't seen her in years.

The bus was only a fraction warmer than the air outside, but now I wasn't thinking about the weather. I was working on keeping an eye on everyone who got onto the bus. I was about ninety-nine percent certain that I'd been imagining things, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

The feeling faded to the back of my mind when I reached my apartment and I ran up the stairs to warm myself up. I quickly changed into my usual workout clothes, grabbed a protein bar and some water. I ate standing up, stretched and then headed back downstairs. The gym I used was only a couple of blocks away from my apartment and a jog in the cold sounded like a good way to start my workout, as well as a good way to clear my head.

One of the things I liked about exercise and that had made me want to go

the self-defense route rather than with weapons is that physical activity was one of the few things that could turn off my brain. The mindless repetition of one foot in front of the other, the steady thump-thump of my feet against the pavement, they were things I could use as a type of self-hypnosis to quiet the chaos.

I'd picked this gym not only because it was close to my apartment, but because it was small and everyone pretty much kept to themselves. If people wanted to socialize while they worked out, they went to the college gym or one of those bright, shiny ones where it was all machines and fitness instructors. Here, I showed my ID and they left me alone.

I'd already run and warmed up. Now, I wanted to hit something. I didn't do the whole spinning or Pilates thing. I was more of a tape up my hands and beat the shit out of a punching bag kinda person when it came to working out.

Since it was a weeknight, there were only a couple other people in the gym and they were completely absorbed in their own routine. I headed to my usual bag and started going through the warm up hits that I'd learned from my self-defense teacher. The sound of my fists hitting against the bag was soothing and I let myself fall into the rhythm. The moves were automatic, adding in kicks between every few hits.

By the time I finished, I was feeling much better physically. The sexual tension was still there, but it was lower now, much more manageable. I could probably have a full conversation with Rylan about work and not think about ripping his clothes off.

It was strange, I thought, how I'd gone from never wanting to sleep with someone more than once to not even considering sleeping with anyone else. I supposed my therapist would've said that, because Rylan made me feel safe, I

wouldn't want to do anything to risk losing him. A part of me wished that was true. He did make me feel safe, and I didn't want to risk losing him, but that wasn't why I didn't want to have sex with anyone else.

In the past, I never thought about having sex with someone. It had always been about getting off. A guy was just the means to an end. I'd wanted the physical act, not the person. With Rylan, it was different. I wanted him. Yes, I wanted the sex, but it wasn't the release I craved. It was his body. The feel of his hands on my skin, his lips on mine. The taste and scent of him. It was a hunger inside me, a need that I'd never felt before.

And I was terrified.

He loved me. He'd said it and everything he did showed it.

I knew I cared about him, that I'd let him get closer to me than anyone, even Lily. I trusted him, which was huge. The question was, did any of that add up to love?

How could I tell him that I loved him if I didn't know what that meant? All I knew of romantic love was the entertainment version of it. Even my experience with platonic and familial love was limited to the short time I'd spent with Lily. What if I told him that I loved him and then realized that what I felt wasn't love?

But I couldn't love him. That wasn't allowed. I'd forbidden myself from letting anyone have that power over me, the power that being in love gave. So it didn't matter that I didn't know if what I felt was love because I'd never call it that.

I sighed as I climbed off of the bus. So much for clearing my head.

The moment I stepped onto the sidewalk, the hairs on the back of my

neck stood up. I tensed and glanced around, but didn't see anyone. I hurried into the building and didn't relax until I was in my apartment with all the locks turned and the curtains closed. Even then, I still had a nagging feeling that someone was watching me. I checked the entire apartment, but it was empty. I sighed. I needed a hot shower and comfortable pajamas. Hopefully, by the time I was curled up in bed, Rylan would call.

Unfortunately, when I checked my phone once I got out of the shower, the screen was blank. No texts or missed calls. It wasn't exactly late, but I'd been hoping that whatever Rylan was doing with Zeke wouldn't take him that long.

I missed him.

The realization hit me.

I missed him. The sound of his voice. The way he'd chuckle at something I said. Hearing about his day.

Dammit.

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hands.

Even though I'd told myself not to, I'd fallen in love with him.

Chapter 17

There were people all around, but I somehow knew that no one could see us. We were hidden from everyone's sight in the shadows. He was behind me, close enough that I could feel the heat radiating off of him. Though I supposed some of that heat was mine. I couldn't be near him and not feel like I was on fire.

His hands slid down my arms and then around my waist. I knew that if anyone looked up, they would see us here on the balcony, but I also knew that no one would. It was merely the suggestion of being caught that turned me on.

I leaned back against him, my head falling back on his shoulder. I turned my head, my mouth finding his as his hands cupped my breasts through my shirt. My nipples were hard, chafing against the soft cotton. I wasn't wearing a bra and the sensation of his hands moving over the thin material was making me wet.

"I want you," he whispered in my ear. His lips moved down my neck, sucking on my skin until I knew I was marked. "And I want everyone to know you're mine."

"No more hiding," I said.

"No," he agreed.

One hand slid beneath my shirt to caress my stomach and then up to my bare breasts. As his thumb brushed over my nipple, his other hand pulled up the front of my skirt. I was bare there too. No panties, just a thin layer of curls that his fingers skimmed through.

“Someone could see.” My protest was half-hearted. His fingers were doing magical things to my nipple.

“Let them look,” he said. His voice was low, possessive, and it sent a thrill through me. “But they better keep their fucking hands off. You’re mine.”

His fingers moved over my clit, rubbing with just the right amount of pressure. I closed my eyes and let him have his way with me. I didn't care if anyone saw us. I only cared that he kept doing what he was doing.

Even as my climax burst over me, I became aware that our surroundings had changed. Sand was hot under my back and I could feel cool water lapping at my toes. I opened my eyes and he was leaning over me. His eyes were blazing.

“I love you, Jenna.” He stretched his body out on mine, the weight of him comforting.

“I love you, too.” The truth of the words was clear as I reached between our bodies and found him hard and ready.

He slid inside me and I was wet and open. Our bodies danced together on the beach, the sun pounding down on us as we made love. Our sweat-slicked skin slipped and slid even as the waves moved up our bodies, cooling us. It was more than sex, it was magic and hope and all of the light and good things I could never let myself think when I was awake.

I was sleeping. Dreaming. But it was too nice of a dream. I didn't want it to end. I wanted to stay here with Rylan, making love. I wanted to dream us into another time and place. A palace. A hotel suite. Some place romantic. Some place common. I didn't want it to end.

I held him close as another orgasm approached...

I jerked awake, my breath coming in pants. My entire body was tense, on high alert. I'd woken hot and bothered in the past, but this wasn't it. Something had woken me up, pulled me out of a dream that should've kept me going until morning. I took slow, deep breaths to try to calm my racing heart. I started to reach over to my bedside lamp, then froze.

A noise.

Had that been what woke me? It wasn't loud. Little more than a dull thump. It could've been any of my neighbors. Maybe one of them had knocked something over when they got up in the middle of the night. It was possible. Hell, I'd done it myself before. Knocked it off heading for the bathroom, and that's what had woken me up, then kicked it or something on their way back.

Yes, that was it. My neighbors and thin walls. Usually, everyone was quiet, but I couldn't fault an accident.

Still, I couldn't shake the icy chill snaking its way down my spine. Something didn't feel right.

The part of me that feared the dark reared its head, demanded I turn on the light, that only the light could chase away the monsters. Except I knew better. There were plenty of monsters who weren't afraid of light. I'd learned at an all too young age that the monsters who thrived in the light were often

worse than the ones who hid in the shadows.

My heart was still racing despite my attempts to calm myself and I knew that the only way I'd be able to convince my paranoid imagination that I was safe would be to check the entire apartment. There wasn't much to check, but I wouldn't be able to start calming down until I did it.

I turned on the lamp, squinting against the sudden glow. I gave my eyes a moment to adjust, then looked around my room. It was empty, just the way I'd left it before going to sleep. I forced myself to swing my feet over the edge of my bed, my knuckles turning white as I gripped the side of my mattress. For me, it had never been something with claws and sharp teeth hiding under the bed, only people who wanted to hurt me. I wrapped my arms around my stomach, thankful I'd worn an over-sized sweatshirt to bed rather than my usual camisole.

“There's no one here.” I spoke out loud, my voice much more firm than I'd thought it would be. That was good. Maybe I could convince myself.

I bent down and looked under the bed. Nothing but the boxes I stored under there. They served the dual purpose of storage and making sure there wasn't room for anyone to hide. It also meant I wouldn't be able to hide under there if I needed to, but I'd made a promise to myself that if I was ever in a situation where hiding was an option, I wouldn't take it. I'd had enough of cowering in corners. I'd be smart about it, but I'd fight.

Once I cleared under my bed, I went to the tiny closet across from it. Like the space I'd just looked at, my closet was too packed to offer any room to someone bigger than a toddler. Still, I looked. The repetition of finding myself safe was as much a part of this ritual as the actual looking itself.

I turned toward my bedroom door. It was partially closed. Enough so

that someone would have to open it to surprise me, but left open enough that I could peek into the hallway before opening it. I did just that and frowned. The short hallway was dark, as was the bathroom, but I saw a faint glow from the living room. If I left the curtains open, the moonlight could create that sort of effect, but I was pretty sure I'd closed them. I could've been mistaken. I had been pretty tired when I came in from the gym.

I glanced over my shoulder at where my phone was sitting on the table next to my bed. There was every possibility that the noise I heard came from one of my neighbors and that I hadn't closed the curtains in my living room. The goose bumps covering my entire body and the metallic taste of fear in my mouth said someone was in my apartment and they had made the noise I heard.

It would be easy to gently close the door and lock it. Move my small dresser in front of it. Pick up my phone and call the cops. I could tell them to go ahead and break in if they needed to. Fort Collins police were great for getting to crime scenes in record time. They prided themselves on helping make CSU a safe school. That had been one of the main reasons I'd chosen to live here.

