



CLUB AVALON BOOK 8

Learn
for Me

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This book is intended for a mature audience only.

Note From The Author

Hello, lovely reader!

Please be aware that Learn For Me was previously published in the Tease Me anthology under the name *Teach Me*.

When Zeke and Olivia's story reverted back to me, I spent forever rereading it, trying to find places to expand and enhance their journey.

In the end, I decided I love it just the way it is. I love this pair, how they unravel and come together again. For the purpose of this book, I've added an epilogue to wrap up the end of their beginning, but I'm sure we'll see them—and the Avalon crew—quite often in Club Serenity.

Happy reading!

Kay x

Learn For Me

Chapter One

Three years ago...

Zeke

The world was going to hell.

Any moment now, the explosives packed into the walls were going to blow, taking Zeke and several of his friends out in the process. It was a feeling in his bones, cold and eerie, haunting him as he bolted through the second barn of Avalon with those friends close beside him.

Braun, the club owner, was slightly ahead, running next to the blond Dom, Liam. To Zeke's right, Liam's boyfriend Wyatt was keeping pace.

They made it into the walkway, but it felt like a trap. Doors at both ends, a long narrow space. Boots clomped at rapid speed on the carpet, and the sense of urgency grew sharper. Like electricity in the air, foreboding crackled.

"He's going to detonate that shit before we get out," Braun growled at Liam. "If he got C-fucking-4 in here, he's got cameras on us."

"Run faster," Wyatt suggested, his voice low and tight.

The crews working on the club renovations were already out of sight, evacuating as soon as Liam uncovered the deadly stash behind the drywall. Faulty, lazy wiring had led him to the nasty surprise, and now, all their lives were in serious jeopardy.

Zeke was clueless. Who the hell would want to blow up a kink club in the middle of nowhere, Phoenix? Braun obviously had some idea, which meant Liam probably knew too.

Personally, he didn't want to know anyone who had access to that amount of explosives.

The doors into the bar and social area were open. Relief washed through him even as imminent danger bit at his heels. He was too old for this shit;

there were a lot of things he'd outrun in his life, but nothing quite as terrifying as this.

A clock ticked soundlessly as images of the empty bar snapped like photographs in his head. It was Liam's baby, and was fast becoming Zeke's. Every inch of it, from the gleaming brass beer pulls to the spotless glasses on the shelf above the glossy bar, was home.

One minute, he was running flat out for his life, and the next... something caught his foot and sent him sprawling. Pain spiked up his leg from ankle to knee. Losing his breath as it was knocked out of his lungs, he gasped and lay where he fell, stunned.

"Keep going!" Wyatt shouted. "I got him."

Zeke grunted as arms hooked under his and hauled him to his feet. Lightheaded, he swayed for a second before one of those arms locked around his waist and dragged him forward, taking his weight until adrenaline overrode the pain. "Should've left me, boy."

Face grim with determination, Wyatt refused to slow down, steering them toward the swing doors that led into the sign-in area, then freedom. "Not long ago, someone called me a coward. Might be true, but that doesn't mean I'll let a man die because of it."

They almost fell through the doors, still swinging back and forth from Braun and Liam's exit. They weren't too far ahead, which told him they'd been willing to stop and help, just like Wyatt.

But Braun had a family, a beautiful submissive and a young son, while Liam was building his own. He and Wyatt shared their shy, insecure sub together, although the path was a little rocky. Mainly because Wyatt's issues with her facial hair kept rising to the forefront.

Zeke wanted to shake the lad and tell him to open his fucking eyes. Sierra was sweeter than any submissive he'd known. A pleaser, always putting

everyone else's needs above hers. If Wyatt didn't buck his ideas up, he'd lose her, and regret it for the rest of his life.

Six feet from the outside doors.

Four feet.

They breached the threshold together, stumbling onto the porch.

As predicted, the world went to hell.

The ground erupted beneath their feet, quaking with the force of the explosion ripping through the third barn. He barely heard the shouts of alarm as fire blasted toward the sky, taking wood and steel with it. Within a heartbeat, the second barn went up, and something shoved him between the shoulder blades as a violent wall of heat blasted through the social area, fire seeking a way out wherever it could.

He hit the ground awkwardly, and the pain in his leg became a scream before his head cracked solidly against the gravel. Burning debris rained down on him, eating through his clothes into his skin. There was no air to breathe, just pressure in his chest where his lungs were supposed to be working.

Fuck, he was going to die.

They'd been so close to getting out of there. He tried to reason that even if they'd made it another twenty, thirty feet away from the building, they'd still have been in dire straits. With his cheek smashed into the small, hard rocks, through blurred vision he saw the devastation unfolding.

Pieces of the club jutting from the ground, fiery javelins of death. Smoke and ash already filling the air, and the scent of charred flesh beginning to mingle with it.

Weight covered his back slowly; a wheezing breath rasped in his ear.

Wyatt.

"Tell them... I love... them." His voice was weak, a horrible rattle tainting

the words. “That I’m... sorry. They’re... everything...”

The sentence wasn’t finished.

As the roar of hungry flames drowned out everything but the beat of his heart, Zeke closed his eyes against the raging heat and blinding glare of fire devouring the world. The weight on his back was unnaturally heavy, the ragged breaths no more.

Agony consumed him, sucking him into the dark.

Present day

Zeke

“Holy hell, Braun. It’s fuc—fluffing beautiful.”

The afternoon was bright and sunny, with only the slightest breeze to wick away some of the intense heat. Sunlight bounced off the treated glass extension, gleaming off freshly painted wood.

Three years after the explosion that left three men dead and a crater in the ground, Avalon was back. No bigger than before, but definitely new and improved if the outside was anything to judge by.

Zeke rubbed his chin and studied the long, sleek construction with a critical eye, unconsciously mirroring the pose of the Masters standing beside him. He felt honored to be included; this was a momentous occasion, a long-awaited one, and by rights, he wasn’t a club Master.

But these men were his family. They’d sat by his bedside during the three months he’d been stuck in a damn induced coma and kept him company throughout the physical therapy sessions his broken leg required. Their women spent weeks bringing him food and books, staying with him and listening to his stories to pass the interminable boredom.

Letting him play with the kids and be part of the family.

“Still curbing your swearing, J?” Braun laughed, the lines on his face deepening with humor. The past few years had taken a heavy toll on the club owner, but he remained a strong and intimidating figure. There was more gray in his hair, and those lines, yet his eyes hadn’t aged.

“Kaylyn casually told my wife that the spilled milk on the kitchen floor came from, and I quote, ‘her imaginary fucking friend’.” The sadist’s lips pursed as he tried to stem his smile. “That imaginary friend gets her into a lot of trouble.”

Saul grinned. “Sasha has one. Apparently, hers is the voice of reason, keeping her on the right track. For a rising three-year-old, her moral compass is well-honed.”

Braun rolled his eyes. “And here I am, grateful that Declan finally learned how to hit the toilet bowl with at least twenty percent of the stream.”

“Oh, don’t tell me that.” Rocking from side to side with his six-month-old son strapped to his chest, Thane’s alarmed eyes darted from Braun to Atticus. “Connie made me promise I’d be on eternal potty-training duties if we had a boy.”

“Declan’s a hellraiser.” Liam smirked, dragging his attention away from the club. “I’ve seen him in the bathroom. He does this hip-swinging movement and lets his dick swing around like a firehose. There’s no effort to keep it under control. I’m sure Tate will be less inclined to drive his mom crazy.”

A flush rose up Thane’s throat. “I hope so, seeing as we’ll be welcoming another one in a few months.”

“Again?” Loki’s mouth dropped open. “You just got that one!”

Zeke added his congratulations to the rest as Thane’s back was slapped several times. He enjoyed spending time with this bunch; the camaraderie

and banter were unlike anything he'd found before.

“What can I say? It took long enough to conceive this little guy, and Connie wants to keep the ball rolling while we can. Neither of us had siblings, and we know how lonely it can be. Tate deserves a brother or sister.” Touching his fingertip to the pudgy cheek not smushed against his chest, Thane's face glowed with a father's love. “Maybe we'll go for a third, for luck.”

From the far end of the line, Jasper snorted. “Stick with one, trust me. Kaylyn's too smart for her own good, Mia's an angel unless she wants something she can't have, and I'm dreading the day Callum is old enough to get sucked into their nefarious schemes.”

“They're *three*, J,” Braun pointed out.

“They hold conversations in people language,” Jasper fired back, “and in some weird, nonsensical babble that only they understand. It's like pig Latin, only infantile. It's fucking baby Latin.”

“Prepare for a hostile takeover,” Atticus rumbled. “They're coming for you, J.”

“Don't mock me just yet, brother. I'm not the only one with three kids to wrestle into submission.”

“Two,” Atticus corrected. “Number three is a couple of months off yet. Natasha shows more interest in sucking on her thumb than world domination, and Link spends all his time playing building blocks with Alicia.”

Jasper harrumphed.

A black pickup truck drove down the drive, drawing to a halt in the parking lot where Braun's house once stood. The guy who got out was huge, rivalling Atticus in height. He stretched and lifted his hand in a wave before sticking a Stetson on his head and sauntering over.

“This is who we've been waiting for?” Loki asked quietly.

“It is indeed.” Hand already extended, Braun stepped forward to meet the newcomer. “Everyone, this is Evander Ledston. He’s the man responsible for the redesign and construction of the club.” They shook hands in the slow, measured way of friends. “Evander, these are the Avalon Masters; Jasper, Thane, Atticus, Saul, Liam, and Loki. This is Zeke,” Braun added without pause, gesturing to him. “We’re hoping to convince him to take on the Master title in time for opening night.”

Ledston inclined his head. “Good to meet you all.”

Zeke blinked and stared at Braun. They wanted him to be a Master? That was a kick in the nuts, all right. The most he’d hoped for was his old job as part-time bartender, but he hadn’t let his hopes rise.

Being a Master wasn’t about privilege or buying his way into a position of power. It came with responsibilities, not only for whatever sub he played with, but for all who entered the doors.

“Won’t take much convincing,” he muttered, giving Evander a thorough appraisal.

Six-foot-six, at a guess. Early forties, blond hair beneath the hat and trimmed in a neat beard. The guy was work fit, his muscles subtly displayed in jeans and a cotton T-shirt. Dark brown eyes touched on every man there, taking their measure as they did the same to him.

“I understand this is a difficult time for you. A new club is exciting, but when it’s built on the bones of a place that meant a lot to you, it’s bittersweet.” Evander took his time examining the building’s exterior with a critical eye. “I was honored when Braun asked me to take this project on. Our walk-through today is the final step before I sign off on it. If there is anything you don’t like, anything that feels out of place or doesn’t fit in with your perception of the club, just let me know.”

Unease settled in Zeke’s gut. He hadn’t been back here since the day

Avalon exploded around him; he'd felt no desire to visit a crater in the ground, even if he'd been able to before the rebuild began. There were only ghosts here.

"Before we go in," Braun said somberly, "I have a question for all of you. Yes, you too," he told Zeke. "Before the old club was destroyed, it was home away from home for us. I believe you felt the same."

Yeah, he had. The highlight of his week had been his nights behind the bar, connecting with people who'd grown to be friends.

"Evander wants to expand into building BDSM clubs as his pet project. His private pet project," Braun added with a wry smile. "He's offered to buy half of Avalon, to run it in partnership."

Oh, that wasn't going down too well, Zeke mused, glancing at the men around him. There were varying expressions of suspicion, and outright hostility from Jasper. Understandably, the Masters were feeling proprietary over what they considered theirs—after all, they'd been waiting three years for the grand unveiling.

"If I sell, I'll hold the controlling percentage. My counteroffer is this... Avalon should stay in the hands of everyone who knows it best. Keeping thirty-three percent for myself, Evander would take thirty-two percent. That leaves five percent for each of you. The only condition is that the shares come back to me if you don't want them anymore."

"Well, shit, Braun." Jasper blinked slowly. "What universe did you wake up in this morning?"

Zeke sighed as his friends contemplated the generous offer. The truth was, as much as he loved Avalon, he didn't know if this version would live up to his expectations, or if the memories would stay away.

The only thing he wanted was gone. Long, long gone.

Olivia.

He zoned out, losing himself in snapshots of time. His favorite was waking from an induced coma, disorientated and in pain, to gaze up into worried hazel eyes. So pretty, so emotive, that even her shock of spiky blue hair hadn't been enough to distract him from them.

The angel who'd guided him back to the land of the living, then flown away without a word.

“So, we're in agreement. Zeke?”

Without thinking, he answered, “Yeah, sure.”

“Excellent.” Braun's grin encompassed his face as anticipation bloomed in his eyes. “I'll get the paperwork drawn up. Welcome to your new family business. Evander, if you'll lead us through and show us what your crews have done.”

“My pleasure.” He tipped the Stetson back a fraction, gesturing to a house across the fields surrounding the club. “As you can see, we've relocated Braun's home over there for more privacy, and to put distance between the two main elements of his life.” He circled his finger to indicate where they stood. “We extended the parking lot considerably. Braun explained how crowded it was with the emergency service vehicles that day, when the lot was mainly empty. Had it been during club hours, there wouldn't have been adequate room to accommodate them all.”

If those explosives had gone off during club hours, Zeke thought bitterly, there'd have been a hell of a lot more than three dead. He stretched his shoulders as the scar tissue seemed to contract tightly.

They walked as a group toward the building, with Evander pointing out the finer details of the outside changes. The entrance was no longer at the end of barn one, but more central, where barn two should have been, and had been upgraded to a portico that looked inviting and appealing, luring members in.

Instead of following his friends inside, Zeke drifted to the left, his steps slow and hesitant as he approached the spot where he'd lain, cheek against the gravel, with the body of the man who'd sacrificed his own life to save his weighing him down.

A cold chill spread through him as he crouched, one knee on the tarmac, to press his palm against the hot surface.

Maybe he shouldn't have waited so long to do this.

For a long moment, he stayed like that, saying a silent thank you to a man who, although he'd possessed unlikable traits, had shown his cowardice was only skin deep. It wasn't the coward or the bully who Zeke mourned, but the potential of the rest of him.

He jolted when a hand landed lightly on his shoulder.

"I've stopped here several times myself," Liam said quietly. "Usually once the crews have finished for the day, and it's quiet. I know he's not here anymore, hasn't been for a long time, but..."

"This is where he died."

"Yes. I'm not a man who puts great faith in an afterlife or ghosts, but part of me hopes that he visits if he can. Makes it easier to believe he's not really gone, whether it's right or not." The grip on Zeke's shoulder tightened. "We never blamed you, Zeke. Me or Sierra. There was never a reason to set that weight on you."

"He died because of me. If I hadn't gone down..."

"He wouldn't have died with his column stacked on the plus side. We all know it, and now the grief has abated, it's not as difficult to admit. Wyatt had issues. Inflicting pain on Sierra was his way of boosting his self-esteem. It was a bad habit; one we were working on breaking. Big heart in some respects, but his spine was undoubtedly weak. Saving you at least made his death less... needless."

Zeke sighed and rose, allowing Liam to drape his arm over his shoulders. Talking about this made him uncomfortable, because he hadn't made peace with it yet. "Speaking of Sierra, how's she doing? Are the fertility treatments working?"

"She's giving up hope. I've told her, it's early days yet, but every time she takes a test and it comes back negative, her heart breaks in her eyes."

That wasn't hard to imagine. Liam's sub was soft-hearted, incredibly innocent, and a little stunner. In Zeke's opinion, only an idiot wouldn't be able to see exactly what she was beneath that beard. It was just a kick in the ass that the cause of her hirsutism was affecting her ability to have kids. "Stress won't help."

Liam snorted as they crossed over to the new entrance. "It gets worse whenever one of the girls announces she's pregnant again. I suggested adoption; she cried so much, she lost her voice for a day. Apparently, if everyone else can have their own babies, she should too."

"If only life wasn't a bitch," Zeke murmured, casting his eye over the varnished wood of the portico. The shade it offered was refreshing, and he spotted several small spotlights recessed into the roof to light the way in the dark.

They walked up the steps and through open, tinted glass doors to join the others.

"Well, this is different," Liam grouched, obviously perturbed by the wide, semi-circle desk in front of them.

"It is," Evander agreed. "Braun wanted the club modernizing a bit, especially when it comes to security and the safety of club patrons. We've introduced a new system where a member produces their card and scans it here," he informed them, tapping his finger on a small square of glass in the middle of the desktop. "That brings up all their relevant data, including

current membership status. This is followed up by a thumb-print scan as confirmation.”

“So, we’re in the Pentagon?” Jasper muttered.

Grinning, Evander shook his head. “No retinal scans, I’m afraid. The simplicity of the system means that subs can man the desk. They can’t override the computer to let anyone sneak in, and those doors won’t open from this side without the scan or a pin number that only the owners—which is now all of us—will have.”

“Isn’t that a fire hazard?” Thane queried.

“Good question, and yes, it is. Which is why there are manual overrides installed on both sides of the door.” Facing them, Evander gestured to their left. “The office and storage room are that way. Locker rooms are behind the desk, male and female. They lead straight into the club from the other end, so the doors work on the same system.”

Swiping a credit card-sized piece of plastic over the glass, he pressed his thumb to the top corner. With an almost inaudible buzz, the double doors on Zeke’s right unlocked. “Come on through.”

Like a little flock of bewildered sheep, they followed him again.

When the doors snicked shut behind the last man through, they all stood in shocked silence, taking in the newness.

It smelled wrong to Zeke. That was what struck him first; the scent of fresh paint, new carpet—hell, even the furniture carried the same unsettling odor. It didn’t help that the layout had changed. Gone were the stage and seating pit, and the bar was no longer to his right.

“Braun explained that the social area was where most of the Doms brought their subs for aftercare after a scene.” Still walking, Evander turned to a door where the booth used to be and stepped through into a short corridor painted cozy yellow, striding down it efficiently. “Changing rooms,” he said,

pointing to two doors on the left, then pushed through the far door into a bright room lit with natural light. “This is the new aftercare space. The glass is treated so no one can see in, but members have a clear view of the sky. Members have day beds, couches, armchairs, a whole array of comfort at their disposal.”

Not just that, Zeke noted curiously. They’d put a small version of the bar in the corner, small enough for one person to man. “We’re serving alcohol in here?”

Braun told him, “Water and juice, mainly, along with a small selection of alcohol. Nothing compared to what we’ll stock in the main room. We’ll keep comfort food and med kits in here. Additional blankets, whatever is needed.”

“And who’s running this setup?”

“We’ll have a rota going for service subs.”

Smart, using the submissives who got off on being helpful and pleasing people.

“Shatterproof glass?” Atticus wondered.

“Yes. Dominic is out of the picture now, but there are still those who hate BDSM and what it stands for, not to mention our LGBTQ members. All glass is bulletproof, and as many of the building materials we could source are flame retardant.”

“Any questions, comments, proposed changes?” Evander asked.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Saul replied, a note of approval in his voice. “It’s quieter, more peaceful. Watching the stars while waiting for a sub to stir doesn’t seem like a bad thing.”

“Perfect.” Pulling his phone from his pocket, Evander made a note. “Okay, back to the main space.”

Zeke rubbed his hand over his face. This was going to be a long afternoon.

Olivia

Two years was an awful long time to be away from home.