I knew if they came and it was a false alarm, they wouldn't fault me, not really. A young woman in her early twenties, living alone, no gun. I didn't have a history of calling in about nothing. I was employed and didn't have any neighbors making complaints about me. They'd chalk it up to a bad dream and a bit of paranoia. They might be a little condescending, particularly because of my appearance, but they were used to college coeds, which is what I was still young enough to look like.

I didn't want to be that girl though. I didn't want to be the one that the cops talked about around the station as being the hysterical freak who thought

she saw the boogiemer and called the cops. I was an adult. An educated, self-reliant woman who ran her own successful business. I'd spent the last nine years telling myself that I was never going to be a victim again. I wasn't about to let all of that hard work disappear simply because I was too scared to go out into my own apartment.

No one could've gotten in without me hearing it, I reminded myself. Someone could've picked the main lock, and even the deadbolt, but the chain lock was more difficult to get off. There were easier apartments to get into. Plus, a thief would have to be pretty desperate to break in here. Everyone in the city knew that these apartments were low-rent, mostly young families. Nothing really worth stealing. Granted, I had a lot of electronics, but there'd be no way for someone to know that.

Unless they'd been following me, I suddenly thought. I remembered how, earlier tonight, I'd felt like someone was watching me. What if I'd been right? What if it hadn't just been me freaking out? If someone saw me coming out of Archer Enterprises, carrying the laptop I took too and from work, they might've decided that I'd have more toys like that at home. I doubted anyone who worked at Archer had only a single laptop at their house. Well, maybe people like Emmaline and Christophe whose jobs were more of the office type, but it wouldn't have been that much of a stretch for someone to think that breaking into my place would be an easy way to make a couple thousand bucks.

Except I didn't hear anyone moving around out there. If there were a person in my apartment looking for computers, I'd expect to hear them picking things up, moving things around. If it was just the laptops, they could easily have them all together and be getting out right now. If they were going to take my desktop, I should hear them moving all of the wires and plugs.

My heart gave a painful thump. What if it wasn't a thief? Assault was always a possibility, though around a college campus it was much more likely to happen after some frat party or a case of a date gone badly. There weren't many random assaults. But, again, there was always the possibility that it wasn't random. Someone could have been watching me after work or at the gym and followed me home.

I gave myself a firm mental shake. I couldn't keep doing this, running scenarios through my mind. It wouldn't do any good. If there was no one, I'd keep standing here until I eventually had to go to the bathroom or the sun came up. Since it was late in the year, I'd be waiting a while for that last one. The alternative was that someone was in my apartment and he – or she, I supposed – would eventually make their way down to my bedroom in search of either money or sex and I'd be caught.

Proactive. That's what I had to be. Go out there and take control.

For the first time, I wished I had a weapon. Right now, I didn't even have a kitchen knife or rolling pin. I made a mental note that in the morning, even though all of this would surely seem pointless and silly, I would at least pick up a baseball bat to keep in my bedroom.

I took a deep breath and opened the door. Fortunately, it didn't squeak, so if someone was in my apartment, they wouldn't know I was coming. I was confident enough in my self-defense training that I thought I could at least immobilize someone long enough to get back out the way they'd come in. As I slowly made my way down the hall, I ran through the various moves my instructor had taught me, the ones I'd recently practiced as well as the others that were more reactive.

I was a couple of steps away from the living room when I heard the low

murmur of voices. Men's voices. Laughter. I couldn't make out any words, but there was a strange, distorted quality to their speech. It wasn't until I was at an angle to see most of the room that I realized where the voices and the light were coming from.

The television.

I rolled my eyes. I'd just about given myself a heart attack over leaving the television on. The thumping I'd heard had probably come from it too. Could've been anything from an explosion to someone knocking on a door. Something on a stupid TV show woke me up.

It wasn't until I crossed the room to turn off the TV that I saw a dark shadow move from the corner of my eye. With a sudden clarity that only true fear can provide, I remembered that I hadn't even turned my TV on tonight. Someone was definitely here... and he was sitting on my couch.

Chapter 18

My brain wasn't sure what it wanted to register first. The television screen or the man on my couch.

“Don't scream.” His voice was low, but almost bored. He raised his hand and I saw that he was holding a gun. “I may not look it, but I'm a good shot, and I'd hate to have to shoot you because you screamed.”

Screaming wasn't actually the first thing on my mind. I was trying to figure out if I could make it back to my room and the phone I'd so stupidly left on my end table. The only light in the room came from the TV I was trying not to look at. He might be a good shot, but could he see in the dark.

“Don't run either,” he said, his tone still conversational but quiet. “I don't care how fast you think you are, a bullet's a hell of a lot faster. And a gunshot in the back isn't a lot of fun.”

He could've been bluffing, but I wasn't sure I wanted to take that chance, not before I knew what was going on. If he'd been a stranger, I probably would've taken the risk. But I knew him and if I could talk to him, connect with him, there was a chance I could get him to give himself up and no one would get hurt.

“Okay,” I said, keeping my voice calm. “I won't run and I won't scream.”

His eyes flicked up to me now, looking black in the lack of light. “Don't lie to me. Don't be a naughty girl and make me punish you.”

I tried not to show him how repulsed I felt at his words. I didn't know if he was the kind of man who got off on reactions, but I wasn't going to take that chance.

“I'm not lying,” I said. “How about this? I promise not to lie to you, no matter what.”

He didn't need to know that I was an accomplished liar, taught practically from birth to tell men what they wanted to hear.

He cocked his head to the side, considering me with those dark, chilling eyes. Then he nodded and patted the seat next to him. “Good girls don't lie,” he said. “And you always were a good little girl. Pretty little Snow White.”

I was halfway to the love-seat, thinking about ways I could get the gun off of him when his words registered. My chest tightened and I started to shake my head. It wasn't possible.

Then I sat down and saw that my nightmares had come true. The glimpse I'd caught of it before had told me that it was a homemade movie, but I hadn't let myself really see it before. Now I knew why. My mind had been trying to protect me from what my brain had known.

On the screen were half a dozen men. Naked. Erect. And standing around a bed.

The girl on the bed was slender, her body still at least a couple years away from the curves it would eventually have. Her hair was to her shoulders and a deep, rich black. Ebony. That, plus her pale skin had caused her to be billed as the fairytale princess Snow White.

Everyone loved a fairytale princess.

She was still wearing her princess dress. They wanted to fuck her in it first.

When they eventually ripped it off, I knew I'd see the burn scar on the girl's side because that had happened at least six years before. Glimpses of the underside of her left forearm showed the scar from four years ago. There were no tattoos yet. No piercings. She wouldn't get those for another six years, when she turned eighteen. When she became Jenna Lang.

The images on the screen froze.

“Snow White.”

I turned toward Christophe and wondered how long he'd known who I was. How he'd known. He smiled at me and I repressed the urge to rub my hands across my arms. How had I not seen it before? That look. I'd seen it so many times, I thought I'd never miss it, but I had. I'd thought I was safe because of Rylan, but the wolf had been there the whole time.

“I was twelve the first time I saw you,” he said. “Surfing on my mom's computer for anything with sex in it, and I saw a preview for a video called *Snow White Takes a Nap*.”

It wasn't one of the titles I recognized from the depositions, but when I'd scrubbed my image from the internet with an intricate and beautiful piece of coding, I hadn't done it by a word or title search.

“It was easy enough to use my mom's credit card to buy it,” he continued. A wistful sort of expression came over his face, but his grip on the gun didn't relax. “She thought it was a cartoon.”

I wondered how many wives had seen similar purchases and thought

their husbands were so sweet, buying cartoons for their kids.

“You were younger in that one,” he kept going. “You didn't have any scars yet.”

I must've been younger than six then, the age I'd gotten the scar on my side. Christophe must've been younger than I thought, closer to Rylan's age.

“You looked so pretty, sleeping there. I kept wanting you to wake up, but when the princes kissed you, you stayed asleep. I knew that meant they weren't your true love and that if I had been there to kiss you, you would've woken up.”

I felt sick and only partially because I knew the film he was referring to was one of those my mom had drugged me for. Sometimes, they wanted me to be able to talk and act, but there were other times that, after I ate or drank something, I'd get tired. When I woke up, usually it was over. At least that part.

My mother was nothing if not resourceful. Those were the days she scheduled more than one film. I'd be awake enough to react, but still groggy enough to be easily controlled.

The biggest reason I wanted to throw up was the way he was talking, like we had some sort of magical love story.

“I had to see more. I knew that if I could just find you, we would be together forever. I went back and got all of the movies they'd released before. I subscribed to your website. I watched you grow up and fell in love with you more every day.”

I could feel the walls starting to close in and I focused on my breathing. If I had a panic attack now, I wouldn't be able to defend myself against what I

knew was coming.

“Then you disappeared. Nothing new came out and all of your videos online were the same. I still watched them, but I searched for you and you weren't anywhere.” He scowled. “Then, a couple years ago, even those went away. I only had what I'd saved on my computer and the videos.” He motioned toward the TV. “This one's my favorite. It was one of the last ones made. How old were you?”

I didn't want to answer, but I felt him getting more and more tense as he'd talked and I didn't want to risk him blowing up over something so small.

“Twelve, I think.”

He smiled. “My age.”

I kept my face blank.

“Not my age now, of course,” he amended with a grin. “But the age I was when I fell in love with you. We're older now, but we'll always be twelve together.”

Oh shit. He was even more fucked up than I'd realized.

“Do you remember filming this?” he asked.

I nodded. My hands were in fists, my fingernails digging into my palms.

Hands on my legs, pushing up my skirt.

“It must have been an amazing day.” He sighed and leaned back.

The shrill laughter of my mother when I cursed at the first man and he slapped me.

I was sure they'd cut that part out.

“I've always wanted to watch it with you.”