As her ancient Ford Focus put-put-putted its way up her neglected drive, Olivia calculated the distance between the hood and the garage door. Pumping the brakes with her foot, she simultaneously yanked on the e-brake, cringing as the heap of junk stopped a bare inch from cruising straight through the barrier.

How she hadn't died a dozen times on her way home, she didn't know.

Guardian angels, maybe.

Switching off the engine, she sat and stared at the place she'd once called home. The yard was hellishly overgrown, the paintwork was deplorable, and only God knew how much dust was waiting for her inside.

Two years ago, she'd gotten a call that threw her life completely out of whack. She'd been happy, sitting with Zeke while he was awake and working remotely when he slept. Their chats were the highlight of her day, every day, for months.

Then her stepfather had blown it all to hell with one phone call. Her mother was in the hospital, eight hundred miles away. Minor injuries from a car crash, but investigations into a fractured forearm brought to light a vicious and unbeatable bone cancer.

Ever the dutiful daughter, no matter how much she hated the asshole her mother had married when Olivia was just ten years old, she'd dropped everything and gone to be with her mom.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the tears that rose swiftly.

Zeke hadn't responded to the note she'd left him while he was asleep. She should have woken him and explained, but he'd been so tired, and the pain

meds messed with his sleep cycles.

He hadn't called her or written to the address she noted down. No emails pinged her inbox with his name on them, not even in the spam folder which she'd checked religiously.

Luckily, Atticus hadn't ghosted her as quickly. Not only was he generous enough to let her continue working away from the office, but he also hadn't docked her pay. Not even after the first couple of months turned into six, then twelve, then two whole years.

Now, her mother was dead and buried, and Olivia was broke.

Every cent she earned got sucked straight into medical bills, which was why her car had ten percent braking capacity, a growing hole in the passenger side floor where rust was slowly gnawing through the metal, and about two miles' worth of gas left in the tank.

With a sigh, she unfastened her seatbelt and threaded it back into position; the thing that retracted it automatically was broken. The door creaked open, threatening to drop if she pushed it too far, so she slipped out carefully, gingerly clicking it shut.

Retrieving her laptop case from the trunk, Olivia knuckled her left eye tiredly and walked up the sun-cracked path to her front door. Honestly, the way her luck was going, she was surprised someone hadn't broken in, robbed her blind, and left her to come home to a disaster.

It would be dark in an hour, but she was past caring. A blistering argument between her and Jared, her stepfather, had worn her down to the bone before she even got in her car for the hellish drive home. She just hadn't been able to put up with his drunken ramblings about how she never did anything for him.

"No," she muttered bitterly to herself, "I've just paid a hundred thousand dollars of medical bills off for him, with more due. I've been paying the rent, my mortgage, the goddamn beer he downs like water. But, of course, I *never*

do anything.”

The key slid into the lock, but it took some effort to turn. After giving the door a bump with her hip that would likely bruise, and jiggling the handle around, it finally spun the tumblers open.

A shower and a bed were all she hoped for. She couldn't remember what was in her cupboards, but she supposed whatever was in there suffered the same fate as everything in her refrigerator.

She wasn't the best at remembering to do grocery shopping, anyway.

The first thing she did when the door opened was sneeze. Loudly, painfully, three times in succession. The draft from her entrance sent dust motes tumbling down the hallway, captured by the gleam of light from outside.

It smelled musty, stale, and too damn hot.

Before the alarm started screaming, she keyed in the code.

There was no mail to gather; she'd done the smart thing and rerouted it to her mom's house. Not that she ever got something exciting, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Everything was exactly how she'd left it, down to the cereal bowl she'd used the morning she left. It was possibly classed as a science project now, what with all the green and icky mold growing on it. Was it *moving*?

With a wince of disgust, she picked it up as though germ gremlins might crawl up her arm and infect her with syphilis born of her own laziness. Stomping her foot on the pedal of the kitchen trash bin, she almost retched. Maybe she should've made time to take the trash out.

The bowl dropped into the can without hesitation.

In all honesty, she should've booked a room at the nearest motel for the night, but she wasn't sure the cheapest one she could afford wouldn't be as grungy—if not dirtier—as her own home. At least here, her own security

system was sufficient enough to keep her safe; a flimsy wooden door with a weak lock and short chain didn't offer a good night's sleep.

Tomorrow, setting her life back on track was her top priority...

After cleaning, she amended silently.

Without hunting through the cupboards or taking a peek in the refrigerator—why bother when it was probably just full of another species of mold capable of resisting a nuclear bomb?—she left the kitchen behind and walked down the hall, stifling another round of sneezing.

The pictures on the walls were coated in dust, but seeing them again was like saying hello to old friends, ones she hadn't seen in too long. There were a few of her with her mom, but mainly they were just prints she'd found and liked in thrift stores.

A little silent company for a woman who didn't have friends outside work, or really socialize with the coworkers she got along with. Dating was completely off the agenda after she'd seen her mother's relationship with Jared deteriorate.

Her computer was her best friend.

It was pathetic, really, but she didn't know how to change it. Truthfully, did she even want to? The outside world and the people in it were unknown entities, and she knew from experience that a high percentage of the population was hostile.

The last two years had shown her how selfish people were, how strained the system keeping everyone alive had become. As a research tech for Heisler Security, she delved into the records of despicably bad men, so she wasn't naïve about what went on, but it was a different story to be out there with them.

Teenagers with guns and knives. Men with bombs.

She'd rather keep her head down and away from nasty projectiles.

Ugh, that reminded her. Patting her jeans for her phone, she pulled it out and pressed speed dial one. Pushing open the door to her bedroom as it rang, she wrinkled her nose at the smell. Dank, damp. Worse than in the kitchen.

“Sonic!” Her boss’s gravelly tone resonated with concern. “Is everything okay?”

“Ah... yes, sir.” No, not really. She hadn’t kept him in the loop for over a month, which he wasn’t going to be pleased about. “I just thought you should know I’m back on home turf. I’ll be in the office first thing.”

Deadly, heavy silence.

Yes, not impressed, she thought with a grimace.

“Back in Phoenix?” he demanded.

“Home, sir.”

What sounded like a coffee mug thudded onto a wooden surface. “That shithole?”

Olivia’s brows drew together. It might not be much, but her home was her everything. She’d bought it cheap with her first year’s earnings as his employee, making improvements as she struggled to squirrel away funds for a rainy day.

Her savings were gone now, eaten up by her mom’s medical bills because Jared was a lazy bastard who did low-energy jobs for cash, then spent it on beer and weed. Her monthly paychecks from Atticus since she’d left were in the same ginormous money pit.

“I’m sending someone over for you. That place isn’t fit to stay in, Olivia.”

Ah shit, he was using her given name. Everyone in the office knew that Sunday names were bad if they were trusted enough to have handles. “H-How would you know, Atticus?”

“Because I’ve had someone keeping an eye on the place, which is why I know it’s about fucking ready to drop on your head from termites and damp.”

He was muttering to himself, obviously displeased. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me you were coming home before now? I’d have had someone pick you up from the airport, settle you in a hotel until new living arrangements could be made.”

She didn’t want new living arrangements, she thought with a pout. She wanted her home, her things, and her mom. But anxiety rippled through her as she gnawed on her bottom lip. “I, ah, didn’t fly.”

The deadly silence returned, only this time it throbbed with fury.

“Please,” he said in a cold, intimidating tone, “*please*, tell me you haven’t driven that hunk of junk Ford eight hundred miles.”

“Um... okay?”

A growl vibrated down the line, doing crazy things to her insides. He muttered something that sounded like, “About time I found you a fucking Dom.”

Her heartbeat pulsed between her shoulder blades. Making people angry was at the top of her *Don’t do* list, but inciting Atticus Heisler into a rage was on a list all its own.

“I’ve called in a favor. Someone will be with you in fifteen minutes. Get in the truck without an argument, Olivia. We’ll hash this out when you arrive.”

Arrive where? There? Oh God, no. She was too tired to battle with him tonight, and there was no doubt Alicia was still awake. Being hit emotionally from all sides by a furious man and his energetic wife wasn’t how she wanted to spend the evening.

“But, sir—”

“Without an argument,” he repeated darkly, then cut the call.

“Oh God,” she moaned, dropping her head in her hands.

Why hadn’t she just walked into the office in the morning? He’d have

been mad, sure, but at least she'd have avoided the escort. Which poor guy had he drafted out of the blue for babysitting duties?

Grit would tease her all the way out into the sticks where Atticus lived, no doubt. That was preferable to Christophe's stony silence. Since the day five members of Alpha team were brutally killed on a mission, he hadn't been the same.

It didn't matter that the outcome wouldn't have changed if he'd been there, she thought glumly, Christophe's shoulders were taking the weight of responsibility. Stupidly, in her opinion, if it even factored in.

Probably not, seeing as how she was just a lowly tech, not one of the ball-busting, danger-craving, knife-between-her-teeth mercenaries on Atticus's payroll.

Shoving her phone back in her pocket, Olivia decided she might as well gather some clean clothes to take with her for the night. Her suitcase was still in the trunk of her car, but she'd been in such a rush to get away from Jared, she hadn't done any laundry before she made her escape.

A stain on the carpet near the shabbily built closet drew her attention. Frowning, she opened the doors and gagged without warning, immersed in a strong wave of mildew. Her clothes were covered in it, thick with mold.

What the hell?

The water heater. Fuck, the water heater was behind the wall.

Cursing a blue streak she rarely allowed herself, she hurried from the bedroom into the hall, then through the next door, almost tripping over the lifted linoleum in the bathroom. The smell was just as bad in here, and she was beginning to realize how screwed her life was becoming by the second.

The tall cupboard in the corner of the tiny space housed the heater, and the door was already open. Something catastrophic had happened to the pipes, but someone must have come in and taken care of it.

Atticus's man, she thought. It required someone with a brain and quick fingers to get through her security system without the code, and they'd taken the time to re-engage it once they were done.

How much damage was there?

Closing her eyes, it dawned on her that Atticus hadn't lied when he said the house was ready to come down on her head. There'd been too many faults with it before she'd gone to be with her mom, faults she hadn't taken care of in the time since. Add in the water damage, the mold... her house was probably going to be condemned.

Selling her car wouldn't bring in more than a couple hundred bucks, tops. There were no valuables to pawn for a quick influx of cash to begin damage control, and her next paycheck was two weeks and three days away. She supposed there was always the option of standing on a street corner, flashing her legs at the local, horny, single men.

Losing her virginity that way made her stomach jitter unhappily.

"All right, I just need to sit down when my head isn't so jumbled and come up with a plan." She began to pace, her sneakers dragging on the ruined linoleum. "Can't fix the house because I'm broke. Can't sell the car because it's a piece of shit. Can't live in a wonderful palace of cardboard boxes because the stupid sun will set it on fire, just like the rest of my life."

Huh. Maybe hacking into a bank and siphoning off a few hundred thousand dollars while no one was looking was an option. Hard work on her part, especially covering her tracks so they wouldn't paint a huge neon sign on her door, but her monetary problem would be fixed.

Temporarily, until Atticus figured it out and reprimanded her severely.

Grand larceny wasn't on her lifetime achievement list.

There was a sharp rat-rat-rat on the front door, heralding her babysitter's arrival.

Olivia sighed and stared forlornly at the heater. It was getting late, and her body was feeling the strain of driving each of those eight hundred miles. There was nothing left to do here now, not until her brain cleared, and her possessions wouldn't be any less ruined by another night of mildew-infested air.

God, Grit better keep his mouth shut tonight; she wasn't in the mood for teasing.

Trudging down the hall, she tried to reassure herself that she'd lived for two years without anything in this house. Sentimental value was greater than the financial worth, that was all.

Her heart quivered with joy before plummeting to the bottom of her stomach, in the same goddamn breath as she opened the door.

Atticus was a dead man.

The man standing outside was older, of course, but the lines on his face were more from stress and pain than actual aging. There were scars down one side of his cheek and neck where the heat from an explosion had kissed him. His beard was gray, like his short-cropped hair, and neatly trimmed.

He gave her a crooked smile, his sea mist-green eyes meeting hers without recognition. "Hello there. It seems I'm your ride this evening."

Blinking once, Olivia found she'd lost her voice. There wasn't even a vague spark of familiarity in his gaze, yet her idiotic heart took one look at him and flopped at his feet.

"It's okay, I'm Atticus-approved. I'll get you where you're goin' without a fuss."

Taking her chances with a rot-infested house seemed more sensible than getting in a vehicle with him. She remembered what his hand felt like between hers as she clung to it, willing him to stay strong and come back whole from the coma. The breadth of his palm, the length of his fingers. How

rough the callouses were.

She made a sound like a trapped guinea pig, much to her disgust.

Zeke's brow furrowed in puzzlement. With the confidence of a man who dominated his surroundings, he reached out and pressed the pad of his thumb lightly to the underside of her chin. Eyes narrowing into pale jade slits, he studied her face.

Now there was recognition.

His hand dropped; he took a step away abruptly. "Olivia."

Of course, he wouldn't want to touch the living, breathing reminder of how vulnerable he'd been in the months after he got his tight ass blown up. Men didn't like that, did they? It wasn't like he was going to smile brilliantly and say, *'Hey, remember me? The last time you saw me, I was riddled with pain, and had a tube up my—'*

"You look different." It was an accusation, not an observation.

She did? Baffled, Olivia tried to think what could be different about her when she hadn't had time to *do* anything. Her days had been consumed by long hours in the hospital; most of her nights, too. When she wasn't by her mom's side, she'd tried to catch up on her sleep, usually with one eye on the door in case Jared tried to come in.

Maybe Zeke thought she looked older? Haggard, exhausted, weary.

She couldn't refute any of it, because that was exactly how she felt.

"The blue suited you," he said gruffly. "Where are your bags?"

The blue? She almost laughed. Yeah, that was a big change. In his mind, she probably had the short, spiky hairdo that was fitting for a caffeine-loving, computer-orientated geek, but Olivia the makeshift-hospice nurse was back to her original mahogany-red color, the curly locks down to her shoulders.

Her voice was still AWOL.

Issuing a warning growl of frustration, Zeke shot her a disapproving look

that made her want to curl up and cry. “I haven’t got all night, Olivia. Tell me where your bags are so I can put them in the goddamn truck.”

What had *she* done to rile his temper? *He* was the one who hadn’t bothered to stay in touch, even after she explained the situation—with a brief overview of her feelings for him—in her note. It hadn’t been all hearts and flowers, sure, because how the hell did she tell the first guy who’d ever held her attention that she thought she was in love with him?

Scoffing, her heart wilting, she shook her head. No, she wasn’t going to put up with this. Screw Atticus and his orders. Fuck Zeke and his unwelcoming attitude. They didn’t know what she’d been through, how fucking *tired* she was—right down to the soul.

Without a word passing her lips, she stepped back into the house and closed the door, engaging the locks before she turned her back against the wood, using it to brace her descent to the floor.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, she pressed her face to them and fought back a hiccupping sob. The door shuddered with several, firm thumps, but he didn’t belong in here. This was *her* house for as long as it remained upright.

It was like having another clock counting down the minutes until her world imploded. There’d been one hanging over her head as her mother grew sicker, frailer, as the time slipped past in an unceasing parade of tests, bed baths, chemotherapy, and pain.

The first tear fell, damning her.

Like a centuries-dormant volcano, sobs erupted viciously, hurting her chest with the force of them. Face already wet, she didn’t have the energy to wipe away the tears dripping off her chin.

One straw too many.

The organized heap of things to deal with at a later date tipped sharply to

the left, crushing her shoulders with the weight of everything she'd fought to keep at bay.

“Olivia, open the damn door. Olivia!” More pounding, angry and insistent.

When her phone rang, she barely heard it. The sound was distant to her ears, on the other side of a barrier that kept her safe from the turmoil of her reality. It stopped, then started again. Stopped... and stayed quiet.

Struggling to breathe through the constriction in her chest, Olivia rolled onto her side. Her nose was stuffed up enough that the smell of damp carpet was almost bearable. Still, she lay there with her cheek pressed to it, gasping for air as the tears just kept coming.

Something beeped musically from a long way away.

She closed her eyes, wishing it was morning already. Night was the worst time for her emotions to claw to the surface, when her defenses were down, and the few reserves she had left dwindled into nothing. Somehow, she'd always pulled herself together, squashing the pain down again until it couldn't control her.

Coming back was a mistake.

Keening quietly to herself, she stopped fighting. It only hurt her more, and for what purpose? Whoever said a person had the power to guide their life where they wanted it was full of shit. Rich, stinking, foolish shit.

If that were true, wouldn't everyone steer themselves around the bad stuff? A vision of the world population skidding around corners in go-karts, trying not to crash into giant R.I.P headstones came into her head. There wouldn't be death or crime or grief.

By the time the wave of mourning passed, Olivia was half-asleep, her mouth open, and her fingers kneading the carpet for comfort.

Footsteps clomped toward her, coming down the hall from her bedroom. The heavy, angry stomp of boots.

Thinking she was dreaming, she refused to open her eyes when sleep was within her reach. No one could get in without the alarm system screaming its tiny components out, so the only thing she needed to worry about—if she was of a mind to—was catching an illness from the germs probably crawling up her nose right now.

“Need a goddamn keeper, girl,” Zeke growled, his voice far too clear and close.

Chapter Two

Zeke

Why had no one warned him how difficult it would be not to touch her if he ever saw her again?

Zeke rolled his eyes at himself. No one warned him because he hadn't told anyone about his overwhelming crush on a blue-haired angel with a bewitchingly innocent hazel gaze—no man wanted to be laughed at by his friends for lusting over a woman who was twenty-five years his junior.

In his head, Olivia was already scooped up in his arms, her face against his neck as he opened the door and carried her out to his truck.

In reality, he stood over her with his arms folded over his chest, assessing the situation to see if he stood a chance of getting her to Atticus without so much as a brush of his skin against hers.

Damn her, she hadn't been taking care of herself, wherever she'd been hiding for two years. He'd seen healthier corpses, certainly ones with more color in their cheeks. The change to her hair had thrown him; the last time he saw her, her hair was royal blue, cut short and fashioned into little spikes.

In all honesty, he preferred the rich red it was now, and the length.

He liked a good handful to hold as he fucked a sub from behind.

Shaking that thought aside, he decided she wasn't fit to walk. He didn't think she even realized he was there; she likely believed her alarm system would keep him out, but one phone call to Atticus and one of his tech wizards was able to access and disable it remotely.

The bedroom window had been shut, but not locked. It was child's play to crawl through it rather than attempt to break down a damn door. He was too old to throw himself into hard objects—his body tended to break instead of bend nowadays.

“G’way.”

An eyebrow lifted in disapproval. Cursing Atticus for begging this favor, Zeke rolled up his sleeves, exposing the fresh tattoo Loki had kindly done for him only a month ago. He stared at the slim line of a woman’s back, dressed in white. Her shoulders were bare of the material, but wings sprouted from them, draping down to frame her body.

Her hair was blue and pointed, her profile hidden.

The tattoo was a reminder that while God might send angels down to guide a man through the worst times of his life, He didn’t let them stay long.

Olivia slapped weakly at him as he pulled her into a sitting position, then onto her feet. The scars on his back twinged as he moved quickly, looping his arm around her waist when her legs immediately gave out. Keeping her pinned to his side, he opened the door and dragged her through it, resetting the deadbolt before he slammed it shut.

From the smell in there, a thief would have to be desperate to take anything.

“Someone needs to take you over his lap and smack some sense into your ass,” he muttered grimly, swinging her up into his arms for the short journey to his truck. “Once a day, every damn day, until you learn how to look after yourself.”

Her head thunked onto his shoulder. “No, thanks.”

“Wasn’t plannin’ on givin’ you a choice.” A lie, of course. BDSM was renowned for its solid foundation in trust and consent. Double emphasis on *consent*. “Be quiet and think about how you’re going to explain this to Atticus.”

She huffed in disgust. “My pers’nal life has nothing to do with him.”

“Think he might disagree with you on that.” Carrying her past the utter wreck of a car in her driveaway, he set his jaw and took her to the passenger

side of his gleaming black Dodge Ram. The fucking gas guzzler was his absolute pride and joy. “You gonna sleep your way to his place?”

“Mmm. Maybe?”

That was a yes, he thought as her voice softened the *Ms.* Stepping back, he shifted her until he managed to hook his fingers into the handle of the back door and yank it open without dropping her. “When was the last time you slept properly?”

“Long time ago.” She made a protesting sound when he set her down on the wide bench seat, her hand catching his shirt. Gentle persuasion encouraged her to let go and fall back until she stretched out across the leather.

Undeniably needed a keeper, he decided with a fierce scowl. God knew where she’d been for the past two years; he wasn’t really interested, or so he told himself. Her leaving had ripped a hole open in a heart already crippled by so much loss, and in response, he’d shut it down and barricaded it.

Plucking a jacket from the footwell, Zeke folded it into a square, then handed it to her. “Put that under your head.” He grunted in approval when she obeyed sleepily. “Now, close your eyes and get some rest.”

She nodded slowly, then rubbed her cheek into the jacket with a hum of delight. Within seconds, she snuffled contentedly, and those red, swollen eyes fluttered closed.

He waited a beat, two, but she didn’t stir.

The door shut with a click, not quite latching, so he bumped it with his hip. Rounding the back of the truck, he climbed in and started the engine, remembering to turn down the music before Falling In Reverse’s *Voices In My Head* woke Sleeping Beauty.

It wasn’t the longest drive, less than an hour if the traffic stayed light, but by Christ, it felt decades long.

Most of the time, Zeke's attention was split between the turmoil consuming his thoughts, shooting glances in the rearview at his young charge, and keeping his eyes on the road.

When Olivia left, he'd asked Atticus if he knew where she'd gone, and why. His friend only shook his head in the negative, and Zeke hadn't asked again. He wasn't a man who begged, not even when something deep inside him yearned so fiercely to hear her voice or catch a whiff of her scent.

His nose wrinkled, the horrendous odor from her house still stuck in his senses. From what he'd seen in her bedroom, the house and its contents remained untouched all the time she'd been gone, which forced him to ask the question, why had she come back?

None of his business. *None* of his fucking business, he reminded himself angrily. So, he'd fallen for her like a hormone-riddled teenager. It wasn't like they'd made proclamations of love to each other. Hell, they hadn't even kissed—unsurprisingly, seeing as he was old enough to be her goddamn father.

Olivia was a free woman with the world and its many oysters at her feet.

It was his own stupid fault he'd allowed himself to dream of her, knowing she was too young. He was fifty-five years old this year, gray as the ass end of a racoon, set in his ways—which included more than just spanking willing submissives—and if he was brutally honest, too banged up and scarred for someone as precious as her.

So, he drove, determined to kick her ass out at Atticus's house and make a quick getaway. The Daddy Dom was experienced in handling distraught women, and it was becoming clear that while he might not have known where Olivia had gone in the beginning, he'd certainly gained that information somewhere down the line.

It was dark by the time he hit the brakes outside the house. A while back,

it had been extended to add several more rooms onto an already impressive abode, creating room for all the Heisler babies Lisha kept popping out.

As he cut the engine, he resisted glancing back to check on Olivia. Babysitting duty was over and, as he vacated the truck, he was pleased to see Atticus coming out of the front door. That pleasure dimmed when he saw the kid tucked into the cradle of one beefy arm.

“You take the girl,” Zeke rasped. “Give me the kid.”

“Sorry, bud, just got him to settle down.” Grinning, Atticus lifted his eyebrow as he rocked his son gently from side to side. Link was a notoriously light sleeper and waking him resulted in a screaming fit that could go on for up to three hours, which was his current record. “Did she give you any trouble?”

“I had to climb through her bedroom window because she was having a breakdown behind the front door,” he replied flatly, crossing his arms over his chest. It was his defensive maneuver, the one he used when discussing topics he really wanted to avoid. “She slept the whole way here.”

“Good. Why don’t you bring her in? I’ll get us a beer while we wait for her to wake up, then we can discuss what’s going to happen.” Already turning, Atticus paused when Zeke cleared his throat meaningfully. “Problem?”

“I’m not staying. ‘Preciate the offer, but she’s your responsibility now.”

“Is she? A shame then, that I’m transferring that responsibility in the morning.”

His eyes narrowed. “To whom?”

“Darius is looking for someone to take care of. Now that he and Tabitha have decided to make the move to Phoenix, he’s expressed an interest in exploring BDSM. With Avalon reopening soon, I think Olivia would be an ideal candidate for him to practice aftercare on.”

Blinding rage seared his vision with red. “The man fillets men faster than a dockworker guts tuna.”

“He’s an efficient killer,” Atticus agreed as he walked away. “Perhaps he’ll prove himself to be an even better Dom.”

Speechless, practically chewing on his tongue, Zeke thought of Jasper’s half-brother. After the explosion, once his brain stopped trying to kill itself and he’d been discharged, Jasper and Atticus had sat him down and explained the whole sordid mess, give or take a few details he was sure he didn’t want to know anyway.

Jasper was a trained assassin, but his body count was nowhere near as high as Darius claimed his to be. Still, he was a sadist, through and through, and he’d been lucky to find the perfect masochist in Anarchy.

What were the chances that Darius’ sexual proclivities weren’t equally driven by pain?

Practice aftercare? She wasn’t a damn doll the asshole could beat until she cried so he could learn how to soothe her, for fuck’s sake! A man either knew how to cuddle a sated sub or he didn’t, and it infuriated Zeke that Atticus believed Olivia was...

He growled and started after his friend, then hesitated.

Goddamn it, he couldn’t leave her alone in the truck.

Muttering under his breath, he yanked open the back door. Mouth open again, breathing heavily, she was mentally and physically wiped out. That fact gentled his hands as he grasped her ankles and pulled her to the edge of the seat. With an arm under her butt, he slid his other hand under her back and lifted her against him.

Her head found the perfect spot on his shoulder, her hair pressing against his neck. She snuffled softly; her body completely limp.

Zeke used his elbow to push the door closed, then stalked to the house

with her pressed securely against him. She smelled faintly of cinnamon and mildew, an oddly disturbing scent. His cock rose regardless, only to be ignored.

The girl needed her ass slapped, a hot shower, and a full belly before she was put to bed for a week and told to rest.

None of that was his damn job.

The house was quiet when he walked in, only the soft clink of glass alerting him to Att's presence in the kitchen. There were two beers on the counter amongst the chaos of a pregnant Little and two young children.

"The couch is made up in my office," Atticus said as he headed off again. "Make her comfortable, and I'll join you with the beers after I put Link down."

Gritting his teeth, Zeke followed Atticus down the long hallway, cutting right into the stylish office. He almost tripped over the beast Alicia called Snog, a massive chunk of pure muscle masquerading as a dog.

Only a year ago, the mutt probably would have savaged his leg, but intense training by one of Att's team had turned him from a mannerless whelp into a fierce, controllable guard dog whose family was his entire reason for existing.

"Hey, Snog." Striding over the grumbling animal, Zeke saw that the couch was indeed bedded up with pillows and blankets. Some kind soul had left a stuffie tucked between the cushions—Alicia possessed a compassionate heart.

Depositing Olivia on the makeshift bed, Zeke sighed and arranged her so she wouldn't wake with a crick in her neck. A moment later, he was fiddling with the pillows, positioning them so they formed a cradle for her head and shoulders. He debated covering her with the blankets, then chose one and spread it over her. It took ten seconds of procrastinating before he tucked it

down the side of her, shifting it down slightly so she wouldn't get too hot.

Finally, he picked up the patchwork stuffie in his hands, studying the button eyes and stitched smile. The rabbit wore a pair of overalls, his long ears incredibly soft and silky. Feeling foolish, he tucked it under her arm.

"Thought so," Atticus rumbled in a low voice, apparently pleased.

Plastering on a scowl, Zeke shot him a disgruntled glare. "You thought what?"

"The two of you. Always wondered if something happened between you at the hospital. The first couple of months, Sonic didn't leave your bedside if she didn't have a reason. Then she wanted to work remotely so she could still be with you, even when she had to work."

"Nothing happened."

"Nothing physical, maybe, but I think you both did something you didn't intend. Her thoughts were pathetically easy to read; she wears her heart on her sleeve when she's distracted, but you... you're a cagey bastard. Never gave her an inch, did you?"

"There wasn't an inch to give. I'm fifty-five. I don't put the moves on women half my goddamn age." His eyes slid over to her of their own volition. "She's a sweetheart, she doesn't need to be saddled with an old coot."

Tsking, Atticus crossed the threshold and held out one of the beers. "Bet your heart doesn't care if she's thirty or sixty. Age doesn't matter, Zeke. Look at Jasper and Archie, me and Lisha. Sizeable differences in age, but we don't care. It's all about the *person*, not how many years longer you've been alive."

"She left." Taking the bottle, he drained half of it.

"She did. There were circumstances."

"I asked you if you knew why she left."

“You did,” Atticus agreed, sipping his own drink as he meandered to his desk chair. “And at the time you asked, I honestly didn’t know. If I remember correctly, it was the next day when she contacted me to explain.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

“You didn’t bother asking. I waited a week, figuring curiosity and missing her might spur you to set aside your pride, but you just carried on as though she’d never been here.” He ran his thumb over his lips. “She told me she left a note because you were asleep when she needed to leave, and she didn’t want to wake you.”

A note? This was the first time he’d heard anything about a note. “I don’t know if there was one or not, but there certainly wasn’t one when I woke. Besides, it’s a moot point now. Olivia left; now she’s back. You’ll get her house fixed, because that’s what you do. You fix everything.”

“The house is fucked,” Atticus stated flatly.

“The damp and mold can be removed; it’ll just take time and someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“That won’t fix the cracks in the foundation, the woodworm eating the place from the inside out, the deplorable state of the water pipes, or the fact that the roof is starting to cave in. It’s fucked,” Att repeated, “and Olivia will not be living there.”

“Gonna be a tight squeeze here, what with one big kid, two young children, and a baby on the way.”

“Exactly.” Jungle-green eyes bore into Zeke’s.

“Hotel, then. Or one of her coworkers can bunk her until she finds someplace else.”

A dark eyebrow flecked with silver rose in a questioning arch. “Olivia requires more than a bed to crash on, Zeke. It seems evident to me that the last couple of years have taken their toll on her.” Tipping his bottle toward

her, Atticus shook his head. “She’s alone, she needs help. She needs a goddamn Dom.”

“D’not,” the woman under discussion mumbled as she pushed herself into sitting. Her eyes were barely open, her face still slack with sleep. Her next sentence was a jumble of words that were meaningless.

“How the hell do you even know she’s submissive?” Zeke demanded incredulously. “Has she mentioned her latest trip to a kink club? Does she have handcuffs in her desk drawer and a bucket list of sexual activities to work through?”

“No!” Olivia said indignantly—or he thought she was aiming for indignant.

Adorable was more apt.

“How the hell do you *not*?” was Atticus’s reply.

Because he didn’t *want* to. The idea of Olivia being submissive clicked his Dom switch, and he hadn’t played since the week before Avalon was razed to ash and debris. Three years without the comfort of a warm body against his, of feeling a woman tremble when he gave her an order.

He missed the contact, the *connection* between himself and a compatible woman. Not just for sex, but to sate the yearning in his soul for a little while.

Fifty-five, he thought in disgust, with one childless marriage long behind him, and his ex-wife living her life several states away, with two teenagers and a husband who thought the sunshine shone out of her ass.

Olivia was a temptation he couldn’t afford to touch, one who’d already proved walking away without a word wasn’t a hardship. That didn’t exactly inspire trust, did it, and a dynamic was based on it.

Trust. Respect. Dominance and submission.

“If you truly believe she’s submissive, then find her a Dom. Avalon reopens on Friday; I’m sure there’ll be a whole host of eager Doms just

itchin' to get their hands on fresh blood.”

“You’d break each and every pair of hands that touched her.”

Zeke glowered, even though it was true. “Nothing to do with me who lays hands on her. She’s not submissive, and you’ll probably turn all those red curls white if you take her to the club. Just hook her up with a hotel, Att, and treat her like a goddamn adult.”

The Daddy Dom’s eyes slid to Zeke’s right, his lips twitching.

Glancing down, he saw Olivia by his side, swaying. Damn near asleep standing up.

If she was his, he’d ravage those luscious lips until they were plump and swollen. Grip her hips and circle her around in a slow dance back to the couch. While those dazed hazel eyes tried to focus on him, maybe he’d just put his mouth to the task of rolling them back in her head.

But she wasn’t his, and she shouldn’t be on her feet.

“Sit down, for fuck’s sake,” he snapped, his frustration and growing arousal combining into a tetchy force. Fighting himself for something he desired wasn’t a usual occurrence, and he was struggling not to unleash his temper as the pressure on him escalated.

“M’kay,” she slurred, and obediently plopped onto the carpet.

Jesus, she was going to be the death of him.

“Not submissive, huh?”

“This is hardly applicable,” Zeke snarled. “The girl is so fucking tired, she’d climb bare-ass naked into the middle of an orgy if you told her to, asshole.” He bent and, setting his beer on the floor, hauled her onto her feet again, urging her to the couch. “Stay there, Olivia, and go to fucking sleep.”

“Just take her home, Zeke. Tuck her up in your bed, make her feel safe. Do what you’re best at. Tomorrow, when she’s lucid, *talk* to her. Give her a chance to explain, then lay down the rules. Two years of pining over her is

over, buddy.”

“I’m not going to win this, am I?” Flipping the blanket over her, Zeke stomped over to the desk and slapped his palms down on the wood. “What are you getting out of this, Att? Why the hell are you pushing this—pushing *me*—so emphatically toward her?”

Atticus shrugged. “Sonic’s been a member of my team for years. She’s talented and smart, but her social skills are shit. No friends, no family. Taking care of you in the hospital was the first time I’ve ever seen her committed to a project that didn’t involve data searches and hacking hard drives. She was happy, Zeke, and despite the circumstances—Wyatt’s death, your pain, all the damn chaos—she made you happy in return.”

“Now years have passed, and we’re two different people.”

“Can’t disagree with that; you’ve turned into a bitter old bastard. Sonic, on the other hand, is the kind of soul who doesn’t change who she is on a whim. But a woman who isn’t interested in a man doesn’t ask her boss how he is every time she speaks to him, and a man who doesn’t love a woman won’t have those sparks I see in your eyes when you look at her.”

“I don’t love her.”

“Keep telling yourself that. Nobody believes it, including you.”

His friend had an innate talent for telling the truth, even when someone didn’t want to hear it. Trying not to hate him for that skill, Zeke lifted his palms off the desk, raising them high in surrender. “Fine, you win. I’ll drive her home and treat her like a queen. Will that satisfy your protective Daddy urges?”

“It’s a good start. Although there is a perfectly good guestroom just down the hall with your names on it.”

“Sure. Toss me in at the deep end, why don’t you?”

“Excellent. I’m pleased we came to a reasonable agreement. Oh, and

Zeke?”

“What?” he asked with a growl.

“There’s a distinct possibility your new queen is a sleepwalker.”

What the fuck? Zeke spun just in time to watch Olivia toddle from the room, dragging the blanket like a pet rock on a string. “How the hell is she walking around when she can’t even keep her bloody eyes open!”

Atticus just grinned. “That’s your problem to figure out now, brother. I’d advise you to lock the bedroom door before you go to sleep. For, ah, safety purposes.”

“I hate you, you smug bastard.”

A deep, rolling laugh followed him out the door as he rushed after Olivia, wondering what he’d taken on, and how he was supposed to keep a woman in bed when apparently, she didn’t stop moving, *ever*.

Olivia

A steel band curled around her back, pinning her against a slab of firm, warm rock. She nuzzled her cheek into the warmth, humming in appreciation of the delicious fragrance; smoke and leather, with a whiff of something extra.

Something solid and rough wedged between her thighs, giving her something to rub her aching pussy against as she moaned under her breath. She didn’t really like touching herself—too many threats, subtle and blatant, from Jared over the years had made her leery—but maybe this hands-free option would work.

“Best stop that, girl, else those panties ain’t gonna be a deterrent.”

Olivia froze, mid-grind. The voice was low and grumpy, rumbling under her ear. Embarrassingly familiar. It didn’t cut off the ache inside her; it

intensified the need in a way that only one man could. “Zeke.”

At her breathless whisper, he grunted. “Least you know who I am now.”

Now? She always knew who he was, but this was the first time she’d been intimately up close with him. Holding his hand was about as far as she dared go. Heat surged into her cheeks as she ordered her traitorous body to stop riding his denim-clad thigh. “Ah...”

“Don’t remember a damn thing, do you?”

Was that a rhetorical question? Olivia frowned. She’d been upset, her life crashing down around her ears one brick at a time, and he’d come into the house like a thief. Picked her up, making her feel safe. After she curled up on the backseat of his truck, she was pretty blank in the memories department. “Am I supposed to?”

Zeke sighed heavily but made no move to change their proximity. “No. It’s fine.”

She wiggled, realizing that while he wore jeans, his chest was delightfully bare. Her fingers wandered lightly, finding several raised ridges over his belly and chest. Normally, she wouldn’t dare to be presumptuous, but this whole scenario was too farfetched to be reality, so she’d take advantage of five minutes in heaven before she was rudely roused from her new favorite dream.

There were no circumstances where Zeke liked her enough to climb into bed with her. None. While she’d pined for him from eight hundred miles away, he’d probably been making love to all the women who caught his attention.

He sure as hell wouldn’t be in bed wearing his jeans, for God’s sake, and she wasn’t in the habit of wearing her bra and panties when she slept. She preferred her soft, snuggly pajamas.

Factoring in all that... she was dreaming, end of story.

Olivia smiled and shifted, pressing a kiss to the underside of his nipple. Fascinated by how smooth his skin felt under her lips, she continued across his chest, daring to flick her tongue across the masculine equivalent of her own tight, sensitive buds. It gave her a rush of pride when his hips lifted subtly, the thigh between hers pressing harder against her pussy.

“Olivia, wait.”

Oh, she loved that dark tone. Zeke had a lovely voice anyway; strong, firm, compassionate. She liked the way he spoke, the rhythm of his words melding with an accent she couldn't quite place.

All her life, she'd learned that an accent didn't matter. It was fakable, interchangeable. No, a girl didn't rely on how lyrical a voice was, but the intent behind the words. Her stepfather was a prime example—all the little endearments he liked to croon at her were slick with perverted slime. A sickness that spread onto her skin whenever he touched her with that depraved voice and thick fingers.

Even the brush of them over her arm made her feel nauseous.