I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from speaking. Please, no. It was bad enough to have to relive these things in my nightmares. I didn't want to see it unfolding in front of me. Especially not with someone who would get off watching it. I had a feeling, though, that I didn't have a choice in the matter.

His eyes narrowed and I could see that he was coming out of that half-dreamy state he'd been in. He shifted in his seat and the gun came to rest pointed in my direction. “We're going to watch it, and if I ask a question, you're going to answer it. I've had years to think of questions I wanted to ask, and I'm going to finally get what I want. Understand?”

I nodded. I could do this, I told myself. I'd survived it actually happening to me, and then I'd survived reliving it to testify in court and telling my therapist. I could survive this. And I'd be watching, waiting. The moment Christophe's guard was down, I'd act. An elbow to the nose or a right hook. A jab to the throat. Or, what I really wanted to do, a kick to the crotch. Anything that would give me the chance to disarm him or run. I wasn't going to be picky about which. I had no doubt that running away was a better option than seeing what else he had in store for me.

He pushed play on the remote and the film started again. He turned it up this time, turning the muffled sounds I'd originally heard into some of the voices that haunted my nightmares. I could feel his eyes on me and I turned my face toward the television, fixing my eyes at a point just above it. It kept the images fuzzy, but couldn't stop me from hearing. And just like that, I was back there, lying on that filthy mattress in the basement.

He pushed too far and I gagged, barely managing to take him into my throat without throwing up.

“What happened to your arm?” Christophe asked. His leg brushed against mine. “There was nothing wrong with your arm in *Snow White Goes to Camp*, but it was bandaged on some of the web videos and then it looked like you had stitches in *Snow White's Day at the Beach*.”

I remembered those two. The first had been the night I'd most like to forget. The second had been done at a “friend's” house, by his pond. He'd played the lifeguard who'd had to save me from drowning. I'd been on enough pain killers during the web videos between that I didn't remember them except in bits and pieces.

I considered lying, but didn't figure there was a point. With the video playing, it was easy to put myself back in that state of mind and the words just came out. “I was eight, I think. I never knew if my birthday parties were on my birthday or just for the videos.”

“There were six birthday web videos and four regular videos.”

He sounded like he actually thought he was being helpful.

I ignored him and continued with my story. Maybe, I thought, he'd understand what had happened if he knew what I'd done.

“Just after the one movie.” I couldn't bring myself to use the title. “I couldn't take it anymore. I broke the mirror in my bedroom and used a piece of it to slit my arm open.”

“Why would you do that?”

I jumped as Christophe yelled at me. Of all the reactions I'd expected, that hadn't been anywhere on the list.

“Why would you try to hurt yourself? I was waiting for you!” He grabbed my wrist with his free hand and shoved up my sleeve, exposing my

scar. “Stupid, stupid girl!”

I wanted to yank my arm back, then maybe scrub it clean with bleach. His touch made me sick, but it wasn't the first time I'd had to let someone touch me when I would've preferred to slap his hand away.

His fingers squeezed my arm until I knew I'd be bruised. “Never again!” He hissed. “Don't ever try to hurt yourself again!”

“I won't. I promise.” That was one promise that would be easy to keep. It wasn't me that I planned on hurting in the near future.

He stared at me for a moment and then seemed satisfied by my answer. He turned back to the screen, but didn't let go of my arm.

“Watch,” he commanded.

“Watch yourself,” he growled. “Watch me fuck your little whore ass.”

I tried to push that memory back. It didn't belong during this video. That came from another time and place.

On screen, younger me was making pained sounds as the first man started on me.

His breath smelled like cinnamon and coffee.

“The scar on your side isn't from you hurting yourself too, is it?” he asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “I was six and I told my mom I didn't want to make a movie. She poured hot grease on me.”

“Why wouldn't you want to make your movies? You're so good in them.”

I stared at him. The fact that he sounded genuinely confused scared me more than anything else, even his violent reaction to my suicide attempt.

I didn't know how to answer that question, but he seemed to be engrossed in the action on the screen and didn't press it. As the action on the screen progressed, his grip on my arm lessened, but never quite to the point where I thought I'd be able to get away. Time began to stretch out. I tried not to watch or listen to what was happening to younger me, but whenever I started to get into a place where I was able to ignore it, Christophe would ask me a question that brought me back.

Some were strangely nonsexual. My favorite color. The books I liked to read. Others were about sex but matter-of-fact. My favorite position. Who was the best lover I'd ever had.

That question had brought a bit of clarity as Rylan's face appeared in my mind. I pushed thoughts of him aside. I couldn't think about him now.

As the movie got closer to the end, the questions became more specific and more perverse, asking about specific acts he'd seen me perform. I answered them all automatically, surprising myself at how quickly it all came back, the numbness, the ability to say what needed to be said to stay alive.

I was pretty sure there was more than one movie playing but I didn't look closely enough to see any differences. All I knew for certain was that we sat there through the rest of the early morning hours, watching and listening to things that were made all the more horrific because, the entire time, I could see the outline of Christophe's erection straining against the front of his pants.

Finally, as the last one ended, he let go of my arm and stood, keeping the gun on me as he did it. My focus sharpened and adrenaline flooded my system, pulling me out of the almost hypnotic state I'd been in. Something

was about to happen.

Chapter 19

“There's a bag on the floor next to you,” he gestured with the gun. “Pick it up.”

I leaned down slowly. I didn't like the idea of looking away from him, but I didn't think he would suddenly attack me. It wouldn't have made any sense. I knew that what he wanted from me wasn't going to be as simple as a flat out attack.

I picked up the bag and put it on my lap before opening it. As soon as I saw what was inside, everything inside me froze.

“Do you like it?”

I couldn't speak at first, even though I knew that the longer I waited, the bigger the chance he would get pissed and decide that shooting me was the best option. Bile was rising in my throat. This couldn't be happening. Not again.

No. I wasn't that girl on the screen anymore. She was gone. Buried deep in the past.

But as had been made abundantly clear over the last couple hours, the past wasn't gone and what was buried didn't always stay that way.

Further proof was sitting on my lap and Christophe was standing a few feet away, waiting for my response.

“I-I don't know what to say.” That seemed like the safest thing to say. It was the truth because there weren't any words to describe what I was feeling at this moment.

“Take it out.”

I reached into the bag, hoping he couldn't see my hands shaking. I didn't want to touch it. One of the reasons I wore the clothes I wore, chose those specific styles and fabrics, was because there were certain things that had been such a part of my childhood that the feel of them sent me right back there. Before I picked it up, I knew that it was made of that filmy sheer shit that made up little girls' princess costumes, except I knew this would be like the other dresses I'd worn. There wouldn't be any of the solid material under the sheer.

I pulled it out and saw that I was right. The one thing I hadn't expected was for it to be not just similar to those dresses, but for it to be identical. Christophe had managed to find an adult-sized version of the main dress I'd worn in the Snow White movies.

“I had it specially made.”

Well, that explained one thing.

“I wanted our first time together to be perfect. Magical. Just like it always should have been.”

And that confirmed what I was the most afraid of. He didn't just want to have sex with me. Him forcing himself on me would be bad enough, but I could get through it. I'd done it before. That wasn't what he wanted though. He wanted me to be that girl. To be Snow White again. And he was going to make me relive my darkest moments. I didn't doubt for one moment that it

would end there. He wouldn't only make me re-enact one of the movies. He would do each one. It wouldn't take him long to realize that, as possessive as he sounded, that he wanted to see other men use me, and that would be when all of the repeats would begin. Including... that night. The one that had made me feel like I had no other option but suicide. I'd come a long way since then and I was older now, but if I had to go through that again, I wasn't sure I could survive.

Or if I'd want to.

“Put it on.”

I looked up at Christophe, my face a blank mask. “Here?”

He shook his head. “In there.” He pointed back toward my bedroom. “Here's what's going to happen. We're both going to walk back there, nice and slow. I'm going to pick up your phone and make sure no one interrupts us.” He smiled at me. “I've been waiting too long for this.”

I put the bag back on the floor.

“There's something else in there.”

I reached into the bag, flinching when I felt something strange against my fingers. I didn't let it stop me though. I pulled it out... and wished I hadn't.

It was a wig. Shoulder length and ebony black. It was the closest I'd ever seen to my natural color.

“I wish you hadn't dyed your hair.” He reached out as if to touch me, then stopped. “It took me days to recognize you. You'll have to take out those piercings too. I want it to be perfect.”

“So we go back to my room and I dress up?”

He nodded. “Just like in the movie. You'll be the princess again and this time, when your prince kisses you, you'll wake up and we'll get to live happily ever after.”

I stared at him. How the hell did this man function in normal society? How had he managed to keep all of this crazy from seeping out all over the place?

His smile widened.

“It's so nice to finally be able to talk to you. I've had friends over the years who could understand to a point. They shared my love of you, but I knew none of them were your soul mate.”

Great. He already had a group of men who liked me. I was probably too old for them now, but there could be ways to make me look even younger. Not a child, but definitely younger.

“Now, it's time.” He motioned for me to stand. “I'll take your phone and then I'll step out so you can prepare.”

I stood.

“Once you're dressed, lie down on the bed and go to sleep. Then I'll come in and we'll finally get to be together.”

The two of us started down the hall. My mind raced as I walked as slowly as I dared. Moving from the living room to the bedroom changed things. Getting out would be harder now, but maybe I could find a way to get someone's attention, let them know that I needed help.

I had a window in my bedroom, but the air conditioner was in it, sealed in. I couldn't get it open without making way too much noise. I could try to lock the bedroom door and then block it with my dresser, like I'd thought

about doing when I'd first woken up. That might give me the time I needed to get the air conditioner out. After that, I just needed to get down the fire escape.

Unfortunately, once Christophe took my phone and stuck it in his pocket, he stepped into the hallway and left the door partway open.

“If you need any help, let me know,” he said. “I’ll be able to hear you quite clearly.”

I heard the unspoken warning in his words. Don't try to lock him out or try anything funny.

The best I could do was stall as much as possible and hope that something happened. Worst case scenario, I let Christophe do what he wanted and then wait for him to fall asleep. He'd been up for a long time and looking forward to this even longer. The more I dragged it out, the quicker that part would take if it came to it.

I took off my pajamas, hesitated, then pulled the dress over my head. The feel of the fabric made my skin crawl. The hem hit me mid-thigh and the chest was tight, making me feel like I was trying to fit into something from my childhood. That didn't help things.

“Are you dressed?” Christophe called from the hallway.

“I'm taking out the piercings now,” I said. I removed each one automatically as I looked around my room. There had to be something here I could use. A weapon of some kind. What was it my self-defense instructor had said? That if my attacker was bigger than me, leverage was my greatest weapon.

An idea formed. It wasn't one I liked too well, but it was better than

waiting for him to fall asleep. I set the last of my jewelry on my dresser and picked up the wig. I didn't want to wear it, but I couldn't implement my plan unless I got Christophe in here, and I knew he wouldn't come in unless I was wearing the wig.

I pulled it on and tucked my hair underneath it. It was itchy, but I pushed that aside. Mild discomfort was nothing.

“I'm dressed,” I said. I was surprised that my voice wasn't shaking.

“Get onto the bed and go to sleep.”

As I climbed onto the bed, I felt the memories circling, bringing the darkness with them. I knew if I let them through, if I gave in to the past, I'd be lost. If I hyperventilated here and passed out, I wouldn't wake up, safe. There wouldn't be strong arms holding me and protecting me. There would be no soothing voice and kind words. I knew if I was unconscious, I would wake up to Christophe on top of me, acting out his adolescent fantasy.

If I wanted to survive this, I needed to save myself. Lily wasn't here this time. Rylan wasn't here, and if I wanted to see him again, I had to use the strength that Lily had always said she saw in me. I allowed myself just one moment to think of Rylan, of how he made me feel. Safe. Real. I could do this.

I laid down the way I'd always been told to, half on my side, half on my back. But I didn't close my eyes all the way. Through slitted lids, I saw Christophe come in. My heart pounded in my chest as he took off his clothes, never letting the gun waver. Only when he was fully undressed did he set the gun aside. I felt a surge of wild hope. That was exactly what I'd hoped he'd do.

He came toward me and I tensed, but for the first time, it wasn't fear. I was getting ready.

“My princess,” he whispered as he climbed onto the bed.

I forced myself to stay still, to wait until he was close enough to touch. As he leaned down to kiss me, I made my move. My knee came up even as I grabbed for him, nails slashing at his face. The second I felt something hard against my knee, I knew I'd misjudged. I hit his hip and my nails caught his neck rather than his face. I didn't have time to be scared though because he was grabbing my wrists with one hand and the other struck me across the face. Pain exploded in my cheek. The second blow dazed me.

I waited for the assault even as my brain scrambled to try to get my body working. Instead, Christophe climbed off of the bed and went for his pants. I stared stupidly for a moment, then tried to push myself up, but my arms weren't obeying. I heard Christophe muttering, but I couldn't understand what he was saying. The tone, however, was clear. He was pissed. All I'd managed to do was make him mad.

When he stood up, he had a knife in his hand. It was a pocketknife, blade only a couple of inches long, but it looked sharp. He walked over to my window and cut the curtain ties, then turned toward me.

Fear spiked, even more than it had when I saw the knife. He was going to tie me down. My head was still throbbing, but fear was a great motivator if channeled correctly. I let it course through me, wake me up. Fight or flight was mankind's most basic instinct and I was counting on that to save me.

He took another step toward me and I bolted. My legs were unsteady and I stumbled, but I'd caught him off guard enough that my mistake didn't cost me. I made it through the door before he started to come after me. I heard him

curse at me as I ran down the hall. I knew now that he would've locked the door behind him, so a quick exit wasn't possible that way. The best I could hope for was to get to the kitchen for a knife and keep him at bay while I screamed for help.

I'd just stepped into the living room when he grabbed at my hair. A few of my own strands came out as he ripped off the wig, but I didn't let it stop me. The second time he managed to get ahold of me, however, it was my own hair and he got enough of it to jerk me to a sudden and painful halt.

“Why?!” he screamed the word in my ear and I winced as much from that as I did from the pain in my scalp. “Why did you do that?!”

He threw me to the ground and I barely got my hands out in time to stop me from hitting the floor face-first. He was still yelling at me even as I rolled onto my back.

“We were supposed to be together! It would've been perfect!” His face was red as he dropped down onto me, a knee on either side of my waist.

I struck out at him and saw him wince as one of my fists hit him in the chest. He wasn't skinny, but he was far from muscular. Unfortunately for me, his arms were longer and as soon as he caught my wrists, I was done.

I wasn't going without a fight though. Someone had to have heard him yelling and there was no way the people in this building would let that go without being concerned. I twisted and bucked, knowing that if I screamed, he'd hit me and I wasn't sure I could take another blow without blacking out. I could, however, make sure this wasn't easy for him. He swore at me, but was too busy trying to pin my legs down to get free enough to hit me. He switched my wrists to one hand and that's when I saw that it was over.

He'd picked up his knife again.

“Don't move or I'll cut you.”

I immediately stopped moving. I didn't know if he had the guts to cut me, but I didn't want to find out. I needed to take a moment and re-assess the situation.

“Now,” he said. “You're going to be a good little girl and I'm finally going to get to fuck you.”

He shifted his weight, pushing my legs apart even as his free hand fumbled with my dress. His fingers grazed the edge of my panties.

And then someone knocked on the door.

“Jenna, babe, it's me.”

Chapter 20

When I was a teenager and heard all of the other girls talking about whoever the latest celebrity or fictional Prince Charming was, I used to think how foolish and silly they were. It wasn't just that there was no white knight coming to save the damsel in distress. There weren't any men as good as the ones they thought were real. They didn't understand that the celebrities were played up by their agents and PR people. They didn't get that those guys weren't as cute, sweet or sexy as the media made them out to be. As for the fictional guys, they were just that. Stories. Make-believe. I liked to read, but I never confused fantasy for reality. Just like I knew there weren't any unicorns, werewolves, vampires or hobbits, I knew that there was no such thing as true love, a man worth dying for or a man who could be completely trusted and make me feel safe.

I'd recently come to realize that last bit wasn't necessarily the truth. There was one voice that I would immediately respond to, one voice that made me feel safer than any lock or weapon could.

The moment I heard Rylan say my name, the surge of relief that went through me was so intense that I stopped fighting against Christophe for a full second. Fortunately, he was just as distracted by someone at the door and calling for me. He froze. My paralysis didn't last as long and I yanked one hand free and punched him as hard as I could.

Pain flared through my knuckles and up my arm, but it was worth it to see him knocked off balance.

Less than ten seconds had passed since Rylan had knocked on the door.

“Rylan!” I yelled as I pushed against Christophe, trying to use his surprise to my advantage.

Christophe backhanded me and I tasted blood.

“Jenna?” Rylan's voice was more urgent and I heard the doorknob try to turn. “Are you okay?”

“Stupid bitch!” Christophe snarled as he grabbed my hair and twisted.

I cried out in pain as my neck was forced into an awkward angle.

A loud bang from the hallway told me that Rylan wasn't going to wait for me to ask him to come in.

Christophe slammed my head against the side of the couch and I was suddenly glad I didn't have a coffee-table. It hurt, but not half as bad as I knew hard wood would've. Hot pain flared across my cheek and I felt blood spill as Christophe's knife cut me.

“How many scars you think I can add to that body of yours before the boss gets in here?” His breath was hot against the side of my face.

He pushed against me, trying to force my nose and mouth against the fabric. I pushed back, ignoring the rug burns on my knees and legs as I fought for every inch.

Another second bang, followed by a loud cracking sound, and then Christophe was being pulled away from me. He held onto my hair, yanking me backwards. I hit the ground hard enough to knock the air from my lungs.

“Get the hell away from her!”

I'd never heard Rylan so angry. If it had been directed at me, I would've been terrified.

“She's mine!” Christophe shouted right back and let go of my hair.

I rolled onto my side, gasping, but needing to see what was happening almost as much as I needed air.

Rylan's fist connected with Christophe's jaw and the other man's head snapped back. Christophe stumbled, but didn't fall.

“He has a knife!” I barely managed to get the words out, but it was enough to give Rylan the warning he needed.

Christophe swung with the blade and Rylan jumped back, the knife missing him by several inches. I pushed myself up, watching as blood dripped onto my carpet. The thought popped into my head that my landlord was going to be pissed if that didn't come out and I wondered how hard I'd hit my head.

“It's over, Christophe,” Rylan said. He sounded calmer, but I could still hear the anger running under his words. He was controlling himself. “The cops are on their way.”

I wondered if that was true. I certainly hoped so. Rylan was in amazing shape and I had no doubt that, in a fair fight, he'd beat the shit out of Christophe. The problem was, I didn't think Christophe would fight fair. The simple fact that he was stark naked and swinging a knife instead of trying to run spoke to the lack of rational thinking at the moment.

“No!” Christophe shook his head. “She's mine. You can't have her. I've watched you go from girl to girl since I started working for you, and I know

you were doing the same thing before that. She's just another notch on your belt, but to me, she's everything.”

If Rylan had called me 'everything', I would've been thrilled. Christophe's words just creeped me out. I finally managed to get to my knees. I still felt a bit too light-headed to try standing on my own. We were like three points of a triangle, with Christophe being too close for me to get to the door, even if I'd been standing. Rylan would've been able to make it out, but I already knew he wouldn't go for that.

“Why don't we just sit down and talk?” I tried to make my voice soothing. “The three of us.”

“You don't want to talk to me,” Christophe spat. “The entire time we were watching the movies, you didn't want to talk. I could tell.”