Olivia shook her head, banishing the thought. Here in dreams, Jared didn't belong. This was *her* time. Seeing as some faction of her brain was treating her to an all-she-could-lick Zeke buffet, she was going to indulge herself.

Hand sliding down his belly with a confidence she'd never possess while awake, she eased her fingers beneath the waistband of his jeans. The button and zipper were undone, his belt buckle already loose, as though he'd needed to be comfortable but still partly dressed before falling asleep.

A warning flickered in the back of her brain, but she was too busy concentrating on the hot column of flesh in her grasp to take note.

He was so soft and silky. Warm velvet over rigid steel. A moan tickled her throat when his cock jerked in her fingers, wetness kissing her palm.

“Damn it, girl, there's talkin' to do before you go jumpin' into—fuck.”

Dream Zeke was very well endowed, she thought with a nip of trepidation. Her brain was insane if it thought anything this size could fit inside her, but what were the chances her fantasy version of him and the real one were the same penis size?

Strong fingers grabbed her wrist, pulling it away from his cock, then she found herself on her back, arms stretched uselessly above her head with one of his hands pinning them to the pillows. Heavy weight pressed on top of her, from his chest against her breasts all the way down to where his hips spread her pelvis wide.

“If we’re doin’ this, we do it right.” Dream Zeke’s eyes were darkening, shade by shade, from sea-mist to emerald. “Atticus has some notion you’re a submissive, but I ain’t seeing it yet. When I give you an order, you obey, ‘less you’ve got a damn good reason not to. That clear?”

Her breath caught. Oh boy, she was in trouble. This was worse than that time she spent twenty minutes chattering to the mailman, wondering why he was being so rude and not replying, only to discover it was a mannequin, dressed up in his uniform, with its makeup so realistic, it looked human.

She swallowed hard and stared up at him. Their noses were almost touching, his breath warm on her skin. The large erection she’d just been clutching in her greedy hand was now lodged firmly against her sex.

Not a dream.

With any luck, her mortification level was going to hit overload at any moment, rendering her unconscious. It was the only way to survive a disaster of this magnitude.

“I asked you a question, Olivia.”

Why did her name sound like that in his voice? Dark amusement, a quick lick of something decadent, and a whole lot of stern reprimand. It sent liquid thrills rushing through places she’d never felt before, even reading her dirty

books.

“Cat got your tongue, girl?”

Oh God. No, her tongue was exactly where it was meant to be, but it was limp with shock. In approximately three seconds, she’d choke on her own drool and probably wouldn’t care too much because she was looking into those beautiful eyes.

Zeke shifted, lowering his mouth to her ear. “Are you submissive, Olivia?”

Her name again in that same, devastating tone. A shiver ran through her, eliciting a moan. Her panties felt wet; she wondered if he knew what he was doing to her. In all likelihood... yes.

A man like him, who’d tended bar in a place like Avalon, knew exactly what he did to a woman.

Would it shock him to find out she knew all about the kink club that had gone up in smoke? That she was aware of her boss’s predilections, how all his friends were immersed in the lifestyle, in one way or another?

Maybe not. Anyone who met Alicia understood that she was different in the best way. She caused riots in the office with her antics, and Atticus was so patient with her, like a father with a kid pumped up on sugar.

Someone who was a demon on a computer keyboard might discover a *lot* of information on that specific dynamic, and others besides; sadism and masochism walked hand in hand. Master and slave wasn’t something she was interested in *at all*. Crawling around on the floor using her hands as paws, with something thick and furry up her butt as a substitute tail was also not a kink that pushed her buttons... much.

“Yes?” she croaked.

“Sure about that?”

Not really, no, but hell would freeze over before she turned down the

opportunity to find out. Neither was she prepared to jeopardize this moment.
“Yes... Sir?”

His hum of approval made her wiggle in delight—which was bad, she realized. Her breasts brushed against his chest as she moved, the hairs on his pectorals inciting her nipples to mutiny through the thin fabric of the bra.

“Good girl,” he told her quietly, deepening the ache in her core. “I’m going to ask you some more questions, and I’d like you to answer each one just like that.”

She nodded, her tongue failing her again.

“Have you ever been in a dynamic? Long- or short-term?”

Oooh, and a swan dive straight into dangerous waters. Right into the middle of several sharks out for the blood of liars.

“N-No, Sir.”

“Just scenes, then. Do you prefer playing with one Dom regularly or experiencing a variety?”

For the first time, she was so fucking glad his eyes weren’t on her face. It was no secret that she was a terrible liar. Just terrible. If her face didn’t give her away, she usually caved into the guilt that followed her mistruth.

What would she prefer? One man or many?

“One,” she whispered.

“Mmm-hmm. Do you let this one Dom touch you in all these needy places, Olivia?” A sharp nip of pain stung her earlobe, and she was in heaven. “Do you let him put clamps on these pretty nipples until you cry? Is he allowed to fuck your wet little pussy, and your tight ass?”

Her eyes widened. Her ass? What did her ass have to do with this conversation? As his mouth caressed a spot on the side of her neck, a montage of all the porn she’d watched while researching BDSM paraded gleefully through her head, reminding her that in this community, there was

quite literally nothing off-limits.

Including the *back hole*.

Gulping, she twisted his question around in her head until the *he* became Zeke. “I-If he wants to, Sir.”

“And if *I* want to do all those things?”

“Yes, please,” she murmured, although clamps and butt stuff were slightly intimidating. But she’d deal with that when—if—they popped into her reality.

Leaning back, Zeke studied her face, his lips twitching. “Flushed there, girl. Too warm?”

Every nerve was on fire, simmering beneath her skin, ready to implode. She was burning up from the inside out, a breath away from spontaneously combusting. “No, Sir.”

“If you say so. Our situation is this, Olivia: Atticus has decided that you need a firm hand in your life to get you back on track. Being the almighty Master of the universe, he’s graciously chosen me to be the lucky individual.” His voice was flat with displeased sarcasm. “As you know, the tenets of BDSM rely on consent. Is a dynamic with me something you’d consider?”

Tricky question. If she said yes, she was admitting to Atticus that she needed help, which she didn’t. Much. Saying no meant kissing goodbye to possibly the only chance she’d ever get of being with Zeke.

He didn’t exactly sound thrilled at the idea of being in charge of her, yet there was no mistaking that his erection was prominently occupying the space above her sex, and her neck still tingled from the pressure of his mouth.

“I think I should be asking you that,” she muttered, trying to hide her disappointment that he wasn’t as eager to take this new step with her. But then, she shouldn’t feel this excited; she’d left him a note, outlining her

emotions the best she could, and gotten radio silence in response. “Is there any point, when it’s obviously not what you want?”

“This isn’t about what I want, Olivia. It’s about you, and what’s best for you right now. Personally, I agree with Att; intervention and support are required to help you.” The seriousness of his tone squashed any hopes and dreams lingering at the back of her mind. “I won’t leave you stranded. I’ll help if you want someone to lean on.”

But he didn’t *want* her.

The keen arousal searing her alive faded and died. Tears prickled her eyes as she blinked, determined not to let any more fall. Clearing her throat, she pressed a hand between them, pushing him away. “Excuse me. I need the bathroom.”

“Olivia.”

“I need to pee,” she snapped. “Would you like to *help* me with that?”

His eyes did that thing where they shifted several shades in a matter of seconds. Another time, another place where her heart wasn’t wilting in her chest, she might have made some ridiculously unfunny joke about him being *Fifty Shades of Green*, but now wasn’t that time, and this was certainly not the place.

Without a sound, he rolled off her, leaving a wash of cold air in his wake. Her heated skin chilled, and she felt stupidly vulnerable as she scrambled off the bed. A bed that wasn’t hers, in a room she’d only seen from the outside on the rare occasion she’d ventured from downstairs to find her interfering boss.

Fighting to keep her breathing steady, she asked, “Where are my clothes?”

“In the laundry. They should be done drying soon. There’s a robe on the back of the door for you.” Zeke hauled himself into a sitting position against the headboard, wincing slightly. “Olivia, look—”

It was a long walk back to the city without any clothes. A hot one in a robe.

Feet sinking into the carpet, Olivia stalked over to the door and yanked the pretty cotton garment from its hook, swirling the pale purple fabric around her back and shoving her arms through the holes. She knotted the belt with shaking hands, cursing the wetness between her legs.

Yanking the door open, she glared at him over her shoulder. “No, *you* look, Zeke. I laid my feelings out for you once. I’ve spent two years of hell waiting for a single word from you to tell me you felt the same, and got nothing. This is me, taking my heart and my love and whatever else I’ve been stupid enough to feel for you, away from here. Keep your intervention and support for someone who gives a shit.”

“Olivia.” The command in his tone was clear: *stay*.

She slammed the door after she stepped out into the hallway, belatedly remembering that Atticus had two young children now. Waiting three beats with her breath held, she strained her ears, listening for any sign she’d woken them.

When everything remained quiet, she exhaled slowly, then hurried down the hall to Atticus’s office. She pushed inside, squinting against the dim glare of dawn sunlight peeking through the window behind his desk, then beelined straight for the elevator.

The doors opened immediately, sliding shut after she dragged herself into the empty box and hit the button for the office floor. A sob stuck in her throat; she pressed the back of her hand to her lips to stop them quivering.

It hadn’t been love at first sight for her. Atticus had asked her to watch over Braun and Liam in the hospital the night of the explosion, and to keep her eye on Zeke. The other two men had been discharged without too much delay, but Zeke’s injuries had been so much worse.

No one came to visit him in the first week. She knew, because she'd been the one sitting by his bedside, talking to him about inane subjects, praying he sensed someone was with him. There was nothing worse than being in pain, suffering alone.

One week rolled into two, then a month.

She stayed with him through all the procedures to heal the burns in his skin, waited for the surgeries to repair his broken leg to end. Her days became a constant loop of working on her laptop as she rode out the months of his induced coma, wondering if he was strong enough to live through the trauma, telling him in no uncertain terms that he was.

She hadn't cried as much in her life as she did when he finally opened his eyes.

Well, aside from yesterday's meltdown, she supposed.

When she'd taken the fall, she didn't know. There wasn't a definitive moment where she could unequivocally state that *this* was when she fell in love. It only deepened in the weeks following, as they talked, and she learned more about him.

It was time to set that period of her life aside and go back to work. Bury her head in her laptop, shut her heart in a box where she no longer heard it weeping pitifully, and be the data machine everyone expected.

The doors opened again, spilling her into the corridor leading to her office. Assuming it *was* still her office. Her prolonged absence meant Atticus had probably allocated the space to one of the in-house techs, someone who didn't blow a year of time on an undeserving asshole, and another two playing caretaker to a terminally ill mother and inept stepfather.

She heard the manic clacking of a keyboard from further down, and friendly chatter coming from inside the breakroom. Neither interested her; she wasn't in the mood for reunions and incessant questions about where

she'd been.

Hurrying to her safe place, Olivia clasped her fingers around the handle, pushing down. Relief escaped her on another sob when she found it unlocked, and she slipped into the empty office like a shadow. The automatic lights registered her presence, flickering to life and shining down on her station.

It was precisely as she'd left it. Cleaner, tidier, than she remembered, but all her things were there—the framed photo of her mom, her assortment of notepads, pens, and pencils for when she got bored and needed to do something to clear her mind. The fidget spinner sat beside the mousepad, and her day-to-day calendar was still set to the last date she'd been in here.

Home.

Locking the door, she shuffled over to the computer, noting it had been upgraded at some point, and booted it up. Hesitating before she logged into the system, she made the choice not to use her own details. It wouldn't be long before Atticus came looking for her, and he'd find her faster if she was in the system under her log-in.

She doubted he'd look down here for her yet; the search would start upstairs, until he scanned the CCTV footage and found no trace of her.

Still, better to be cautious.

Bypassing the company log-in, Olivia set to work hacking through the security until she slid into the overview of available computers. Picking one, she assumed its IP address and broke a few laws—federal and company—by jacking the employee data and logging in with it.

The pressure in her chest built, her eyes burning.

Shoving through it, she accessed the task list and chose a project based on priority. Within moments, she was delving into the life and criminal activities of a potential terrorist in Ohio, sifting through his financials, and noting his

recent purchases at several gun stores in his area.

Compiling everything the agent in charge demanded, she dropped it all into a secure folder and zipped it back to the system, marking the task as done and moving on to the next.

She might have been gone a long time, but she was back in her element.

Time flew past. Her fingers rattled over the keyboard, picking up speed as the ball in her chest expanded. *This* was what she understood, *this* was where she belonged. Holed up in a dark, quiet space where she wasn't seen or heard, just doing the job like the good little worker bee she was.

Someone knocked on the door; she went still, silencing the clack of the keys.

After a few minutes, she resumed her frenzied attack on the task list, picking one that required more in-depth hacking. One worthy of her heartbreak, her entire focus.

The in-house IM system pinged.

ATTICUS: My office.

With a stroke of the keys, she dismissed the summons and continued. Her life wasn't going to be a game to him, handing her off to his buddies because he thought transferring her like a pawn was *best* for her. She wasn't a fucking toy to be played with and cast aside when the newness wore off.

Another ping.

ATTICUS: That wasn't a request, Sonic. In my office, now.

Olivia hesitated. Sonic was her office name, which by rights should mean he wanted to see her for business reasons, but call her suspicious, she was a hundred percent certain that her work wasn't on the agenda.

Goddamn ambush.

Rather than replying, she dismissed the message again, and deciding to be a bad girl, disabled the IM system. Imagining her boss calling her all the

names under the sun and marching down to her office to break the door and its shitty manual lock, she went one step further, hacking deeper into the company network to access the electronic locking devices that were only used in case of a breach of headquarters.

In case of such a breach, employees were required to go to the nearest office if they were in the cubicle section or conference rooms and hit the panic button. Every door was made of steel, with a wooden veneer to prevent employees feeling like they were working in a prison—and it was a successful con.

Once the electronic locks kicked in, only authorization codes could disable them.

She heard the snick, snick, snick as her door sealed, and immediately isolated the coding, shielding it from anyone trying to override it, then buried it where it would take days for someone to uncover.

There, now she could work in peace.

It took ten minutes before someone began hammering on the door, shouting her name.

Zeke.

The dam in her chest cracked, spilling a few tears before she shut her emotions down until she felt dead inside. Yanking open a drawer, she pulled out a pair of wireless earbuds and synced them to the new unit as she brought up the music program she'd used constantly before she left.

Shoving the buds into her ears, she selected one of her favorite playlists, and let Evanescence blast her hearing into oblivion. She took a moment to wipe her cheeks dry, to take a calming breath, before she plunged back into the job at hand.

Two hours later, as she was fighting through security protocols protecting some very shady data on the Italian mafia she needed, the IM system popped

up again.

ANARCHY: Hey, sweetheart. Got a minute to chat?

SONIC: No.

ANARCHY: You've been busy this morning. Atticus is impressed but concerned.

SONIC: Atticus can go to hell, and take his friend with him. Leave me alone.

ANARCHY: I know what it's like to have my heart broken by an insensitive jackass, Olivia. I ended up marrying him, but he hurt me a lot in the beginning. Will you let me come in so we can talk? Just me, I promise.

Olivia's eyes narrowed on the screen, her suspicions rising quickly. Archie was a talented hacker now; some of Atticus's best techs had taught her plenty before Olivia's unplanned departure, so God only knew what she'd learned in the time since.

Switching over to the internal system, she tracked back to where she'd hidden the lock codes, and discovered that someone was very busy working their way toward them. Teeth clenched, she moved them again, throwing in a few diversions and firewalls to keep the intruder on their toes.

SONIC: I'm done. I told him I'm fucking done, so just leave me alone and let me work.

ANARCHY: I'm sorry, Olivia.

What the hell? What was she sorry for?

Olivia spun around in her chair, paranoid they were using blow torches to cut through the steel while she was distracted. Music screamed in her ears as she stared at the door, but there were no signs of a forced entry. Turning back to the computer with her heart slamming against her ribs, she read the next message.

ANARCHY: I didn't mean to hurt you, Olivia. I only want to help.

Rage boiled in her blood, firing up her usually unflappable temper. Cracking her fingers, she set them on the keyboard and typed furiously.

SONIC: Take your help and shove it, Zeke. I left because my mother was sick, and she needed me to be there, just like I was for you. I didn't ghost you the way you did to me, without a word for two years. I kept loving you like a fucking idiot, and when mom died, all I wanted was you. So fucking naïve. I get it, you don't want me. That's fine, but do me a goddamn favor and leave so I can at least salvage the one thing I have left.

Disabling the IM program a second time was a petty *fuck you*, but this time the tears were unstoppable. Her emotions were so fragile, and she hated it. Her mom had raised her to be strong and independent; living with Jared had cemented those ideals deeper than Crystal probably intended, making her shy away from anything to do with men.

Yet her heart did the dirty on her, tumbling carelessly like a kid on a playground when she wasn't looking.

Huddling into the robe, she covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the noise. Like hell she was giving him the satisfaction of knowing she was breaking all over again. If she had to cry herself dry without a noise, she would.

Ripping the earbuds out, she tossed them on the desk, then lurched from her chair to the couch she'd often napped on after a grueling project. The pain in her chest was killing her, and it wasn't all Zeke. It was raging mess of the fight to keep her mom alive, and the loss of her; the ruination of her home, the financial and sentimental destruction following on its heels; and then there was him.

The final nail in her coffin.

For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, Olivia cried herself into a stupor. Curled on the couch in a tiny ball, she wept until she was sick,

throwing up nothing more than bile and saliva, and the inevitable migraine struck like a hammer blow to her forehead.

Struggling to breathe, her vision blurred, she felt herself slide away into the space that wasn't quite sleep, wasn't really consciousness, but where she drifted in a mix of the two. Her brain registered the rapid ping of incoming IMs, but she was unable to flex her fingers, never mind cross the room to deal with the demands of a man she never wanted to see again.

The migraine consumed her, spiking through her brain until the screech of an alarm brought more tears to her swollen eyes.

God, she was a mess.

It was the last thing she thought before she surrendered to escape the pain.

Chapter Three

Zeke

“How long does it take to open a goddamn door?” Zeke demanded.

“As long as it takes to snake through all the neat little roadblocks she’s thrown in my way,” Anarchy replied absently, her gaze focused entirely on the screen of the laptop propped on her knees. “Don’t know what you said to her, Zeke, but you launched her defense mechanism in style.”

“I asked if she wanted to explore a dynamic with me, as per Atticus’s orders, that’s all.” Frustrated, he paced relentlessly outside the office door, scowling as the red emergency light above it continued to gleam.

“That’s never all. Judging by the message she sent, you fucked up good.”

He hissed between his teeth.

“Has she replied yet?” Atticus asked. He leaned against the opposite wall, one boot braced on the paintwork. Looking at him, anyone who didn’t know him would believe he was calm and in control, but worry and anger simmered beneath the façade.

Humming under her breath, Archie’s fingers danced over the keys. “No. She hasn’t shut us down for a third time, and I’m almost through the last block she’s put in place. In about thirty seconds, she loses any chance of keeping me from retrieving the codes, which tells me she’s not at her desk anymore.”

“Less talking and it could be twenty seconds.”

“Nope, I’ve tested that theory. My hands perform magic at the same speed regardless of how fast my mouth is moving. Be patient, Mr. Grumps. You got her into this shit, I’ll get her out. Hope you’re ready to do some groveling.”