He took a step toward me and Rylan launched himself the short distance and tackled the other man. The knife went flying. With Rylan and Christophe trading blows, I went for the knife.

As my fingers closed around the handle, I heard the sound of flesh against flesh, and then a sound of pain coming from Rylan. Panic gave me strength and I rolled back toward the fight. I saw blood at the corner of Rylan's mouth and anger overshadowed everything else I was feeling. For the first time in my life, I was furious on behalf of someone other than myself.

I was still on the floor, so I didn't have many options, but I wasn't exactly going through a list of things I could do. I acted without thinking.

The knife was as sharp as I'd hoped, easily going straight through the top of Christophe's foot and out the bottom, into the floor.

He screamed, swinging down at me even as he tried to yank his foot up.

I barely managed to get out of the way. He grabbed the handle of the knife and I knew it wouldn't take much to get it out.

In the distance, I heard sirens. Even if Rylan hadn't called the cops, someone had. Not surprising. I was sure most of the apartments around me had heard at least the last couple minutes of what was going on.

“I'm going to fucking kill you!” he growled as his fingers slipped on the handle. “I'm going to have you, slice you up and kill you.”

I heard the solid thunk before I even realized that Rylan had hit him again. Christophe's eyes widened in surprise for the briefest of moments and then he dropped to the floor. His leg twisted under him and the knife pulled. I could almost hear the flesh tearing. It came free from the floor and I caught a glimpse of a bloody half-inch of steel before I looked away.

I heard a deep, shuddering breath that sound almost like a sob, and it took me a moment to realize that it was me.

“Jenna.” Rylan's voice was soft and he was close.

I turned toward the sound. He was on his knees next to me, his expression pained beyond concern or worry. One hand was stretched out toward me, but he didn't touch me. I could see in his eyes how much he wanted to. I nodded, not trusting my voice.

His fingers brushed across my cheek and I felt them slide across the blood. “Oh, love, what did he do to you?”

My eyes burned with unshed tears. His lip was swollen and there was blood smeared next to his mouth. One cheek was red and already swelling. But it was me he was worried about.

His thumb traced under my bottom lip and I winced as he touched one of

the tender spots. Anger blazed for a moment in his eyes and then faded behind other emotions.

“I want...” He stopped and shook his head.

“What?” I put my hand over his.

“What do you need me to do?”

Love swelled inside me. I couldn't call it anything else. That's what it was. Love. I knew it as well as I knew anything.

“What do you want?” I asked. My fingers tightened around his. “Tell me.”

“I want to hold you.” The need was there, raw on his face. “But after...” His mouth twitched. “I don't want to touch you in any way that would—”

I practically threw myself against him, burying my face against his chest so he wouldn't see the tears that I couldn't hold back anymore. The pain in my face was still there, but as his arms wrapped around me, they were all I could feel. He was all I could feel.

“I'm so sorry,” he said. “I didn't know. I thought you were safe. You should've been safe.”

One hand moved up and down my arm. The other made circles on my back. I began to shiver, unaware that I'd been cold until the heat from Rylan's body began to seep into me.

“You didn't do anything wrong.” My voice was muffled.

“How could I not know what kind of man he was?” Rylan shifted. His finger hooked under my chin and tilted my face up until I was looking at him. “I should've done a better job. I should've protected you.”

“You couldn't have known,” I said. It hurt my heart that he was blaming himself. Hurt my heart, but also made me love him even more. I knew that there were plenty of men who would've blamed me. They would've asked what I'd done to deserve this, how I'd led Christophe on.

I opened my mouth to tell Rylan everything, but stopped when a pair of police officers came through the broken door, guns in hand.

Chapter 21

The cops wanted to break us up to question us, but something about the way Rylan's arm had tightened around me and the look in his eyes must've told them that it wasn't a good idea to press the issue. The problem was, I didn't want Rylan to be here when I had to answer certain questions.

Like when I had to tell the police about the video, or the real reason why Christophe came after me. That wasn't the way for Rylan to learn what happened.

"It's okay," I said. I hated the thought of going through this without him, but I hated the thought of him finding out the truth about my past this way even more. I would tell him, I promised myself, but not here and now. Not like this.

He gave me a doubtful look.

"Let them do their job," I said. "I'll be okay."

"They should talk to you at the hospital," he argued, giving the detectives a dirty look. The paramedic who was checking my vitals ducked his head to try to hide a smile.

"I don't need to go to the hospital," I protested.

"I'll tell you what," Rylan said. "I'll go with Detective Charles here to answer questions if, once Detective Walters is done with the preliminaries,

you go to the hospital.”

Dammit. I scowled, then winced. His expression softened. “Fine,” I said. I squeezed his hand. “Deal.”

“Right this way.” The dark-haired detective motioned for Rylan to step out into the hallway. “Let's start with how you knew Miss Lang was in trouble.”

“She was late for work,” Rylan began, his voice fading as he left the apartment. I only caught part of the rest of what he said, “So I called her twice and she didn't answer...”

“Miss Lang.” Detective Walters caught my attention. He had lighter hair and a nicer face. It made sense that he was the one who was going to talk to me. I was the victim here, after all, even if Christophe was the one who was already in an ambulance and on the way to the hospital.

“Yes.” I forced myself to focus. My head was still a bit fuzzy.

“How about you start at the beginning. Tell me what happened and if I have any questions after, I'll ask them.”

I nodded. “I work with Christophe Constantine at Archer Enterprises, but that's not why he came after me. I didn't know it when I met him, but he'd seen me before. When I was a kid.” I took a deep breath and said the words I'd never thought I'd have to say again. “Back when my mother pimped me out to pedophiles.”

I knew the detective had spent his professional career using blank face, but I saw the flicker of surprise in his eyes.

“Among other things, I was forced to make films that were then sold to other pedophiles around the world,” I continued. “When I was thirteen, I was

rescued and a lot of people were arrested. They couldn't get them all though. Apparently, Christophe was one of them.” I gestured toward my television. “You'll find proof in my DVD player.”

This time, Detective Walters couldn't completely hide his surprise.

“I left work at five-thirty yesterday,” I said. “I came home, grabbed a bite to eat, changed my clothes and headed to the gym. I thought I felt someone watching me, but I didn't see anyone. I honestly don't know if it was Christophe then, or just me being paranoid.” I sucked in a breath as the paramedic began looking at the hand I'd used to hit Christophe twice. “I came home from the gym, took a shower and went to bed.”

I went on from there, telling him how I'd woken up because I thought I'd heard something and then everything that followed. I wanted to keep my voice flat, unemotional, but I knew that the detective wasn't just taking my statement. He was watching me, taking mental notes of how I was behaving, my reactions to what had happened. I had to let at least some of my emotions through, enough that I didn't sound like a robot. If I had to testify, a defense attorney would try to take this moment apart.

When I finished, the detective was silent for a moment, scribbling something on his notepad. Then he looked up and asked, “Did Mr. Constantine have a key to your place?”

I shook my head. “Not to my knowledge.”

“The door was locked when Mr. Archer arrived?”

“I assume so. He tried to get in and couldn't until he kicked the door open.”

“Did you lock the door before you went to bed?”

“Yes.”

“Were you and Mr. Constantine romantically involved?”

I bit back the smart retort that wanted to ask if he was a complete moron considering what I'd told him, but I controlled my temper. He was only doing his job. “No. We worked together. That was it.”

“So if we ask around, no one's going to say that the two of you were overly friendly?”

I rubbed my temples. The dizziness was going away, but a headache was replacing it. I had a choice here. I could tell him the truth without talking to Rylan about it or I could leave it out of the conversation and then get accused of hiding it later.

“I was friendly with Christophe at work because he was friendly with me,” I said. “He never demonstrated anything inappropriate.” I looked up at him. “The two of us are not nor have we ever been in a relationship other than in his twisted fantasies.”

“Do you have a boyfriend, Ms Lang?”

Well, there went the vague. It was pretty black and white now.

“Yes,” I said. “I do.” I glanced toward the door. “Rylan and I are keeping it quiet because he's my boss, but the two of us have recently become involved.”

Obviously, this wasn't a surprise to the detective. I had a feeling that he'd asked to see if I'd tell the truth.

“No one at work knows,” I added.

“And you want us to be discreet?”

Again, I sensed a test question. “Please do whatever you need to do to make sure that Christophe goes away for a long time. I just thought you'd need to know that no one at work will know that Rylan and I are together.”

Judging by the approving light in his eyes, my confession had been the right thing to do.

“We've done everything we can here.”

I'd forgotten about the paramedic.

“I think I've gotten what I need,” Detective Walters said. He gave me a kinder look than I'd ever gotten from an authority figure other than Lily. “If we have any other questions, we'll be in touch.”

The moment we moved into the hallway, Rylan was there. I wasn't sure if he was supposed to be done with his questioning, but I wasn't going to argue as he followed me into the ambulance.

Neither one of us spoke on the ride, but when the doctors tried to separate us at the hospital, he flat-out refused. This time, there was no deal to be made. I told the doctors that he stayed or I went, and they let him stay. The exam wasn't pleasant, but I'd endured much worse. The bruises on my face would heal with time. The cut was superficial enough that it only needed a bandage, no stitches, though the doctor said she couldn't promise it wouldn't scar.

“Her insurance is excellent,” Rylan said from where he stood at my side. “It'll cover any necessary plastic surgery.”

I glanced up at him. “I keep my scars,” I said, reaching for his hand.

The doctor smiled at me, the expression in her eyes warm. I thought she might say something, but she continued with her recitation. “The x-rays show

no broken bones in the face or hand, but you're going to want to take it easy for a couple days.”

The look in her eyes changed and I knew what she wasn't saying. There were no new breaks. I hadn't gone to the hospital much as a child, but I'd heard the report of my initial exam after being rescued. I'd been fortunate that the doctors my mom actually had called had done a good job setting the broken bones I'd had, including three fingers and my wrist.

“I'm a little concerned about the contusions,” she continued. “Multiple blows to the head aren't something to be taken lightly.” She gave Rylan a stern look. “And that goes for you too, young man.”

His eyebrows went up and I smiled. I had little doubt that anyone talked to him like that, let alone a doctor who looked like she was barely ten years older than him.

“I don't want either of you two spending the night alone. I didn't see any signs of a concussion, but I'd feel a lot better if I knew you had another person around just in case something happened.” She looked from Rylan to me. “Will you both have someone around tonight?”

“I think we can make that happen,” Rylan answered before I did.

Even though I normally hated when people tried to talk for me, I was glad he'd done it this time. I didn't want to make any assumptions, but I also didn't want to be alone tonight.

“Good.” The doctor scribbled something down and handed the paper to me. “That's a prescription for a mild painkiller if you need it.”

“Does that mean we're done?” I asked. I was grateful for the prescription since I knew I'd probably need it tomorrow, but I cared more about getting

discharged.

Her smile was understanding. “Yes, it does. I just have a couple things I need to have you sign.”

I held out my hand.

“I’ll be back with the papers in a moment,” she said. “You can change back into your street clothes.”

Shit.

I’d agreed to change into a gown for the exam because I wanted out of the dress. Then it hit me. I gave Rylan a puzzled look. “I thought the dress was evidence.”

“It is,” he said. He reached down and picked up a bag I hadn’t noticed. “I paid one of the orderlies to get some clothes. I’m not guaranteeing they’ll even match...”

“Thank you.” I squeezed his hand, then raised it to brush my lips across his knuckles. “For everything.”

“I meant it, you know,” he said. “That we’d work something out so you wouldn’t be alone tonight.”

“She meant that for you too,” I said as I released his hand and started digging into the bag. There were no undergarments, but I was fine with that. The idea of a stranger picking out a bra and panties weirded me out. I quickly pulled on the sweatpants under the hospital gown, and the sweatshirt came next. They were both baggy, but at least the guy had picked gray rather than some outlandish color.

“Your apartment’s going to be off limits for at least a day or two,” he

said. "And it'll be another day before a cleaning crew can get everything fixed up."

"A cleaning crew?"

"No arguing, please." He gently touched my uninjured cheek. "I don't want a single thing left in your apartment to remind you of what happened."

I didn't tell him that the memories would still be there, no matter how much cleaning was done. I knew that from experience. Still, I appreciated the fact that he wanted to do that for me.

"Whatever you want to do is what we'll do," he continued. "Whatever you need to make you feel safe."

My heart did a little skip. "You make me feel safe."

He shook his head, his eyes sad. "I shouldn't..."

I put my finger on his lips. "We're going to talk about that, but not here."

His gaze locked with mine for a moment and then he nodded. "Do you want to stay at a hotel? Call in a friend to stay with you?" He lifted my hand and rolled up my sleeve so my hand was free, his head staying down as he spoke again, "Or you can stay with me."

"At your house?" I tried to make my voice nonchalant.

"No strings. No expectations," he said. "You can stay in the guest room for as long as you like."

"Thank you." I looked away and told myself not to feel disappointed that he'd specified guest room. I didn't want this to confuse things between us, and I definitely didn't want him thinking I was trying to take advantage of what had happened.

“Jenna.” His voice was soft.

I turned back toward him. My emotions were close to the surface, but I managed to keep them back.

He cupped the side of my face and I leaned into the touch. Better than any painkiller.

“I’ll understand if you want to stay in one of the guest rooms, if you need your space, but I would also love for you to stay with me.”

I inhaled sharply.

As if he knew I needed him to say the words, he clarified, “In my room. In my bed.” His thumb brushed the corner of my mouth. “In my arms.”

Chapter 22

Rylan called a car to take us to his house. He'd driven to mine but said he'd call someone to pick it up later. All he cared about right now was getting us home. Warmth coiled in my stomach at the word. Home. I knew he didn't mean it like that. It was his home, not mine, but for now, I wouldn't overthink it. I'd let myself feel safe, feel love, feel home.

It was already heading toward evening so we'd have all weekend, just the two of us, and I was looking forward to not doing much of anything that didn't involve a bed, couch or good food.

I stayed in the sweat suit as we went through the kitchen, picking at food here and there. Neither one of us said much of anything, but in a way, I found that comforting. I had a lot I was planning to say, but I appreciated the break.

After eating, Rylan held out his hand. I took it and the two of us went upstairs. We got into the shower together, and while there were definitely some lingering touches and looks, things didn't become sexual. I knew Rylan wanted me. He made no effort to hide the way his body reacted to mine, but I knew he wouldn't make the first move. Not after what had happened.

I wanted him too, wanted to feel the safety and comfort of his arms around me. Wanted him to make me forget. But first, it was time for me to tell him everything.

There were soft, fluffy robes for us both after we were done drying off

and then he looked at me, waiting for me to make my decision about where I wanted to go.

“We need to talk.”

His eyes widened slightly, but the rest of his face went blank.

“Nothing bad,” I said quickly. Then I amended my statement. “It's not a break-up or a where are we going speech. It's about what really happened this morning, and how it connects to all of those things about my past that I haven't told you.”

“Jenna, I meant what I said. You don't have to tell me anything.”

“I'm ready.” I stopped him before he could say anything else. “And I need to tell you. I need you to know.”

He studied my face for a moment, probably searching it to see if I was serious or just saying it because it was what I thought he wanted to hear. Finally, he nodded.

“Okay. Where do you want to talk?”

I thought about it. Did I want to go back down to the living room and sit while I shared all of the shit from my past? No, what I wanted was to feel safe while I talked, and while I felt safe in the entire house, there were three rooms where that was the most true. One, I wanted to use later. The other was through that door.

“Can we sit on your bed?” I asked. I stuck my hands in my pockets. They were already starting to get cold. “This isn't going to be pleasant.”

He reached out and put his arms around me, pulling me toward him. He didn't try to cop a feel or even kiss me. This was an embrace of pure comfort

and I let myself enjoy it. I took the strength he offered me and stepped back only when I was sure I could do this. Once I started, I didn't want to stop. I only wanted to do this once.

After a few minutes, we moved into the room and settled on the bed, not touching, but close enough that we could if either of us wanted to.

“None of this will be easy for you to hear,” I began. “And it's not easy for me to say, but it needs to be said. If there's any hope of this.” I gestured between the two of us. “Any chance for us to work, you need to know.”

My eyes met his and in those blue-violet depths was an array of emotions. Anxiety over what was to come. Concern for me. A hint of anger that I knew would grow. And hope. A hope I understood because I had been fighting it for a while. Hope that we would become something more.

“When I said before that I kept my scars, I meant it.” This seemed like as good a place as any to start. I pushed up my sleeve so that my scar was visible. “They're reminders, like my tattoos.” I gave him a half-smile. “The hair and the piercings are different. The tattoos mean something, like the scars. They tell the story of who I was.” I hesitated, and then added, “Who I was before I became Jenna Lang.”

I looked at him, expecting shock, but he didn't even look surprised.

“My background checks on employees are a bit more thorough than the average boss.” He groaned. “Or, at least, I'd thought they were.”

“Trust me,” I said. “Unless you dug into his home computer, you couldn't have known. You'll understand why in a minute, I promise.”

He nodded and then went back to what he'd been saying. “For you, I found a record of a name change when you were eighteen, but nothing else,

including what the name had been changed from. I knew that you weren't born with that name even though you used it on your college application, before the change. And that's where I stopped looking."

"You knew there was something strange, but you stopped looking?" I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss him for not hacking systems to find the truth or slap him for digging so much in the first place. Okay, I was sure which I wanted, but it had very little to do with his actions.

"It wasn't my story to find," he said. "It's yours to tell."

"Thank you," I said sincerely. Knowing how easy it would've been for someone like him to hack the court records, I respected him all the more for not doing it. That was the only place the old me still existed.

He held out his hand, giving me the choice to take it. I laced my fingers between his, grateful for the contact. I would need his strength.

"My tattoos," I started again. "Angel wings on my back to cover scars from beatings and cigarette burns. Symbolism you'll either get or not when you've heard it all. The barbed wire to remind me of the prison I came from. And Lily." I blinked back the sudden tears. "She saved me."

I took a slow breath and Rylan waited.

"The scars remind me of the things I survived." My voice was still steady but my fingers were holding more tightly to Rylan's hand. "The reason I wanted us to have our statements taken separately was because I had to tell the detective why Christophe came after me. How he knew me. And it wasn't through work." I put my other hand on top of our joined ones. "I couldn't let you find out that way."

I took another deep breath and hoped it would calm my nerves. Not

surprisingly, it didn't. Nevertheless, I pushed on.

“My mom was twenty-three when she had me, but as near as anyone could figure, she'd had at least six other kids before me, maybe more. That's also not counting the abortions. The first one, a boy, was born when she was fourteen and she gave him up right away. One died. SIDS from what I heard. When the police did their routine follow-up, they found the drugs she'd been using. I think there were three kids taken away that first time. By the time I was born, she'd lost custody of everyone. A total of two boys, counting that first, and three girls. I don't know if the one who died was a boy or a girl. Don't know names either. Sometimes she'd say my brothers were Dillon and Mikey. Other times, it was Ollie and Samson.”

“You never did any... digging?”

I smiled softly. I knew what he meant. I was a good enough hacker that I could've gotten the information if I'd really wanted it.

“I'd be lying if I said I'd never thought of it,” I admitted. “But I don't think I could face any of them. There'd be too many questions.”

“Like why she kept you and not them?”

“The answer to that one is simple. I got her stuff. Mom kept my birth quiet because she knew I'd get taken if the state found out. She'd been turning tricks since she was fourteen to pay for drugs, so a father interfering wasn't going to happen.” I traced my finger along Rylan's thumb. “She always liked the idea of being a mom more than the reality of it, so I think she might've eventually let me go too if she hadn't met Tony. He was her new pimp slash drug supplier when I was born. From what the cops found out, I was only a year old when Tony told my mom that there was another way she could pay for her drugs that didn't involve her giving blowjobs for ten bucks a pop.” I

looked down. There was no going back after this.