Zeke growled. “What was I supposed to do? Drag her kicking and screaming into a relationship I don’t particularly want, like a caveman? *Consent, Anarchy.*”

The little blonde's lip curled as her brown eyes flicked briefly over the edge of the laptop. "Jesus, it's like Jasper all over again, right?" She glanced at Atticus and got a nod of agreement. "She's in *love* with you, you numbskull."

His heart squeezed. "I'm too old for her."

She made a derisive sound in her throat. "Men and this fucking age thing. We *like* older men, Zeke. It's like wine, y'know, or cheese. Older, more mature, better taste. The oats have been sowed, yada yada, and by this point in your life, you should know where the clit is and how to use it to its full potential."

Atticus smirked. Obviously, he had no issues navigating his wife's anatomy to maximum effect.

"I have no issues with a woman's clit, Anarchy," he said in exasperation, "or her G-spot for that matter. Maybe we could have given it a shot a few years ago, but she just upped and—"

"Say left and I'll slap you. She went to take care of her sick mom."

"Without a word."

"There's the note," Atticus pointed out.

"A note no one has seen or remembers."

"Did you check your wallet?" Anarchy mumbled. Her fingers attacked the keys viciously. "Come on, you sneaky bastard. I've almost got you."

Both Zeke and Atticus shifted to face her, looming over the chair where she sat with foreboding expressions. He felt the tension in the hallway twist, deflecting away from the lockdown situation for a brief moment, and landing squarely on this new bite of information.

Slowly, he pulled his wallet from his back pocket and opened it. He flipped through the card section and billfold. No note, just like he knew there wasn't. He'd used the damn thing countless times since Olivia vanished, on a

fucking daily basis. “Nada, Archie.”

“Just...hold...on...one...” She jabbed a button savagely, cheering, then looked up, frowning at him as her eyes refocused on the unpixelated world, then snatched his wallet from his grasp. “I swear to God, men can’t see what’s in front of their face. Where’s the peanut butter, Archie? On the third shelf of the cupboard, J. Where, I can’t see it?”

As she muttered to herself, apparently reliving some random conversation with her husband, her deft fingers were violating the sanctity of his wallet, sliding over the leather with purpose. After only a few moments, she wiggled a folded sheet of paper from a section he didn’t know existed.

“Right in front of your face,” she told him with a flat expression.

“How’d you know it was in there?” he demanded.

“Walked in on the nurse who put it there. Thought she was trying to rob you, but it didn’t really make sense. She was putting something *in*, not taking stuff out. She told me she’d found the paper on the floor, and that she’d leave it in your wallet, so you’d find it when you woke.”

His mouth opened but nothing came out. Stunned, he stared at the paper with a mixture of shock and horror, studying the last two years with a fresh perspective. “Did she read it?”

“I don’t think so. She didn’t have the gooey expression we tend to get when we read someone’s declaration of love.” Brown eyes rolling, she yanked the treasure out of his reach when he tried to take it. “Priorities, Zeke. The locks should disengage any moment n—”

On cue, the red light flashed three times and switched to green as the security system disengaged with a soft buzz.

Priorities, indeed. The moment he literally got the green light, the letter and its potential blipped from existence. He beat Atticus to the door, shoving it open and striding inside with his heart in his mouth.

The computer on the desk was in screensaver mode, images flashing over the monitor in a random pattern. Nothing personal, just swirling patterns changing color on rotation. Music bleated tinnily from an unknown source, but all he heard were the soft whimpers of a woman in pain.

“Couch,” Atticus murmured.

Turning his head, Zeke spotted the purple bundle huddled in a pitiful ball at the end of the only piece of comfortable furniture in the room. The red curls of her hair were in disarray, as though she’d tugged at it, running her fingers through the silky locks in frustration.

Walking over slowly, ready for her to launch at him and claw his eyes out, he met her eyes and understood she wouldn’t be going anywhere he didn’t take her. Open, blank, dull.

He knelt on one knee, cupping her cheek. Cold, pale skin. She blinked slowly, like it was too much exertion to maintain normal speed. Her lips were cracked, dehydrated; unsurprisingly, given how red and puffy her eyes were.

She’d cried herself into exhaustion yet again, and this time, it was his fault.

“What happened to her mom?” he asked, stroking his thumb over her cheekbone.

“She didn’t say. I didn’t get any updates for a while, but she said her stepfather was giving her weird vibes. She wasn’t returning messages or calls, then yesterday... she was home.” Atticus crossed over to her desk, rummaging in one of the drawers. He brought a bottle of water to the couch. “Sonic isn’t one to divulge much of her private life. I think she only kept in touch as much as she did because I’m her boss.”

Anarchy leaned against the jamb. “I did some digging in between trying to break into her computer. There’s an obituary from a paper in Washoe County for a Crystal Perkins, survived by her husband, Jared, and daughter, Olivia.

She died almost a month ago, the funeral two weeks later.”

“Fuck,” Att hissed under his breath. “I should’ve known.”

Zeke echoed his sentiments silently. All the shit he’d dumped on her from the moment she got back, and this was what she was dealing with inside? Her mother had *died*; he had firsthand experience in how that felt, the hole it left behind.

How much strength did she have to conceal that pain? What energy was she consuming daily to slot the mask of normality into position? To hold it there without unleashing the torrent of grief and loss on those around her?

Olivia had spent almost a year with him, rarely leaving his side, then traveled to fucking *Nevada* to do the same for her mother? His thoughts switched to the heap of junk sitting in her driveway, and the idea of her crossing state lines in the fucking thing made his blood boil.

“Get rid of that piece of shit car she drives,” he told Atticus, struggling not to fist his hands when they were so close to her face. “Make sure it doesn’t come back.”

“Zeke, she doesn’t have the money to buy a new one, even secondhand,” Anarchy murmured.

“With what I pay her?” Atticus scoffed. “She can buy a brand new one and not feel the dent in her bank account.”

“Not anymore. She cleared out her savings to pay some of the medical debt. Her paychecks have been going into the rent on her mom’s house, some other bills, and—”

“The medical debt,” Atticus repeated. He breathed in slowly, his jaw tense. When he spoke, his voice was tighter than an overstretched drumskin. “If you don’t spank her, Zeke, I sure as hell will. Has she accrued any of her own debts by paying off her mom’s?”

“It’s a fine line. For the past year, she’s ended each month with a few

dollars left before the paycheck went in. A bad month, an emergency... it wouldn't take much for her to slip into the red."

As they picked through her life, Zeke opened the bottle of water and touched it to Olivia's lips. Tilting it enough that only a couple of drops spilled out at a time, he patiently dribbled it until he saw her swallow. "That's it, angel. Little sips."

"The house situation is dire. Living there will make her sick."

"It won't be an issue," Zeke said absently.

"But she—"

"It won't be an issue," he repeated emphatically.

"I—oh," Archie purred with satisfaction. "Finally changed your tune. Am I allowed to threaten you with the sadist if you hurt her again? Because my current audience at home has no fear when I tell them Jasper will break his sjambok out of retirement if they're naughty."

"Do they even know what a sjambok is?"

"No, but just hearing his name should be enough to strike terror into their tiny, evil little hearts, right? Kaylyn gives me this look that basically says 'Do I look like I care?', and then toddles off to suck up to her daddy with angelic innocence."

Atticus laughed. "I wonder which side of the parental tree she learned that from."

"If you're implying that I'm a brat—"

"Not implying, stating. You are a brat, Anarchy Fairfax. Fun, feisty, usually respectful, but a brat nonetheless."

Olivia's lips pursed, forming sucking motions.

"You gonna sit up for me, Livvy? Don't want you to choke."

Her fingers twitched, her hand jerking forward to brace herself. The muscles in her forearm trembled as she tried to push herself up, working on

autopilot. There was still no spark behind her eyes.

Zeke eased his arm under her, propping her up far enough for him to lift off his knees and sit beside her, shifting his arm around her shoulders. She was trembling all over, he realized, and lifted the bottle to her mouth again. A fraction of his guilt faded when her fingers curled around his wrist, clutching him as she drank in long, slow gulps.

Perhaps that was reason enough to hope he hadn't fucked this up.

At least before they talked and figured out what the hell was going on between them.

Denying he hated the age gap was futile. He did, vehemently. At her age, he'd been a jack of all trades, doing whatever was needed to bring cash into the house. Tinkering with car engines, building fences and mowing lawns. He'd played chauffeur for a while, ferrying around a family-money prick wherever he demanded to go.

Meanwhile, Olivia would have been playing a different role entirely; one that was more age appropriate. Being a kid was a job of its own, and he'd just bet she'd been a gorgeous child, all that red hair with those hazel eyes.

The last of the water disappeared with a swallow, so he set the bottle aside. "Att, would you happen to have a set of padded cuffs? Preferably with a long coupling chain."

"Sure. I've got some upstairs."

"Thanks. I think it's time someone went back to bed. Any objections to us bunkin' down for another night?"

"Not at all. Need me to carry her up for you?"

Possessiveness bit deep. "No, I got her. Could you ask Connie if she has any free time this week to sit with her?"

Atticus plucked the empty bottle from his hand. "I'll make sure she does, even if it's just thirty minutes. When Olivia wakes up and is coherent, tell her

she's on bereavement leave for at least a month. Archie's going to dig into how much her mother's medical bills are; with any luck, we can chip them down to nothing."

"Run the husband, the stepfather. If he can afford to pay the bills, Olivia ain't gonna be stuck with payin' any more than she already has."

Rising, Zeke bent and hitched her onto his hip. With her butt braced on his arm, she slumped forward over his shoulder. Fingers gripped his shirt, keeping him close as he turned toward the door. "Archie, the letter, please."

She brought it to him, tucking it in the front pocket of his jeans. "I wish I'd written J a letter, back at the beginning. Maybe it would have saved a lot of heartache."

Atticus shook his head. "A formal declaration of love from the one person he thought he couldn't have? Fifty dollars says he'd still be running." He shot her a grin. "You'd have been all mine then, little bit, and the world would be a lot different."

Even as she blushed, Archie mirrored his headshake. "The world would've been wrong, Att. This is how it's meant to be—you and Alicia, with your beautiful family; me and Jasper with our brood of potential villains intent on taking over the universe, one potty at a time."

Snorting, the big guy walked over to the computer and began shutting it down. "Just don't give my kids any ideas. Some of the technology we have down here is capable of toppling a government or two in sticky hands."

Zeke gave Archie a nod as he carried his woman out of the room, into the barren hallway. He'd just leave those two to argue the finer points of whose children were most likely to cause an uprising, and get Olivia somewhere quiet where she'd get the rest she needed.

The letter was burning a hole in his pocket, but it would wait.

Finding out how much of an idiot he'd been required privacy, after all.

Making amends for his mistakes didn't bother him; he would do whatever it took to soothe the pain he'd caused, but he got the feeling he'd need a few moments to digest the foot currently in his mouth.

After that, he had to make a decision.

A big, fucking terrifying choice.

Olivia

Moaning under her breath, Olivia rolled onto her stomach and turned into a starfish. Her arms and legs found the cooler areas on the bed as she snuggled her face deeper into the pillow, but the quiet jingle of chains when she moved her right arm prevented her return to sleep.

Slowly, she opened one eye, squinting at the pressure around her wrist, and struggled to make sense of the wide, tan-colored band fastened around it. Experimentally, she flexed her fingers, which worked fine, and then followed the thin silver chain links from the cuff, over the blankets and her hip...

Turning onto her side, then her back, her eyes trailed the chain over the side of the bed to the foot poised in mid-air.

Zeke sat in a chair beside the bed, his cuffed ankle resting on the opposite knee. He held a piece of paper in his hand, his eyes drifting from side to side as he read the words, before they flicked up and saw her watching him.

Carefully, he folded the sheet and set it to one side. Dropping his foot to the floor, he rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. "Your mom died."

The quiet statement, so full of sympathy, punched her in the gut. "Yeah."

"Told no one, drove yourself home from Nevada in a wrecker held together by chewing gum and luck."

Because her throat squeezed shut, Olivia only nodded.

“How long have you been sleepwalking?”

Confused, she frowned. Sleepwalking? That wasn't something she did. She woke up in her bed every morning, the door still locked against Jared, and nothing out of place in her room. “I don't do that.”

“Don't make a habit of chaining a lady to my ankle, girl. Three times last night, twice the night before, I was chasing you around the damn house. Just as soon as your eyes close, you're up and about, getting' into mischief.” He gestured to the chain. “You'll be sleepin' with this for a while, 'til we figure out what's making you so antsy you won't stay in bed.”

“Uh... we?”

“Hmm. I owe you an apology, Olivia.” His gaze darkened, regret twisting his mouth. “Seems I've been carrying a certain note around with me for two years, without realizing it. Apparently, a nurse found it on the floor and tucked it into a section of my wallet I didn't even know was there.”

She swallowed, dread and hope banging heads in a battle for supremacy. “D-Did you read it?”

“Been up all night, keepin' an eye on you and readin' what you wrote.” He stroked his thumb over his lip. “Got a way with words, angel. You still mean 'em?”

There wasn't a chance to pretend to hesitate; her head was already nodding. Lying to him, even to protect herself, wasn't an option. No matter what, she'd never be able to lie about what she felt for him. It was too deep, too intertwined with her heart, to deny.

Zeke hummed low in his throat. “I'm sorry, Olivia, for not staying in contact with you since you left. I'm sorry if you believe I abandoned you, and I'm sorry I wasn't there for you while your mom was sick, and everything that came after. For a year, you kept me alive just as much as the doctors and nurses; I should've been *your* rock when you needed me.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it ain’t. We got to be pretty good friends, but I refused to give you the benefit of the doubt. Pride’ll kick you in the balls, angel, you let it get a strong enough hold on you. That’s what I did, and now I’m tryin’ to figure out how to make this right. If I deserve to be forgiven.” When she tried to speak, he gave her a somber look from those serious green eyes. “Gotta admit, angel, I ain’t really treated you right since you got home.”

Olivia blushed and fiddled with the chain. She loved it when he let himself relax and dropped into his ‘casual’ voice, losing the *g*’s from the end of his words. There was a cadence to it, a calming rhythm that soothed the anxiety bubbling under the surface of her façade. “Well, you know, it was just *horrific* waking up smushed against that tough body yesterday.”

His lips twitched. “Horrific, huh?”

“Mmm-hmm. But waking up without it is monumentally worse.”

Something dark and heated flashed in his gaze before he tamped it down. “Don’t forgive me for my sake, Olivia. Make me earn it.”

She bit her lip. “Do you forgive me for leaving when you were asleep? Not waiting to tell you about my mom in person?”

“Family comes first. You did what you had to, Olivia.”

Circling her fingertip around one of the metal links, she absorbed the wave of sadness. Didn’t he know that she considered him her family too? That the only reason she’d gone to Nevada was because of her mom? There was literally no one else in the world she would abandon him for and now, in her eyes, there was only Zeke.

“I don’t want this between us anymore,” she blurted nervously. “I hate conflict. I don’t want you to feel bad, and I don’t want you to resent me. Can we just... put me to bed?”

Zeke’s eyebrow winged up in surprise as her eyes bugged out in horror.

“It! Can we put *it* to bed!”

“Are you sure about that?”

Frantically, she nodded, mortification stealing her voice for the rest of eternity. Jesus, could she *be* any more... fuck, she didn't even know the word. Forthcoming? Upfront? *Suggestive*?

Was she naked under the covers? Heat flared as she yanked them away from her chest, peering down at herself. No, she was in her underwear again, which was bad when she felt all flustered and hot and...

Zeke reached out and snagged the blanket in his big hand, slowly pulling it out of her grasp. One corner of his mouth tipped up when she squeaked in alarm, playing tug of war for a few seconds before he overpowered her with a quiet chuckle. “All right then, Livvy, a clean slate it is.”

Pleasure hummed like a live wire inside her at the use of the nickname. No one ever called her anything but Sonic or Olivia, but *Livvy* sounded so personal, so very... intimate. As the edge of the blanket slid over her breasts, she made a second attempt at pulling it back up to her chin.

“Leave it.” The dominance in his tone shot straight between her legs, intensifying the jolt of bliss. He wasn't unkind or forceful, but the command was clear—leave the blanket exactly where it was. “I asked you a question yesterday, one that wasn't answered. I'd like one now, Olivia, if it doesn't send you into a manic rage again.”

She looked wistfully at the receding blanket as it skimmed over her midriff in slow motion. “It wasn't a manic rage. I was upset, and working lets me burn off negative emotions. They kept pushing and pushing until I couldn't think.”

“Did the question upset you that much?” Concern etched into his brow.

“No.” Her lip trembled until her teeth sank into it.

“Then what?”

“The fact you don’t... *want me, the way I want you.*”

Zeke eased back, expression thoughtful. For a long, uncomfortable minute, silence sat between them, but his eyes were distant, as though he wasn’t with her in the room. The first noise to break the silence was a grunt. “I suppose I did give you that impression, though it’s far from the truth. I’m an old man, Livvy; almost two of your lifetimes fit into mine. I was resigned to living the rest of it alone.”

“I don’t care about how old we are, Zeke.”

“No, I’m beginning to see that.” He stood and leaned over her, strong fingers clasping her cuffed wrist and releasing the leather band easily. Gathering up the chain, he looped it around his hand loosely, then bent and unfastened the other cuff from his ankle. “What do you know about BDSM, angel?”

Her mouth went dry. She cleared her throat as he set the chain and cuffs aside, fully expecting a cloud of dust to erupt from her desert-dry throat. “Were they so I didn’t try to go back to work?”

Humor lightened his eyes. “No. They were in case I fell asleep and you decided to go walkabouts in the dark. Last thing we need is you sleepwalking into Atticus’ bedroom or the kids’ rooms, and scarin’ the bejesus out of everyone.” His fingers skipped down the buttons of his shirt, flicking them open. “BDSM, Olivia. Tell me.”

“Ah...” Her mind went blank, a giant blackboard without so much as a streak of chalk on it. The material parted, spreading open to reveal the tanned skin of his chest, the mixture of dark and silver hairs across his pectorals. “Sex?”

He snorted. “If you’re a good girl and tell me what you know.”

“Um...” She squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the distraction. “Spankings. Safewords. I’m not sure what you...”

“Open your eyes, Olivia.”

She obeyed, wishing she hadn't when she saw his shirt was gone, leaving his arms and torso bare. It was hard to focus when her attention locked onto the muscles he'd rebuilt after being stuck in a hospital bed for so long.

“You know what I am, yes?”

“Dominant,” she whispered as his hands lowered to his belt, sliding the leather strap through the belt buckle, then the loops of his jeans.

“That's right. Do you trust me to show you what BDSM means? Can you put yourself in my hands for a time, while you get a taste of what it offers?” Lord, the button of his jeans put up no fight whatsoever as he popped it open, drawing the zipper down slowly. “I'll look after you, Livvy. Maybe then you'll be able to answer the question.”

The question?

“Whether you want to be in a dynamic with me,” Zeke clarified, obviously sensing her bewilderment.

Her breathing increased, nerves prickling under her skin. This was her moment to shine, to step up to the plate and shrug off an entire adulthood of celibacy. It was what she'd been dreaming of for years, wasn't it?

She squirmed as the ache returned to her core. His eyes were on her, and she felt herself growing wet as they stroked over her skin as tangibly as his hands. “Yes. Yes, to both.”

“You're a trusting soul,” he murmured, hooking his thumbs into the waistband. “Far too good for the likes of me. Are you sure, Olivia?”

It was just sex, she reminded herself. The first time was rarely good, from everything she'd read on the forums she sneaked into now and then. She just needed to remember that it would hurt for a few seconds, and then acclimatize herself into unfamiliar territory.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl. If that changes at all, at any time, you tell me *red*. That’s it; one word. Red stops everything, no matter what.” Leaving his thumbs hooked in his jeans, Zeke lifted his chin. “On your knees, pretty girl, facing me.”

Cautiously, her breath coming in shallow puffs, she turned onto her side, then rose onto her knees as ordered. She didn’t know where to look, so she directed her gaze to the mattress between her spread thighs.

“Repeat your safeword.”

“Red.” She inhaled deeply. “Sir.”

“Perfect.” His hands moved to her neck, fingers curling around the fragile stem as his thumbs brushed her lips. When she shuddered, he smiled, lowering his head to taste her mouth. The tip of his tongue traced the shape of it before she involuntarily opened them. “Relax, Livvy. Has it been a while?”

Oh, only all her life, she thought, tilting back to offer more. A moan filled the room as he shifted his hand to clasp her nape, fingers pressing into the muscles. The other dropped to her shoulder, sliding the bra strap over the joint. “Um...yeah.”

“That’s fine. We’ll take it slow. Don’t want to spook you now, do we? Take your bra off,” he requested quietly, before deepening the kiss.

Her first kiss.

Wait, he wanted her to multitask, now? She was melting into a puddle of hormones and anxiety, and he... oh. His tongue was in her mouth, moving in a mimicry of sex, sending tiny spears of heat slicing through her.

Her fingers fumbled indelicately with the front clasp of her bra, feeling it finally pop free as his teeth nipped her lower lip. Unwilling to break the kiss, she wiggled her way out of the straps as best she could, then gasped when his hands covered her breasts.

Head lolling back without the support at her neck, Olivia whined at the

touch. She didn't have the biggest assets, that was for sure, and she didn't really see the need for them, but when the callouses on his palms scraped over her budding nipples, she was surprised by how heavy and swollen they felt.

Zeke relinquished her mouth, his beard tickling her sensitive skin as he kissed his way down her neck, over her chest, to clamp his mouth over her right nipple. The tip of his tongue swirled and fluttered as suction brought the little nub to a rigid peak, while his fingers tormented the left.

The slow, strong pulls in tandem with each other were having a devastating effect between her legs. Her inner muscles squeezed and released on emptiness, the wetness becoming embarrassing. She whined again as mouth and hands traded nipples.

"Please," she whispered.

His free hand trailed down her side to her hip, fingers tracing the cut of her panties. His huge palm grasped her ass cheek, giving it a firm squeeze, then slid beneath the waistband from behind. The spread of her legs left her open for exploration, and she cried out softly when fingertips grazed her labia, gently stroking the seam before a single digit pushed between them, forging inside her.

Olivia choked, her hips jerking forward.

"Easy, Livvy. There's a good girl." Breaking away from her breast, Zeke rested his head on her shoulder as he played with the heat between her legs. "All hot and bothered. Jesus, you're tight." He found a reactive spot on the curve of her shoulder where it met her neck and sucked lightly.

An odd noise rattled in her throat as another digit eased inside her, stretching her open with a bite of discomfort.

She didn't know whether to cry or be relieved when his touch vanished. There wasn't time to mull it over before he said simply, "Stand up, angel."

Not entirely sure her legs would hold her weight, she started to shuffle off the bed, but Zeke shook his head. “Right where you are. Use my shoulders for support if you need to.”

Clumsily, she shifted position until she gained her feet, gripping his broad shoulders for balance as the mattress wobbled underneath her. Her breath strangled in her lungs when he reached for her panties, pulling them over her hips, then down her legs. One foot at a time, she stepped out, and for the first time in her life, stood naked in front of a man.

The panties disappeared, casually tossed to the side.

Zeke’s expression was wondrous, his eyes a predatory green as they raked over her from top to toe. “Perhaps I should ban you from wearing clothes, Olivia. Nothing this beautiful should be covered up.”

“Uh…”

He tugged the trimmed curls at the apex of her thighs. “I love this shade of red. These need to be a bit shorter, but I’ll take care of that myself.”

Mortification spiked through her as she realized her current position put her pussy almost in his face. She tried to take a step back, but he tsked in reprimand.

“Right leg over my shoulder, angel.”

Olivia blinked, frowning as she wondered if she was dreaming. Anything was possible; she certainly hadn’t ever fantasized about doing *this* with him. “W-Why?”

“Because I said so,” he chuckled.

“Oh. Okay.” Hesitantly, wobbling precariously on her left leg, she managed to hook her right one over his shoulder as per his command. Her hands automatically found purchase in his hair, gripping the softness as she struggled to stay upright.

“Relax, Livvy,” he crooned. “I’ve got you.”

Maybe now was a good time to tell him she was a virgin? That everything he was doing felt foreign and a little overwhelming? Her mouth opened, the words right *there*, and then his lips skimmed the inside of her thigh like a butterfly.

The heat of his arm was a band around her back, while his other hand stroked the outside of her raised thigh. His mouth branded a path of pleasure from where her knee bent over his shoulder all the way to...

Her body hunched forward as his tongue dragged along her slit with excruciating care. A cry wrenched from her, a startled declaration, and the wires in her brain controlling function and thought snapped and died in a flurry of sparks.

He tasted her as though she was the finest confectionery, lapping at the wetness with a hum of satisfaction. Taking his time, he licked at her, *into* her, until her leg threatened to buckle. "Such a pretty little cunt. All wet and pink and swollen. All mine."

All yours, all yours, all yours. It was a mantra screaming through her head.

Gasping for breath, her muscles quivering and damp with sweat, she dragged her nails across his scalp. The warm wash of his breath over her pussy as he laughed added tingles of bliss to the strokes of his tongue. When he clamped his mouth over the nub of nerves at the top of her pussy, she couldn't stop the cry of shock and delight that followed.

Her leg gave out, sending her tumbling back. The sensation of falling yanked her away from the building pleasure in her core, replacing it with fear.

Zeke grunted, bracing her weight with the arm at her back, and lowered her gently to the bed. Licking his lips, he scraped his teeth over the bottom one. In a dark tone, he murmured, "I'll have more of that later. Never tasted anything like you. But now, I think I want to feel your first orgasm ripple

around my cock.”

Sprawled over the covers, Olivia just stared up at him in shock.

Stroking her leg in reassurance, he moved away and picked up the cuffs, the chains clinking as he did something with them. Before she caught her breath, he was back with her, kneeling beside her prone form. “I’m going to cuff your hands, angel. Tight enough to restrict movement, but not to take it away altogether.”

Her body continued to rev at high speed, driven by nerves and adrenaline. Trembling, unsure her voice even worked anymore, she watched as he fastened the cuffs around her wrists with the ease of experience, his finger sliding beneath each one to check the fit.

When he was satisfied, he clipped one end of the chain to her left D-ring, then leaned over to the headboard and threaded the length of links around the ironwork, bringing the end back and attaching it to her right cuff.

Taking her by the hips, he eased her down until her arms stretched over her head lightly. “How does that feel?”

Like she was stranded on a sacrificial altar, waiting for the monster to come and devour her, she thought. She was able to move her arms a few inches, no more, and the position made her feel incredibly vulnerable. Everything was open and accessible; she was reliant on his mercy. “A little scary, Sir.”

“I know, but you don’t have to be afraid. I won’t hurt you. Are you comfortable?”

She managed to nod.

“Good girl. Use your safeword if anything changes.” Zeke climbed off the bed, tugging a foil packet from his back pocket and tossing it next to her foot. In one swift move, he shoved his jeans down, kicking them aside, and fisted his cock in a firm grasp.

Olivia's heart, stomach, and internal organs compacted into one giant ball of fear.

Holy hell, why hadn't she remembered how big he was? She'd had him in her hand only the day before. Sure, she'd thought she was dreaming, but he looked significantly larger now, especially when his hand highlighted just how long he was. How thick.

Size made all the difference, right? Was that the difference between being able to walk the next morning or being hospitalized?

Eyes wide, she couldn't take her gaze off the *enormity* of her situation. As Zeke released the rigid shaft to rip open the condom, it took on a life of its own, bobbing under its own weight, the substantial length glistening with fluid dripping from the fat, mushroom-shaped crown.

A thick vein ran along the underside of the angry-looking phallus. The tip was darkly purple, tapering to shades of red further down his erection. Color was the only thing that tapered, she realized. His girth was as imposing as the length, with only a slight dip of leniency behind the plump head.

It only took him twenty seconds to roll the condom on, but they were the longest twenty seconds she'd ever lived through.

He grabbed a pillow from the top of the bed. "Lift your hips, Livvy."

Bracing her feet on the mattress, she obeyed, wetting her lips nervously as he wedged the pillow beneath her, tilting her pelvis. Her heart adopted a stuttering rhythm, the same one dictating her breathing.

Zeke knelt between her open legs, one hand stroking his pet monster, while the other caressed her knee. "Part your legs as wide as you can, Livvy. Make sure you're comfortable."

Tell him now, a little voice warned her direly.

Her feet inched over the covers, widening herself further. A moment later, he eased over her, his weight pressing her into the mattress and pinning her in

place. His arms slid beneath her shoulders; one hand curling over the curve, the other cradling her skull.

His erection lay on her mound, almost reaching her belly button.

“Don’t be scared, Olivia,” he murmured when her trembling increased. “Just listen to me, and everything will be fine. We’ll go slow.” His hips rocked until she felt the head of his cock part her labia, the soft petals of her sex blossoming around the shaft as he moved leisurely, coating the condom in her wetness. “There’s no rush.”

The friction felt good, the crown bumping her clit with every slow stroke. But anxiety was digging teeth into her nerves, waiting for the moment when everything changed.

Zeke kissed her face; from forehead to chin, every inch in between. He teased her mouth, luring her attention away from the big, bad beast knocking at her door. “Slow breaths in, angel. Long breaths out. Good girl. Nice, deep breath in,” he coaxed, nuzzling at her throat when she obeyed. “And out again. Just like that. Again.”

He calmed her, almost to the point she forgot there was a threat.

As she breathed in sync with him, her heartbeat wasn’t quite as erratic, and her muscles began to lose some of their tension. The murmur of his voice was the best dream, a constant stream of reassurance.

Olivia made a little purring sound.

“There we go. Nice and calm, Livvy. Relaxed and pliant.” He kissed her firmly on the mouth, his tongue diving back into their previous dance. “Another long inhale... blow it out.”

Lulled into complacency, she exhaled heavily, feeling his hips shift differently. As air rushed from her lungs, the fat crown didn’t bump into her clit to stoke the rising pleasure, but notched against her entrance, prying her open with the pressure from his hips.

A keening cry ripped out of her as she struggled, legs kicking weakly. She was too small; he was too big. Even as she stretched to accommodate him, the crown popped inside her, sweat springing over her skin. Hands fisting, the chains snapped taut.

“Easy, Livvy. Breathe. Catch your breath, angel.” Zeke’s concerned eyes filled her vision as it blurred. “I’m not the easiest man to take the first time. Try and relax again. I won’t move until you’re ready.”

Mewling pitifully, she realized he was leaning on his forearms, taking some of his weight off her. He was poised perfectly still with only the head of his cock inside her.

“How did you know?” she gritted between clenched teeth.

“Know what?” His lips skimmed her jaw.

She recognized she’d stepped onto the wrong path immediately. “Nothing.”

“Know what?” he repeated darkly, nipping at her throat in reprimand.

“Honestly, it doesn’t—” Olivia hissed at the sting of pain when he shifted slightly. “Please, it’s okay. You can move now; it doesn’t hurt so much.”

Eyes narrowing into dangerous green slits, Zeke studied her face. She saw the moment it all clicked into place for him, and shrank into herself. “I’m not the easiest man to take the first time,” he repeated under his breath. “Only, this isn’t just our first time together, is it? Is there something you want to tell me, Olivia?”

She shook her head slowly. No, she really didn’t want to confess anything, now or ever. Opting for a distraction technique, she raised her hips, encouraging his cock to sink deeper. At least until her breath snagged in discomfort.

“Are you a virgin?”

Her gaze swung to the right, away from those all-knowing eyes. “That

would be sad and not a little pathetic.”

“We’ll work on this evading honest answers shit you keep throwing my way,” he told her sternly. “Is my cock the first one in this snug cunt, Olivia?” He growled when all she could do was nod miserably, and then the hand curled around her shoulder snaked from beneath her to capture her throat in an erotically tight grip. “Good. It’s going to be the first and last you’ll ever know.”

Zeke

Why the hell hadn’t he guessed she was fucking innocent?

Everything about her screamed it at top decibel, for God’s sake.

Zeke growled again as fear, pain, and arousal merged with the shock in her eyes. The fact she was a virgin—or not, as the case may be now—triggered something primal in him he couldn’t control. He felt an outrageous desire to bite her pale flesh, leave his mark on her skin to let every other man know she was his. More than that, he wanted to rip the condom off, shove back inside her, and fuck her until her screams were as thick and rich as the cum he’d pump into her womb.

Reminding himself he was a civilized man, he yanked on his own chain until the blinding haze of possession ebbed slightly. She was openly shaking now, a scared butterfly pinned mercilessly beneath a predator.

Keeping his hand around her throat, he loosened his grip a fraction, gentling his voice. “This is something you should’ve told me before,” he admonished, resisting the urge to plunder the sweet pussy currently milking the head of his dick with little squeezes. “I could’ve hurt you badly, Olivia. I know my size; I know how much effort I need to put in the first few times before a woman gets used to me.”

Her mouth was tilting down at the corners, her misery palpable. “I didn’t think you’d notice.”

“I notice everything about you.” With a tsk of disapproval, he bent and brushed a kiss over that sad mouth. “A man would need a pencil-dick and a damn small brain not to feel how tight you are, Livvy. With a dick like mine, it’s an uncomfortable fit for most women, but you... you’re something else entirely.”

“Nearly got away with it,” she mumbled.

“Nearly,” he replied agreeably, “but you’d have regretted it. Now I know, I can minimize the damage instead of pushin’ you past your limits—and those are something we’ll discuss in greater detail later. Tomorrow, you’ll still be sore, but at least you won’t be hurtin’ the way you might have been.”

Wetness glimmered on her lashes; even though she kept her face turned away from him, he saw what she didn’t want him to, and he was determined to make the best of a difficult situation.

“No cryin’, angel. I ain’t mad at you, not how you’re thinkin’, anyway. But I need an honest answer right now, and you’re gonna look me in the eye when you give it to me.” He waited a beat, then two, before he cleared his throat sharply. “Look at me, Olivia.”

Reluctantly, she obeyed. It was easy to see her emotions in those stunning eyes; shame, pain, lingering arousal. Embarrassment and a dash of despair. And yes, those were definitely tears clinging to her eyelashes.

“This doesn’t have to go any further,” he murmured, making sure her gaze didn’t slide away again. He wanted to read every thought in her head, witness the truth she may or may not be able to give him. “Tell me if you want to stop. We can try again later if you need a break.”

Olivia paled, shaking her head. “No. No, I need you. If...”

Oh, he knew where this was going. Pulling out and losing the precious

ground he'd gained was tempting, he thought, if only to roll her over and spank the doubts from her mind. Working his way back in, however, might be more than his self-control could take. "If I still want you?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm." The fingers around her throat flexed lightly, a subtle warning. "I think you're in a spot of trouble, Olivia. Wanting you has never been an issue for me." He grinned when her eyes widened. "Breaking you in for my cock is gonna take time, and lots of practice."

Releasing her neck, he lowered his head and teased the erogenous zone across the top of her shoulder with his beard, making her squeak and wriggle delightfully. Her shocked laugh eased the tension surrounding them, and he felt her relax a fraction beneath him.

With a slow roll of his hips, he eased another inch inside her, stopping when she stiffened and whimpered. "You'll take all of me. Don't care if it takes all night, you'll take me down to the balls."

Plump lips parted, she sucked in a breath. "What if you get stuck?"

"Atticus is right down the hall," Zeke deadpanned. "I'm sure he's got some WD-40 and a crowbar handy, just in case." Because she looked so aghast at the prospect, he kissed her until she went limp. "It's called lube, Olivia, and there's a bottle in the drawer next to us."

"Oh." She gave him a sheepish smile. "I think my brain is frazzled."

"It's about to get worse." Kissing her again—mainly because *not* doing so seemed wasteful when her mouth was so close and so tempting—he rocked his hips slowly, drinking down her whimpers and moans like the finest aged scotch.

He wasn't a sadist as such, but he had to admit that the noises she made, the valiant effort she put forward as she tried to relax for him, was a strange kind of drug. He'd been with subs who insisted they could handle him, then

safeworded the moment they saw just how well-endowed he was.

Having a larger sized cock wasn't always a blessing; mostly, it was a goddamn curse.

Being a porn star wasn't his ambition, although a few of his bedmates in a previous life were adamant he'd have earned more money than he could spend in three lifetimes. He wasn't that kind of guy—never had been, never would be.

He craved a woman who accepted him for who he was. His cock was only a fraction of the whole, and it scared more women than it attracted. The brave ones regarded him as a trophy, a prize to be flaunted like a badge of honor. He swore some of them eyed his cock up like it was a lion to be shot, beheaded, and mounted on their goddamn wall.

But not his shy little virgin.

Not his Olivia.

He ran his free hand down her leg, urging her to hook it over his hip. The muscles tremored under his touch, but she obliged. Rewarding her with a quick nip on her bottom lip, he attempted a thrust, relishing the flare of pleasure along his spine, the fist-like pressure of her cunt as he finally filled her completely.

Oh yeah, she was perfect.

Resting his forehead against hers, Zeke smiled. "Still with me, Olivia?"

"Did God put you on earth to destroy women?" she whispered, her voice strained.

"No, Livvy, just to make them drool."

The chains jerked, her small hands straining to reach him.

Reaching up, he released them. In time, she would learn that he'd take pieces of her when they were in a scene—touch, sight, voice—but this had evolved past an introduction to BDSM. It seemed wrong to deny her the right

to touch when he was stripping her of everything and leading her down a dangerous path.

Immediately, her hands dove into his hair, fisting the short locks as a grateful sound hummed in her chest. The muscles sheathing him fluttered as though unsure what to do with the unexpected intruder.

Carefully, watching her eyes, he withdrew to the tip. A slow, firm drive of his hips seated him home again. Shock and pleasure flickered in the golden brown along with a flash of discomfort.

“Okay?”

“I-I’m not sure what to do.”

Because her heartbeat was pulsing thick and fast at the side of her neck, he skimmed his tongue over it, enjoying her quiet moan. She was responsive, beautifully so, and he took satisfaction in knowing she’d only ever be like this with him. Laying claim to her was primitive, primal, but between the letter, her virginity, and the fact she looked at him as though she’d love him even if he ripped her apart and put her back together again...

He was stealing an angel and not giving her back.

“Relax as best you can,” he told her between tastes of her skin. “Listen to what your instincts are telling you.”