“I'm right here, Jenna,” Rylan said. “I'm not going anywhere.”

I raised my head and met his eyes. Safety. Strength. I could do this. “I was her way to get what she wanted. It was just Tony for a year or two, or so I was told. I don't remember. Then he got killed by some other dealer and my mom decided to go into business for herself.”

Rylan looked sick, the revulsion in his eyes clearly not directed at me. His hand convulsed around mine, as if itching to make a fist. “Jenna, love...”

“I have to keep going,” I said. “I need to say it all.”

He nodded, the expression on his face saying he wished I wouldn't, but also that he knew how important this was.

“I was somewhere between two and three the first time Mom got an idea. I don't know if someone suggested it, or she thought of it herself, only that she was there for every film.” I reached up and touched my hair. “I was Snow White.”

“Which is why you dye your hair,” he said softly, understanding in his expression.

“And that's how Christophe knew me.”

Now came the shock. Rylan stared at me.

“When he was twelve, he found some clips of the movies online and became obsessed.”

“The dress.” Rylan's eyes widened.

“He wanted me to be Snow White again,” I said. “So, you see, that was

why he suggested that you hired me. Why he never messed with any of the other women at work. But you never could've known.”

“I should've known I had a pedophile working for me.”

I shook my head. “These men, these people, they're masters of disguise. They know how to cover their tracks.” I steered the conversation back to my story. I could argue against his guilt later. “Until I was thirteen, I spent at least three to four days a week being raped. Sometimes one man, sometimes more. Sometimes they'd bring their wives or girlfriends with them.”

With every word, the horrified and sickened expression on Rylan's face grew.

“Aside from the movies, there were web shows and pictures too.” I put my hand on my side. “When I was six, I told my mom I didn't want to do movies anymore. She beat me after she saw that the grease left a scar. Said I'd have to work twice as hard since I'd made her leave a mark.”

I kept waiting for Rylan to pull away, but he didn't. Then I told him about that night. The worst night. I didn't leave anything out. He needed to know. With each disgusting, degrading detail, the anger in his eyes grew until they were almost black.

“Mom had to let me heal for a couple days after that one,” I said. “The first night I could walk again, I tried to kill myself.” I held up my arm. “I didn't realize that the blood would make the glass too slippery for me to cut my other arm. I didn't bleed out fast enough.”

“No one asked questions?” Rylan's voice was hoarse. “You were a kid, coming into the hospital with a suicide attempt. An exam would've shown...”

I didn't make him say it. “The doctor my mom took me to, the one she

always took me to, was a regular customer.” I sighed. “I didn't know that until after he was arrested though. He always wore a mask.”

“How did... how did it end?”

“I was in the middle of making a movie.” I shuddered. If I'd been forced to finish that one, I knew I would've found a way to kill myself. “In the middle of it, the cops burst in. One of the people who subscribed to the website had been arrested a couple of days before. My picture was one of thousands on his hard drive, but the tech people were able to identify some things and figure out where I was. Lily was the only person who came to me and held me. She didn't act disgusted by what she saw... she just saw me.”

“Jenna.” His voice broke on my name.

I didn't stop. It was almost over and I needed it all out. “I spent a couple of months in the hospital before I was put into the system. The one thing my mom had done, at least most of the time, was insist on condoms. No one wanted to risk getting caught because of an STD outbreak. I didn't end up with anything permanent there, but what they'd done to me...” I could feel my throat closing up and had to make myself finish. “Six surgeries total to fix the damage. Most of it at least. They couldn't fix all of the internal stuff. I can't have kids.” I put my hand on my lower stomach. “Most of those scars aren't noticeable unless you're looking for them.”

I fell silent. That was it. Everything he needed to know. The things I'd done and had done to me. The reasons for my panic attacks. Why Christophe had come after me. The damage that couldn't be undone.

“Oh, love.” Rylan pulled his hand from mine and gently took my face between his hands, careful not to touch my cut. “Why didn't you tell me before? Not the details, but enough... I never would've done any of those

things to you... never asked you to do anything..." His eyes were shining with tears. "I'm so sorry."

I wrapped my hands around his and put them in my lap. " I am so grateful that I met you, Rylan Archer. You have no idea what you've done for me, how safe you make me feel. You've made me face my fears instead of ignoring them."

I climbed off of the bed, pulling him with me. He stood, confusion on his face. I walked out of the room and he followed. I could feel the tension radiating off of him as I stopped in front of the playroom door. I opened it and stepped inside, flipping on the light before I turned to look at him.

"Jenna?"

I stretched on my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his. I felt his surprise for a moment and then he was leaning into the kiss. He didn't touch me and I could feel his hesitation as he let me take the lead. I took his bottom lip between my teeth and he moaned. I bit down, then sucked his lip into my mouth, soothing it with my tongue before letting go.

"You made it safe for me to face my fears," I said. "I trust you, Rylan."

I reached out and took his hands. He let me turn them over, holding them in front of him, palms up.

"There are two things I don't do. I never do." Butterflies fluttered in my stomach at the thought of what I was about to do. "One, I told you. I don't do bondage. But I also don't close my eyes during sex. No matter how amazing something feels, I can't ever bring myself to trust my partner enough to close my eyes. I can't give myself over that completely. There's always a part of me that's holding back."

I placed my wrists on his palms and he sucked in a breath.

“I don't want to hold anything back anymore. I want you to take control. All of it.” I looked up at him. “I trust you, and I want to close my eyes with you.”

Chapter 23

I could see the indecision warring on his face. He wanted me, but he also wanted to make sure he wasn't taking advantage of me. I waited, my wrists still resting on his open palms. A lot had happened to both of us today and I knew he was still trying to process all of it. He needed to make this decision without me prompting him.

He kept his eyes on my face as his fingers slowly curled around my wrists. I hadn't realized how big his hands truly were, how long his fingers were, until they were holding me. My heart was in my throat, but I didn't pull away. The fear was there, but greater than the fear was desire... and love. I hadn't said it to him yet, but I knew it was the truth. It was funny, I supposed, how worried I'd been that I wouldn't know what love was when I felt it. What I felt for Rylan couldn't be confused as anything else.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “After everything that's happened?”

“Make me forget.”

His eyes darkened, this time with want. “You say the word and I stop,” he said quietly.

I nodded.

He pulled me to him and my hands went to his chest. The robe was soft, but the muscle beneath was hard. He slid his hands up my arms and then

around to my back. Each movement was slow and deliberate, and I could feel him gauging and weighing my reactions. Of all of the reactions I'd imagined a man having if he heard about my past, I'd always assumed there would be some level of hesitation, but it had always been based on repulsion over what I'd done. I'd never dreamed that he would worry about me and how I felt. From the first time I'd slept with him, I should have known Rylan would be different.

I looked up at him as he pulled me against him, his hands on the small of my back. The moment his mouth touched mine, relief flooded me. Until that moment, I hadn't been entirely sure that he'd go through with it. His tongue pushed at the seam of my lips and I parted them willingly. His tongue danced with mine as he explored my mouth. The kiss was slow and lazy, a simmering burn rather than a roaring inferno.

I slid my hand between the folds of his robe, needing to feel his skin against mine. He moaned into my mouth and one of his hands moved up to cup the back of my head. His heart thudded against my hand as he deepened the kiss. I could feel his cock hardening between us.

He pulled his mouth away, but didn't let me go. "I'm going to take you to the bed." He gently kissed the bruised side of my face. "But I'm not going to tie you up."

Before I could register my disappointment, he continued.

"The first time I restrain you." His voice was heavy with desire. "I want it to be with my hands."

Fuck. My pulse stuttered. I nodded mutely to let him know that I was agreeing to it. Suddenly, he was picking me up and my arms automatically went around his neck. I remembered the first time he'd carried me to a bed.

He'd asked my permission and then been careful not to hold me too tightly. Even before he knew the whole story, a part of him had known how to handle me.

He set me in the center of the bed and untied his robe. I didn't try to hide my admiration as the robe fell away, revealing his magnificent body. I'd always told myself that I'd get bored being with the same person more than once, but I didn't think I'd ever get tired of looking at him, let alone having sex with him.

I made a move to untie my robe.

“No,” he said. “Put your hands above your head.”

I shivered, but did as I was told. He wasn't holding my hands yet, but even this was relinquishing control.

He pulled a condom out of the side table drawer and tossed it onto the bed next to me before climbing up to join me. He pulled my legs apart and stretched out on his stomach between them. As he settled, I admired the way the cross on his back rippled with the movement of his muscles. I promised myself that I would, at some point this weekend, trace every inch of that tattoo with my tongue.

He didn't open my robe like I expected him to. Instead, he parted the folds just enough so he could get where he wanted to go. I made a sound as his tongue teased the insides of my thighs. I started to squirm, but his hands wrapped around my thighs, holding me still. I whimpered as he began to lightly trace along my slit, never penetrating, never hard enough for real friction.

I reached down and ran my fingers through his hand, encouraging him to

move closer.

He raised his head. "Hands above your head." His tone was stern. "That's your one warning. After that, we may have to discuss methods of... correction."

Shit. That word should not sound so hot.

I put my hands back above my head and he lowered his mouth to my pussy again, resuming his torture. By the time his tongue finally pushed between the folds, I was dripping. He took long licks, the flat of his tongue running the full length of me before it slipped into my pussy. I moaned, my fingers twisting together above my head.

"Close your eyes." He made the command soft. "Just feel."

I took a slow breath and let my eyes close. My stomach clenched and the fear took the edge off of my arousal.

"Concentrate on my voice," he said. "Focus on what I'm saying."

I nodded.

"Feel me." His voice took on a hypnotic tone. "These are my hands on your legs."

I pictured them in my head, those long, strong fingers that had never hurt me. He was keeping me in place so I could enjoy what he was doing.

When he spoke again, his breath was hot against my aching pussy. "I'm going to kiss you, Jenna. Make love to you with my mouth. It's my lips, my tongue on you. It's going to be my fingers inside you, preparing you for me."

The knot in my stomach began to ease.

“I'm the one who has you. Only me. And I'll never hurt you.”

“I trust you.”

I gasped as his tongue flicked against my clit. The gasp became a moan as he circled it, alternating pressure on the little bundle of nerves until I was panting. I didn't know if it was the power of suggestion, or if I was actually more aware of the sensations with my eyes closed, but either way, I was feeling things I'd never felt before. I grabbed the pillows above my head to keep my hands in place.

My orgasm hit me as he began to suck on my clit and my hips jerked. He put his hand on my stomach, never letting up the delicious suction that was sending wave after wave of pleasure crashing over me. Even before I'd finished, a new climax began, prompted by the single digit he slid inside me. He slowly pumped his finger in and out of my pussy, coaxing me into a second orgasm before the first had dissipated. I cried out, my body tensing as I came.

He kept going, taking a short break only when it was getting to be too much. Then he'd start up again, his finger moving, his tongue dancing. When he added the second finger, I came for the third time, my back arching. I shouted his name, hoping he could hear in that single word all of the things I didn't have the ability to say.

Then his fingers were twisting, rubbing against my walls in new ways and three became four without any space between them. Tears streamed out from under my closed lids. I couldn't take anymore. Every nerve in my body felt like it was on fire.

“Please, please,” I begged. “No more.”

Instantly, he was gone. I felt the bed dip and fingers gently touch my face. “Jenna, love, open your eyes.”

I did and saw Rylan's concerned face above me.

“I'm sorry. I got carried away.” He pulled his hand back. “We don't have to do anything else.”

I stared at him, confused. “I thought you wanted... I mean, you didn't...” I looked down to where his cock bobbed against his flat stomach. It was clear his body needed release.

“You said to stop.” His fingers brushed the sides of my face and I realized my skin was wet. “You're crying. I'm so sorry.”

I understood now. I took his hand and kissed his fingertips. “It was stop in a good way. Too much of a good thing.”

“But...”

“The tears were good too,” I said. “Trust me.”

“So I didn't hurt you?”

“No.” I smiled. “My body just needed a minute. Four orgasms in a row tends to make a girl sensitive.”

He grinned and raised an eyebrow. “Four?”

I rolled my eyes. “Men and their ego.”

He laughed, the tension easing from his body.

I put his hand on the belt of my robe and then stretched my hands above my head again. “Please, finish what you started.”

He didn't ask me this time if I was sure, but I didn't need him to. He'd

proven more than once that while he was calling the shots when it came to what happened, I was in control as to how far things went.

He untied the belt and pushed the robe apart, baring my body. The expression on his face as he looked down at me sent a surge of emotion through me. He didn't try to hide anything that he was feeling. Pure, raw, hunger mixed with something softer and sweeter. He leaned down and pressed his lips against the scar on my side, lingering there for a moment before turning his attention to my breasts.

I didn't need him to tell me to close my eyes this time. The moment his tongue swirled around my nipple, it hardened and my eyelids came down. I gave myself over to the wet heat of his mouth and the feel of his fingers dancing across my stomach. He started gentle, licking and sucking on my breast and nipple until I was begging for more. When he switched to the other breast, goose bumps broke out across my wet flesh and I shivered. Then his fingers tweaked my nipple and the shiver turned into a shudder.

Heat pooled in my belly and the space between my legs throbbed. I wanted him inside me – no, I needed him there. With every pull of his mouth, the pressure inside me increased. When he lightly bit down, I swore and tried to push myself closer to his mouth. He chuckled, and the vibrations made my insides quake.

“Are you close again?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, please.”

“If I touch your clit, will you come again?”

“Yes.” I writhed on the bed, desperate for friction. “Please.”

“Someday,” he said. “We're going to practice some self-control. See

how many times I can take you to the edge, but not let you go over.”

“Not now, please.” I looked up at him. I didn't think I could stand it if he didn't let me come.

He laughed again, a low sound, all man. “No, my love, not now.”

He wrapped his lips around my nipple and slid a finger between my lips, easily finding my clit. Two strokes across the top of the swollen nub and he bit down on my nipple.

“Fuck! Rylan!” I cried out his name as I came again.

He let me ride out my orgasm as he moved down the bed and climbed between my legs again. My eyes fluttered open as I heard the familiar tearing sound of a condom wrapper. I didn't want to miss this. I licked my lips as he rolled the latex down his cock. At some point this weekend, I fully intended to have that in my mouth again. Right now, I had something else in mind.

I kept my hands where they were, but I spread my legs further apart.

“Eager, are you?” he asked as he stroked himself.

“Only for you.”

He dropped so suddenly that I made a sound. Or I would've if his mouth hadn't been on mine, his lips hard and demanding. His tongue thrust into my mouth, curling around mine and drawing it back into his mouth.

Damn, that man could kiss.

He pulled back before I was ready for the kiss to be done, but then I felt his cock brushing against me.

“Look at me.”

My eyes flicked up and met his. He reached above us and, a moment later, I felt his hand close around both of my wrists. He watched for a moment, waiting to make sure I was okay. My pulse was rapid, my chest tight, but I wasn't regretting a moment of this. For the first time in my life, I let my guard down and let someone see everything I was feeling.

Rylan's eyes darkened and he leaned down to kiss me again, this one full of all the things that we were both feeling but couldn't say, the kinds of things that there weren't any words for. When he pulled back, he didn't go far, just enough so that he could see my face as he slowly pushed his way inside me. He moved slowly, but without stopping, a relentless force molding me around him, stretching me to fit him perfectly.

As he came to rest inside me, his body stretched out on mine, he spoke in a soft voice, "I love you, Jenna Lang."

He'd started to pull back when I spoke, "I love you too."

His entire body shuddered above mine and he squeezed his eyes closed, a look of pure concentration on his face. I knew that look. He was fighting for control. With all of his experience and all that he'd done, four words were nearly his undoing.

His eyes stayed closed as he withdrew, then opened as he paused. His gaze was intense, almost unbearable. With his eyes locked on mine, he surged forward.

"Ah!" The sound tore out of me as my body arched against his.

His grip on my wrists tightened as we moved together. My fingers flexed as he drove me into the mattress, every stroke going deep. I wanted to scratch, to dig my nails into his flesh.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “Feel me.”

I did as I was told, crying out as he picked up the pace. As he rode me, I gave myself over to the sensations coursing through my body. I'd experienced sexual pleasure before, though none as great as what I'd felt with Rylan. This was something completely different. I opened my eyes and found his above me. This was everything I'd always been afraid of, everything I'd told myself was forbidden.

I'd fallen in love and told him.

As our bodies moved together, my walls were down, everything about me laid bare.

“Come with me, love,” he said. “Come with me.”

I was close. His cock was rubbing against me in all the right places and ways. My nipples were bullet points against his chest. The feel of his fingers around my wrists only heightened things. Everything in my world was narrowed down to the two of us, where our bodies joined, the places our skin touched. I could feel the explosion hovering just below the surface, and with every stroke, it grew closer. His body was straining, fighting for my pleasure before he took his own.

And then it was here, white heat flooding every cell. I called out his name, struggling against his hold, desperate for some way to release the energy inside me. Instead, he held me down, forced me to feel it, to feel every moment of pleasure coursing through me. My muscles tensed and my pussy contracted around his cock.

“Fuck, Jenna!” He buried his face against the side of my neck as he came. “I love you. I love you.” His breath was hot against my skin as he

repeated it over and over again.

He let go of my wrists as he wrapped his arms around me. I grabbed onto him, holding him to me, taking comfort in the weight of him. I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to process the enormity of what I was feeling. I could feel the world graying out around me, and I didn't fight it. I knew it was okay. He would stay with me. He would keep me safe.

I wasn't sure when I passed out or even how long I was out, only that when I came to, Rylan and I were under the covers and my robe was wrapped back around me again. He was right next to me, but not touching me.

“Are you okay?” he asked as my eyes opened.

I shook my head and alarm flashed across his face. “You're too far away.”

Relief immediately replaced concern.

I pulled off my robe and tossed it onto the floor. “I want to feel you against me.” I turned and scooted back against him. “Will you hold me?”

His arms circled me, but his embrace was still tentative.

“It's okay,” I said. “I know I'm safe with you. Hold me tighter.”

He wrapped his body around mine. He nuzzled beneath my ear. “I've wanted to do this from the moment I met you.”

“You're not mad I've made you be so patient?”

“Jenna, love, you're worth waiting for.” He kissed the top of my head. “I'd do it again in a heartbeat to know you trust me.”

“I love you.” It was getting easier to say and I meant it more each time.

“And I love you,” he said. “Now sleep. We have all weekend together with no interruptions.”

“I like the sound of that,” I murmured. Exhaustion was getting ready to take over. I could feel it in my bones.

For once, I didn't fear sleep or what would come after. Tonight, I'd be safe from the nightmares because I was with him. He would protect me. The man I loved. As long as I had him, I was safe.

But even as sleep claimed me, I couldn't quite ignore the little voice that asked me how long this would last. How long until he realized that I didn't deserve him and he left me. I wouldn't dwell on that, I decided. I would live for every moment for as long as I was with him, no matter how short that might be.

– *THE END* –

Continues in His Pleasures – a novella from Rylan’s point of view, release March 13th. If you would like to read His Pleasures before anyone else, [CLICK HERE](#) to sign up to my newsletter. All subscribers will be able to download His Pleasures for free a week before the official release.

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M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of the Erotic Romance series, Club Privé and Chasing Perfection.

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Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor or author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call for her to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading— oops, scratch that! She is always writing. ☺