A nervous laugh bubbled up and out of her as he began to move in a languorous rhythm. Without taking offence, he took his time, teasing her with shallow thrusts until her hips tentatively rose, trying to take him deeper.

He was partial to a quick learner.

Sinking deep, he growled when she clenched down on him. Circling his hips, he ground the base of his cock against her clit, stealing the startled gasp straight from her mouth.

“Zeke, please. I need... I need...” As though words weren’t enough to convey her desperation, she dragged her nails down his back, over skin and

scars. “More.”

Happy to oblige, he shifted for leverage. Still mindful of hurting her, he pumped faster, angling his pelvis until he felt her clench on a moan. Perfect. Sweat slicked his back as he controlled his urge to pound into her until she screamed when she came.

It all clicked into place, finally.

Olivia’s hips rose to meet his thrusts, fell away as he withdrew. Her eyes were dilating, her breathing coming in fast, stuttering pants. The bite of her nails became urgent, spurring him deeper.

She moaned his name.

“Reach down and play with your clit,” he ordered, grunting as jolts of impending orgasm trickled down his spine. Balls tightening, he counted down the seconds until she blew his mind. “Come all over my cock, angel. Let me watch you fall apart.”

“I don’t... I’ve never...” The lithe body beneath him bucked and shuddered.

Cursing, Zeke slid his hand between them, unerringly finding her swollen clit. Stroking, pinching, titillating the bundle of nerves until Olivia’s eyes turned into wide, uncertain windows. He saw the wonder, the shock, the spark of panic as she arched into him, mouth open.

He slammed home, rougher than he intended, sending her over the edge. Her pussy spasmed, several strong contractions wrenching his own orgasm into the condom. He held himself there, groaning as she cried out and milked him into insanity.

Even though his body ached with the satisfaction of a good fuck, his job wasn’t done. Kissing her sweetly, he rested his cheek against hers, murmuring soothingly as his free hand caressed bare, damp skin. “Easy now, Livvy. Such a good girl. All mine.”

She went utterly limp as the last ripples of pleasure ebbed. The death grip of her nails in his back loosened and fell away. Color infused her face; her eyes were shellshocked, edging toward slumberous.

As gently as he could, Zeke eased out of her, dislodging the leg still bravely clinging around the back of his thigh. Her whine of protest did marvelous things to his ego, especially when she lifted trembling arms to reach for him.

Now more than ever, he still wasn't convinced he deserved her, but it was too late.

Her taste was in his mouth. Her juices were lingering on his fingers, drying on the condom covering his cock, slicking his groin. There was beard rash... everywhere, he realized with satisfaction; neck, breasts, thighs, she wore his marks.

Every single one of them stated *Mine*.

Bending, he kissed her reverently, addicted to the shape and warmth of her mouth. When she hummed in contentment, he smiled. "Tired?"

Olivia struggled to focus on his face, even when they were practically nose to nose. "Heavy."

"You need sleep, Livvy. Close your eyes and get some rest." Unable to resist, he stroked a rough fingertip over satin-soft skin, tracing the contour of her cheekbone. "I'll clean you up, then join you for a while."

"Proms?" she slurred.

"I promise."

Chapter Four

Olivia

Zeke's voice was in her head before she woke fully.

Her back was flush against a wall of heat, vibrations humming into her from the source. She stirred, her lips pursing in discomfort as her sore pussy rubbed against the solid thigh slotted between hers. A strong arm around her waist tightened subtly as she stretched.

"Ow," she breathed.

Lips caressed the top of her shoulder, accompanied by the tickle of his beard. "Sore?"

Olivia assessed herself, frowning at the wash of bright sunlight illuminating the carpet beside the bed. Her shoulders ached, but not as much as the spot between her legs, or her insides.

The only thing to say was a repeated, "Ow."

Zeke's chuckle was amused, and far too smug. "Want me to kiss it better? Don't think you're ready to ride me yet, but I'll put my mouth to work if you need some TLC."

Her lips twitched despite her unease. "No touching. It feels weird."

"Touching feels weird, or your pussy?" he asked bluntly, concern evident in his tone.

Why, oh why, did she have to blush at the P word? It wasn't quite as embarrassing when she thought it, but hearing it aloud made the blood rush to her cheeks. Reacting this way was stupid; he'd had his mouth and hands—and the demon penis currently poking her butt—all over her just a few hours ago.

When she remained silent, Zeke tsked. "I suppose I'd best check for myself before we go for breakfast. If you're a good girl and don't wriggle, I'll even put some more aloe gel on your wounds."

Torn between reacting to the phrase *good girl* like a needy child and being horrified at the idea of him probing inside her, Olivia blew out a steadying breath. “D-Did I bleed?”

“No, Livvy.” His chin rested on her shoulder, his cheek rubbing her hair. “No blood, just some bruising. I made sure of it when I cleaned up.”

Okay, that part she had no recollection of, she thought. The last thing she was sure about was feeling herself unravel, the world splintering apart as her body twisted into a devilish knot, tighter and tighter, until she broke into several jagged pieces. “When I was sleeping?”

“Wasn’t much of a window to do it while you were awake,” he commented. “Did I hurt you, scare you?”

“No?” God, she needed to get out of this bed, away from him, before he started asking questions she’d undoubtedly answer without hesitation, because being naked with him was screwing with her head. “I, ah—”

Her breath hitched as his hand slid around her hip, down over her belly, to cup her sex in a featherlight hold. She hissed between her teeth, barely stifling a whimper.

“I need to feed you and get you in the shower,” Zeke murmured. “Before I do that, do you understand what happened last night, Olivia? The consequences of what we did?”

Her throat snapped shut. “Pregnancy?”

“Condom was intact; I’d like to enjoy you a hell of a lot more before children come into the equation.” His hand didn’t move, but the warmth of his fingers rekindled the ache in her tender core. “Last night, you gave me something precious. Weren’t going to tell me, were you, naughty girl?”

Her inner muscles clenched, much to her regret. The skim of his lips down the side of her neck didn’t help the growing need brewing inside her. “I didn’t think you’d notice.”

“So you said. What I want to know is, why you were a virgin at thirty years old, and more importantly, why me?”

She squirmed, then a brilliant idea came to mind. “I need the bathroom.”

His fingers flexed against her, jerking her hips into his touch. “The faster you answer my questions, the sooner you get to pee. Don’t forget I like honesty.”

“That’s blackmail!”

He said nothing, waiting patiently.

With an exasperated grunt that wasn’t entirely lady-like, she wrapped her fingers around his wrist. Not for control—apparently his dominant side was constantly in action—but for comfort. “My stepfather is a pervert. My mom married him when I was ten, and he was always... overly attentive. Dirty looks, inappropriate endearments and insinuations, plus sneaky touches here and there that made my stomach turn. Never in front of mom, and I always tried to stay away from him if she wasn’t home.”

Zeke’s growl was low and possessive, resonating with anger.

“When I was twelve, my breasts developed. I had a growth spurt, began to fill out in all the right places, and Jared’s attention became worse. I managed to convince mom that I needed a private space; maybe on some level she knew what she’d married, because she had a lock installed on my bedroom door, and only she and I had keys. I’d come home from school, lock myself in my room, and do my homework. After that, I spent the rest of the night on my computer, honing my skills with one eye on the door.”

“Hacking skills or research?”

“A bit of both. I have an aptitude for them, but hacking can be stressful, and I don’t always have a strong constitution. Data gathering relaxes me, especially if I have a meaty project to sink my teeth into.” She stroked the pulse in his wrist as she spoke, centering on that steady beat. “Jared would

get drunk or high, often both in equal measures, while my mom was at work, then proposition me to sit on his lap and give me a treat. Me being me, I accessed some porn sites and... some of it was exciting,” she admitted. “Some of it scared me, and the rest was downright appalling. But at least I was forewarned about what he was angling for.”

“How old were you?”

“Thirteen, maybe fourteen by that point. Old enough to watch people and read their body language, to learn that the majority of men were the same as Jared. Old enough to make the choice to stay away from them all. I didn’t trust the lock on the door, so I studied what makes girls appealing to men, and systematically changed myself to become less tempting to him.”

“Smart girl. Did it work?”

“No. He’d decided he was having me, one way or another. I took... measures,” she told him slowly. “Precautions. I hired out my tech skills, brought in some money doing stupid little jobs. Hooked myself up with birth control pills and bought a chastity belt off an online website. I wore it constantly until I left that house.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Zeke muttered. “Why didn’t you tell your mother?”

“Jared threatened to kill her if I did. He had his hand around the back of my neck, pressing my face against the wall. I’d just come out of the bathroom, didn’t take notice of my surroundings, and there he was. The belt thwarted his attempts to, ah...” A cold shudder ran through her. “He was angry, but that sucker couldn’t be removed without the key, and I’d rather have died than give it to him.”

“When did you leave home?”

“Home alludes to somewhere being safe, Zeke. I wasn’t safe there unless mom was home, and the more Jared smoked and drank, the longer hours she worked to keep the money for rent and utilities coming in. I ran when I was

sixteen. Created my own fake I.D. and added a few years to it. Mom wasn't happy, but we kept in touch."

"Then she got sick?"

"Yeah, terminal cancer." Her throat burned with unshed tears. "Two years of hell spent dodging Jared. I stayed with mom almost constantly, only going home when I knew he was getting shit-faced at a bar or down at the track. After she died, there were the arrangements to make for her funeral, so I slept in my own room, with the door locked, and I hightailed it back here as soon as I could."

He made a thoughtful sound deep in his chest. "Did you *always* lock your door, no exceptions?"

"None. It was the first thing I did when I shut the door."

"Did you ever wake up and find it unlocked?"

An uneasy feeling trickled through her. "No. What are you implying?"

"Nothing. Just mulling things over."

"Zeke."

He sighed. "You might not want to believe it, but you really do sleepwalk, Livvy. Several times a night if you're not restrained. If I retrieve you and put you back to bed, five minutes later, you're up and on the loose again."

Cogs started turning in her brain, following the direction he was pointing toward. Sickness churned in her gut as she realized *exactly* what he was thinking. "There's no way I'd sleepwalk out of a locked room, *if* I did something as stupid as that."

"You do," he assured her.

"I'd know if I had, right?" There was a pleading quality to her tone, one she was powerless to stop. "Hypothetically, if I sleepwalked into... that situation, I'd be feeling the way I do now. Sore and bruised, and there'd be signs."

“Yeah, you’d know. Was his interest in you alone, or were there others he had his perverted eye on?”

Olivia bit her lip. “I don’t know. He liked to watch the neighborhood kids, especially in summer.”

“Hmm. Have you any particular preference as to whether he remains breathing?”

Thinking he was joking, she snorted. “The world would be a nicer place without him in it. Even if you take away his predilections for ogling young girls, regardless of whether he touches them or not, he’s just an abusive asshole in general.”

“Tabitha likes assholes,” he said contemplatively. “Particularly the predatory ones.”

Her jaw dropped. “Tabitha as in *Tabitha*? As in Jasper’s sister, Tabitha?”

“As in tiny, bloody ninja, yes.”

“She’d kill him.”

“And take great pleasure in it,” he agreed, his tone dark and cold. “She might be insane, but she loathes anyone who bears a resemblance to her father. Jared sounds like he’d be her favorite plaything for a while.”

“But that would be murder...”

Shifting, Zeke rolled her onto her back beneath him, his eyes boring into hers as he covered her with his body. His cock appeared thrilled by the change in positions, the erect shaft resting against her thigh. “This is where I make one point absolutely clear. You are *mine*,” he told her in a no-nonsense tone. “Jared’s interest in you hasn’t abated, which means he’s a threat to you. I protect what’s mine, no matter what lengths I have to go to. If he hasn’t already started preying on the neighborhood girls, it won’t be long before he needs his fix. Tabitha will kill two birds with one stone.”

Hoping he’d let the subject drop, she asked, “So sex equals ownership?”

“A love letter, a very precious gift, and the fact you’re under my skin like the ink of a goddamn tattoo,” he explained, “don’t equate to ownership, Olivia. They do, however, rouse an undeniably strong desire to possess you, any which way you’ll allow.”

“Oh.”

“We’ll talk about this more when I’m not dyin’ to be inside you again. Seems unfair to discuss matters when you’re distracted.”

Huh? Olivia lifted her eyes to his, surprised to discover they’d drifted down to take a sneak peek of the brute that took her virginity. Not that she hadn’t seen it in its full glory, but maybe it wouldn’t look as intimidating in the daylight. “I’m not distracted.”

“Of course not. What did I just say?”

Uh-oh, had he kept on speaking while she... he really did have an excellent physique for a man of his age, she noted with a hum of pleasure when he leaned away. She traced the firm outline of his pectoral muscles, brushing her fingertips over the short, dark hairs covering them. She liked the scatter of silver ones.

And then there was the vague shadow of a six-pack running down his abdomen, bisected by a thick scar. Certainly not defined, but enough to negate a paunch. Plus, there was this cute little trail of hair leading all the way down to—

“Zeke! Daddy says breakfast is re—oooooh.”

Olivia’s head snapped up, her forehead connecting with Zeke’s chin. Her yelp was a mixture of shock and pain, but her embarrassment was ten times worse as her eyes slid to the side, where a woman with shoulder-length, raven black hair stood with a matching toddler on her hip.

Two pairs of shockingly deep blue eyes stared back at her.

It wasn’t hard to recognize Alicia; there was no forgetting Atticus’s

mischievous better half. Time had been kind to her, filling out her figure and face. She no longer resembled a discarded waif, but was a woman in her own right.

Damn her, she didn't look older than twenty, despite the small girl on her hip, the birth of her son, and the baby rounding out her belly.

"Did I knock myself out on the headboard last night?" Olivia murmured to Zeke from the corner of her mouth. "Give myself a concussion?"

He chuckled. "No."

"Are you sure? Because I'm ninety-nine percent sure I'm hallucinating..."

Alicia's mirage waggled her fingers in an excited hello wave.

"Lisha, we'll be out in a few minutes. Remind me to speak to your Daddy about teachin' you to knock."

"I knows about sex, silly. Anyways, yous under the covers."

"Not the point, and you know it."

As her lover argued with her boss's childlike wife, Olivia shrank into the mattress and prayed for the earth to swallow her whole, bed and all. How could she *not* take her surroundings into consideration before letting Zeke... do what he'd done?

She moaned like a dying moose, an utter sound of despair, when she realized she'd made a lot of noise last night. A lot of loud, obviously sexual noises. In someone else's home. While losing her virginity.

How much had they heard?

Okay, now she really did need the bathroom. Throwing up was in the cards, and she was reluctant to add to her already sky-high humiliation by evacuating her stomach contents all over the sheets.

"Privacy, Alicia. Now." Zeke's hand closed around Olivia's throat firmly, his fingers pressing down on a point that did something soothing to her anxiety as she tried to wiggle from beneath him. "Close the door on your way

out.”

The Little heaved a sigh. “Fine. I’ll tell Daddy you’re naked and need five minutes. Come on, Natasha. We’re having pancakes! Nom, nom, nom.”

Olivia didn’t relax until the door clunked shut loudly. The constriction around her throat made it hard to swallow, but the warmth of his palm connected her to him.

“Pancakes,” Zeke murmured enticingly. “Atticus’ specialty since he met Alicia.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

Green slits narrowed at her as he scowled. “Lost some weight since you’ve been taking care of your mom. Grief’s taken its toll too. You’ll eat, Livvy, because you need to, and because bad girls who faint from hunger don’t get fucked as hard or as often as they want.”

Her core clamped on emptiness, eliciting a full-body shudder. She was wet again, that damn ache reviving, but they both knew she needed time. His thumb caressed her pulse point in calming sweeps. “How much do you think they heard? I can’t sit at a table with people who’ve listened to me…”

“Come all over my dick like a queen?” Zeke’s expression softened. “Once Avalon reopens, I’ll take you there. It’ll open your eyes, and you’ll learn that we don’t care what noises you make or what your orgasm face looks like. We appreciate beauty in all its forms, angel; there ain’t nothing more beautiful than you chasin’ your pleasure and catchin’ it.”

There ain’t nothing more beautiful than you.

Seven words that brought love and warmth to her heart, and a vibrant blush to her cheeks. What the hell did her orgasm face look like to him? “People watch?”

“Watch, listen, study, value. For some subs, voyeurism and exhibitionism is easy; others—like you, I imagine—find it difficult to stop thinking and just

feel. It takes a great deal of trust for submissives to be under the spotlight at their Dom's request, and they often require the comfort and safety of a familiar place. There's no other experience like being fucked in public, in a friendly environment."

Fucked in public. She made a strangled noise, blinking up at him in shock.

"Don't give me those eyes," Zeke groaned. Kissing her fiercely, he rolled off her in a smooth motion. "Breakfast. Pancakes. If we don't move, Lisha will be back in here, bouncing on the damn bed, and I'll be inside that sweet pussy again before it's ready."

The loss of his warmth chilled her skin, but ice slithered down her spine when her gaze landed on the strong canvas of his back. A tapestry of survival, a testament to what he'd suffered through to still be here, his skin was a patchwork of scars.

Seeing them was a nasty blow, even though she'd been there during the treatment and healing process. Her hands knew the shape of them, the tangible difference between healthy skin and damaged, but some part of her cried silently for his pain.

Oblivious, Zeke bent and picked up his pants, turning as he stretched. The scar running down his belly started at his sternum and cut all the way down to his navel. There were more on his legs.

"Do your legs ache?" she asked as he stepped into his jeans, pulling them up to where his erection stubbornly refused to be hidden away. "The breaks were substantial."

He glanced at her, amusement in his eyes. "Are legs a euphemism for my cock? Because if it is, yeah, angel, it fucking aches like a bitch."

"No! Get your mind off that..." She licked her lips without thought as he tried to wrangle the zipper over the thick shaft. Clearing her throat, she shook her head to get *her* mind off it. "The blast messed you up, Zeke."

With a grimace, he got his dick into the confines of his jeans, much to her disappointment. The ruddy head emerged over the waistband in protest. “They give me shit sometimes, mostly if it’s wet or cold. Don’t get much of that here, so I manage okay. The scarring on my back restricts movement, but I’ve learned how to compensate.” He lifted his hand to the back of his head absently, then let it drop. “Get migraines every now and then, but at least my brain’s still intact.”

“You’re an optimist, huh? Always seeing the bright side of life?”

“Nah. I’m a realist, Livvy. Take what you get and deal with it. The only way is forward.” Flashing her a grin, he retrieved his shirt, tugging it over his head. She noted the way he twisted his shoulders, adjusting to the restriction he’d spoken of. “Don’t mean I don’t see the bright side, though. Looking at her right now, ain’t I?”

She melted into a puddle on the mattress. She should be scrambling to cover her nakedness, but the hot stroke of his eyes over her body as he emerged from the shirt was enough to pin her in place.

He held out his hand. “Up you get, angel.”

Sliding her fingers into his palm was the easiest thing she’d ever done, but the instant she moved, Olivia realized last night was going to stalk her for at least a week. Her moan was full of discomfort; every muscle in her body, particularly those *down below*, was adamantly refusing to cooperate.

“Just leave me here; I think I’m broken.”

Laughing, Zeke bent and scooped her up. “Guess I’ll have to fix you then.”

Zeke

Breakfast was a chaotic affair.

Sipping his coffee, Zeke took in the scene with interest.

Atticus and Alicia worked together in unison to feed Natasha and Link.

The wide-eyed little girl refused to take her eyes off Zeke, staring at him in a way that suggested she was searching his soul for flaws.

Link, however, was laughing like a loon, smushing his toast in his tiny hands, smearing peanut butter *everywhere*. His bright green eyes were alive with the joy of a two-year-old, mischievous and full of wonder as he offered Olivia the mashed ruins of his breakfast.

Hesitantly, she accepted the gift. “Ah... thank you?”

Like a baby bird, he opened his mouth, giggling.

“Mind his teeth,” Lisha called over her shoulder. “He’s a little monster when he’s in a mood.”

Olivia’s hand paused a few inches away from the kid, and she shot Zeke a glance that told him she was completely clueless how to proceed, which raised questions.

Did she have no experience with children? Or people in general?

While she knew their hosts, she was quite clearly uncomfortable, and he suspected it wasn’t just because she’d lost her virginity in the guestroom. This ran deeper, as though being around people—no matter how friendly or young—was a foreign concept.

“Here,” Atticus rumbled, walking over with a cloth. He took Livvy’s wrist gently and removed the mangled toast, wiping her fingers clean much like he would Natasha’s. That jungle-green gaze met Zeke’s, and he winked as though stating he wasn’t poaching. “Link isn’t the finger-eating cannibal his mom makes him out to be, Olivia.”

Hunching her shoulder, she tipped her cheek into it. The gesture was remarkably shy for a woman so confident in other areas. She’d barely touched her pancakes, pushing them around in the syrup on her plate, which

simply wasn't acceptable.

For a tall, well-built woman, she was underweight. Stress and grief ate the flesh off a person's bones, given enough time. Two years of it was more than she could handle, in his opinion, so he reached out and snagged the side rung of her chair, dragging her over to him.

Link clapped his hands and laughed uproariously.

"Can I trouble you for some fresh pancakes, Att?" Zeke asked politely, yanking Olivia off her seat and onto his lap. She squirmed, then stilled when his fingers found her nape, massaging the cable-taut muscles. "Someone needs a helping hand this morning."

Alicia hummed softly. "I love when Daddy feeds me. Especially after sex."

Olivia jolted, her expression growing distressed. "I... we..."

"We'll be outta your hair by lunch," Zeke interjected, taking pity on her. He loved Alicia dearly, but sometimes she had no goddamn filter. "The stuff you salvaged from the house can be shipped over to mine when you've got time, Att, or we can put it in the truck. The junk heap's been dealt with?"

A foreboding expression crossed the big guy's face. "Towed. The money will be in her account by the end of the day; there'll be a new company vehicle delivered this afternoon."

"Wait... what?" Olivia croaked.

"Quiet, angel," he murmured against her hair. "You've escaped the lecture up until now, let's not draw his attention."

"But... you towed my car?"

Chuckling, Zeke just shook his head. She was fiercely protective about what was hers—her possessions, her space, everything she needed to remain in her solitary bubble. After what she'd told him about Jared, it wasn't surprising.

“I towed that worthless hunk of dangerous metal masquerading as a car,” Atticus snapped. “The piece of sh—”

“Sugar,” Alicia interrupted sweetly.

“—sugar,” he corrected smoothly, “that you shouldn’t have driven to Nevada two years ago, let alone all the way back. I understand you’re independent, Sonic, and you treasure your privacy, but putting yourself and others at risk by driving that heap is unacceptable. All for the sake of forgoing pride and asking me for a loaner vehicle?”

Color leached from her face. “It wasn’t pride.”

“No? Then what? Whatever it is, was it worth potentially killing yourself?”

Oh, that was the wrong tactic to take. The woman on his lap was shutting herself off, hunkering down where words held no control over her. He felt the shift in her, the walls erecting to protect herself. “Atticus, leave it to me.”

“My employee—”

“My woman. My sub. Leave it to me.”

Glowering, Atticus surveyed the pair of them. Inhaling deeply through his nose, he rolled his head until his neck cracked, finally nodding in agreement. “Make sure she understands the ramifications of putting herself in danger, Zeke.”

“She will.” Still massaging her nape, he ran his tongue around his teeth, smiling at Alicia as she plopped a plate of fluffy pancakes in front of him. “Thanks, darlin’. I need to ask a favor, Att.”

A thick black brow arched. “Another?”

“One you might not be keen on granting.”

“Oh Christ. Hit me with it.”

“Begins with a T and ends with *absolutely insane*.”

Atticus groaned. “You know I can’t guarantee she’ll play ball, Zeke. I love

the girl, but she's a fucking wildcard."

The savage cough Alicia gave him was entertaining, especially when he turned a baleful glance on her.

"She'll gear up for this one," Zeke assured him before he could freak Olivia out completely by hauling his Little over the kitchen counter to spank her. "Sexual predator, likes them young and uses intimidation tactics as a grooming method. Don't know how many girls he's got his eye on right now, but if he isn't already molesting them, he's got plans to escalate."

Atticus's gaze sharpened. "How do you know?"

"Because the one he's coveted for twenty years just walked out of his life."

Lecturing Daddy Dom became Guardian Daddy Dom in a heartbeat. Fists clenched, Atticus stared at Olivia as though trying to see wounds she might be hiding. "Did he..."

"No." Zeke understood his concern. "My girl's smart, and she took precautions, but he set her in his sights at ten years old and hasn't let her go. What he wants most is mine now, but even with that gone, I think he'll still come after her. Likely punish her for not saving her virginity for him."

Olivia made a soft, desolate sound of dismay.

He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her in close. He was divulging secrets that weren't his to tell, but they'd go no further than this room. "But just because Livvy isn't in his immediate reach doesn't mean he can't pluck one of the young girls from his neighborhood."

"You were her first?" Alicia asked with a happy sigh. She sneaked under her Daddy's arm and buried her face against him. "I wish you'd been my first. Maybe it wouldn't have hurt so much."

Pain flickered in his friend's eyes, along with impotent anger. "I know, princess. Olivia's very lucky she found someone to take care of her."

The look Zeke exchanged with Atticus made his intentions perfectly clear: he was the one, the *only* one, who'd be taking care of her every need from now on. If that meant utilizing the skills of a pixie-sized, bloodthirsty assassin who loved her blades more than any person on earth, then so be it.

"Tabitha swanned off to Europe for a couple days, something about dissecting frogs." Atticus smirked as Link shrieked something that sounded more like *fog*, then made bouncing motions with his fists. "Yeah, buddy, frogs."

More like her father than her energetic mom, Natasha continued to assess the situation with those big blues. She'd be one to watch as she got older; her reticence and suspicious appraisal of life might be a hindrance, or the perfect tool to slide her in as her father's right-hand woman.

"I'll pass Tab a message through the system, ask her if she has time to deal with the problem. She'll want to know who the request is from," Att warned, dropping a kiss on Lisha's head. "You ready for that bombshell to drop on your head?"

Zeke reached out and picked up the fork, using it one-handed to cut a piece of pancake, spearing the chunk. He started to lift it, but Alicia tsked at him, stepping away from her husband to grab the syrup bottle and smother the plate in sticky goodness. "Thanks, Lish. As for Tabitha... she likes me," he said with a rueful smile. "I got the seal of approval when she visited me in hospital."

Olivia's head rose, her brow furrowed. "When was this?"

He dipped the pancake in syrup, then shoved it in her mouth before she argued. "Not long after they brought me out of the coma, I think. Time was hazy for a while after that. Don't even think about spitting that out," he admonished when she attempted to do just that. "Chew, swallow, repeat."

Expression mulish, she obeyed, then said, "I was there with you the entire

time.”

It warmed his heart; she really had been. For months—from what he remembered and been told afterwards—she’d barely taken bathroom breaks, and things like showering and eating were activities she’d been brow-beaten into doing by the Masters.

Another chunk of pancake on the fork, he replied with, “You were, Livvy. Fast asleep, if I recall, with your head on the bed.” Where his fingers combed through the bright blue locks reverently; the only time he’d been able to touch her and dream of what might be. “She came prancing into the room, took one look at you, and froze like a deer in the headlights.”

“Wha—” In went the next forkful.

“Someone’s gonna have a handful with her,” he told Atticus, grinning as Olivia spluttered. “All the power of a rocket packed into that pint-sized package?”

Atticus grimaced. “Add in the triggers she undoubtedly picked up through Dominic’s training, and *boom*.”

“*Boom!*” Link yelled in delight.

“Exactly, buddy.”

“Apparently, Tabitha heard about the explosion, and came to apologize. Not somethin’ I expected an experienced assassin to do,” he confessed, continuing with his pancake mission. “They don’t apologize for their own sins, let alone those of their father, but she came in—a lot calmer once she saw I wasn’t alone—and told me the family owed me a debt. Makin’ amends for what Dominic put us through, I guess.”

“And I didn’t wake up?” Olivia demanded. “I’m not a heavy sleeper, I—” Her words jumbled around the fresh food he filled her mouth with, and she scowled in frustration.

“Angel, I hate to tell you this, but when you’re exhausted, you sleep real

deep. Ain't had a chance to sleep next to you on a normal night yet, but from what I've seen so far, there ain't much wakin' you once you're under." He wagged the fork at her mumbled protest, then touched his lips to her ear. "Wonder if ruttin' my cock into this delightful cunt would be enough to rouse you? Or maybe in that tight little asshole."

Color turned her cheeks cherry red. This time, when he offered her a bite, she took it without protest, chewing slowly with her wary eyes locked on him.

"Good girl," he murmured, rubbing his beard against her cheek.

"I think Darius made the same offer to Liam and Sierra," Atticus was saying as Alicia lifted Natasha from her chair to cuddle. "Braun, too. Seems they want to make reparations."

Running his tongue around his teeth, Zeke blew out a breath and thought about the five million dollars currently padding out his bank account. Money he daredn't touch, because while he had an inkling where it came from, he wasn't sure he wanted any part of Dominic's ill-gotten gains, whether they were given in charity or not.

Whoever siphoned the money into his account had also written off his medical bills—he still wasn't sure if they'd been paid, or if the hacker in the family had just slid into the system and erased them.

He wondered if Braun and Liam had found themselves burdened with similar *gifts*.

Maybe he'd ask them.

"Tell Tabitha it's me askin' the favor," Zeke told him. "Just make sure she knows to use the front door—and knock first—if she comes for information. My girl's shy, and an unexpected audience at a bad time might spook her."

Olivia moaned in embarrassment, and voluntarily filled her mouth with food.

“Your girl,” Alicia crooned. Little hearts swam in her eyes. “I’m so happy for you both. Don’t deny you’ve been on your own for too long, Zeke,” she said with a huff. “We’ve been worried about you.”

“No need to worry about me, darlin’. I’m right where I want to be.”

But she’d already brushed him aside, her attention on Olivia. “Having a Dom is so much fun! Once the nerves pass, it’s so freeing. And the orgasms,” she giggled, fanning herself with the hand not cupping a toddler’s butt, “are out of this world. You did give her an orgasm, didn’t you, Zeke?”

“Alicia.” Att sighed in exasperation.

“Well, he needs to up his game if he didn’t,” she protested. “Every woman should know what it feels like, especially if she’s a virgin. Daddy gave me my first,” she confided to Olivia. “My father didn’t really care about anything but getting his rocks off, but he was a—”

“Very bad man,” Atticus finished as Olivia choked. “Lisha didn’t have a conventional sexual awakening.”

Zeke’s brow lowered. While Livvy probably knew more about the Masters and their significant others than anyone, he didn’t want her slapped in the face with a reminder of what her fate might have been. Nor did he need her scared off by Alicia’s eager recitations of explicit scenes; not the morning after she’d ventured past her limits.

“I think it’s time for a shower,” he decided, pleased to see Olivia’s plate was almost clean. He pressed a kiss to her temple as a reward, then inclined his head at Atticus. “Will you be there on Friday?”

“Sitter’s booked. You?”

“Don’t know yet. Depends on…” His eyes slid to Livvy. “Everything.”

“Oh, you should come! Girls’ night!” Alicia declared, bouncing Natasha excitedly on her hip, and stirring Link into a frenzy of clapping. “We’re all going to be there, and you can meet everyone. I mean, I guess you know most

of us, but you haven't seen us all in a while and—”

Olivia shrank into Zeke's chest, her face reflecting what she thought of socializing on a grand scale. If she joined the subs' circle, she'd be number eight, and he got the feeling eight was not a magic number in her opinion.

“We'll see, Lisha. There's a lot to talk about before Olivia dives in; the lifestyle isn't for everyone, remember, and it's daunting for some people.”

The Little's face fell. “Oh. Of course, I'm sorry. Getting ahead of myself.”

“It's fine.” Zeke helped Livvy slide off his lap, steadying her as she stumbled. “Head for the shower, angel. I'll be there in a minute.”

“D-Do you need help with the dishes, sir?” she asked Atticus.

“No, sweetheart, I've got it. But thank you.”

With a nod that was completely submissive, she trudged toward the hallway.

“Got any pain meds, Att?” Zeke asked quietly as he stood. “I think she's feeling rougher than she's letting on.”

“I'll get you some. Zeke... I love you like a brother; we all do. The Masters consider you one of the family, you know that, right?”

His lips twitched.

“Sonic's one of my best techs. Even working remotely, her standards didn't drop until the last few weeks—for obvious reasons. More than that, she's become part of the family too, only in a different branch. If you hurt her...”

“I get it, Att. If I hurt her, it won't be a hospital stay this time; I'll need a coffin.”

“That about sums it up.”

“Don't expect anything less.”

Olivia

She was peopled out.

Alicia's enthusiasm and Atticus's commanding persona were like walls around her. Add in the considering stare of the little girl and the almost chaotic energy pouring off Link, and she was thoroughly drained.

On top of that, she was exhausted.

Sitting on Zeke's lap hadn't helped her internal ache, not one iota. While he'd been shoving food into her mouth, her brain replayed how it felt to take his cock inside her, an inch at a time, stretching her open, bonding her to him in a way she couldn't describe.

She was bruised and emotionally wrung out.

Pushing open the door into the guest bathroom she'd used earlier, Olivia forced herself to the shower and blinked at the fancy controls, playing with knobs and levers until water streamed from only one of the dinner plate-sized heads instead of all four.

Debating whether to strip, she closed the toilet lid and sat down, leaning back against the ceramic tank and closing her eyes. It wasn't the comfiest position, yet... she slipped beneath the surface of consciousness, not deep enough to be asleep, but hovering between them.

There was too much data to process, even from a simple breakfast discussion.

Her insides quaked at the thought of Tabitha hunting down Jared and doing unspeakable things to him, but it did bring a semblance of comfort knowing he'd never be able to hurt innocent girls ever again.

There was shame and abject humiliation, knowing her boss now possessed intimate knowledge about her sexual status—not only that she'd been a virgin up until last night, but also that Zeke was her first lover.

And going to the club? That was what the latter part of the conversation

was about, she was sure. Going to the club for a girls' night struck anxiety straight into her heart like a jagged spear, twisting until she tasted copper in her mouth.

Five minutes with her, and the women she mostly knew from reading their data on a computer screen would think she was standoffish, rude, socially inept.

Well, they wouldn't be completely wrong, would they?

Goldfish developed better social skills than she'd ever have.

A hand cupped the back of her head. "Open your mouth, angel."

Mired in the in-between, she obeyed, recognizing both the touch and the voice. Something dropped onto her tongue, but before she thought to spit them out, the cool rim of a glass pressed against her lips, and water spilled.

Swallowing reflexively, she winced as the pills disappeared down her throat.

"Good girl, Livvy. They'll take the edge off the pain. Arms up."

More blind obedience, letting Zeke's calm tone guide the way forward. Bit by bit, he stripped her down to bare skin and raw emotions, his hands stroking her gently in reassurance.

"Shouldn't be this tired, angel. How long have you been running on an empty tank, pushing yourself to the limit every day?"

Though her eyes were too heavy to open, she allowed him to lead her to where the water hissed loudly, warm steam dampening her skin. A moan rattled the air as heat pelted her in a multitude of drops, beating it into muscles strained by fatigue.

Arms wrapped around her waist, and she felt his chin rest on top of her head as water sluiced down over them. His chest was a wall at her back, his cock thickening lazily against her ass.

How long they stood like that, she didn't know. Time was lost in the flow

of the water and the safety of his embrace. If she went limp, he'd hold her up. There wasn't any reason to believe she'd fall when he was with her, and that was something she'd never had.

Someone to lean on.

Eventually, Zeke shifted, and the scent of something spicily masculine infused the steam. Bergamot and cinnamon, with a hint of muskiness. He eased her partially from under the showerhead, lathering her from nape to ankles in rich foam, massaging every inch of her as though he understood how crippling the tension inside her had become.

When he spun her around carefully and set to work on her front, her arms lifted of their own volition to cover herself, only to be gently pushed down again.

“No hiding, Livvy. There's no reason to hide away from me. I love all of you, love having my hands on you, love watching how you respond to me even when you're too tired to open your eyes.” His tone picked up a lullaby cadence, rhythmic and soothing. “When you're naked and with me, I want to take my time and study all this beauty, down to the last freckle.”

But his touch wasn't designed to arouse, she realized. Yes, she was growing wet, but only because it was him. It was a chronic problem she'd suffered from since the day she met him, and nothing she could change.

He was simply tending to her.

Her only resistance was when his big hand found the tender spot between her thighs, his fingers rubbing soap all around the nooks and crannies of her pussy. Everywhere but the sensitive inner flesh. She was so freaking tender, just the brush of his callouses was enough to bring a keening moan to life.

Painstakingly thorough, Zeke took the time to rinse every trace of soap from her body before he poured more of it on her hair, his fingers kneading her scalp almost as much as they washed her locks.

Swaying from side to side, she missed his touch when he began his own hygiene routine, but the fact he kept one thigh between hers for support didn't escape her notice.

The water switched off.

He squeezed the wetness from her dripping hair before wrapping a towel around her head, then she was bundled into another, the soft cotton engulfing her. When he scooped her up, she allowed herself to relax, going lax in his arms.

“That’s it, good girl,” he purred, his voice resonating with pleasure. “It’s okay if you want to sleep. I’ve got you. Let me take care of you.”

It was easy to fall away, surrounded by him.

Chapter Five

Zeke

Zeke,

I feel terrible, sneaking away like this, but you're sleeping so peacefully after the most awful day, and I don't want to wake you. I know your dreams are troubled, and sleep eludes you most nights, so stealing that from you feels wrong, even if it means I don't get to say goodbye face to face.

It's not goodbye forever.

My mom called with bad news. She's been diagnosed with bone cancer, and her prognosis isn't good. They're starting treatment immediately, trying to stave off the disease, but I know statistics, and they don't fall in her favor.

I need to go and do what I can for her. Her husband isn't the caring type, or supportive in any way, and she needs love and care if there's any hope for her at all.

My heart is torn. I love my mom, I really do, but we lost any closeness we had when she married Jared. Still, it doesn't change the fact that she is my mother, and I love her. I'll be there for her as long as she needs me, but while I'm with her, my heart and my thoughts will still be here with you, giving you strength from afar.

I'm not brave enough to say these words to your face, Zeke, but I need to say them one way or another, so I'll lay them out in black and white where they can't be lost or forgotten.

I love you.

Every day I'm with you, my love for you grows. It's not fancy and wistful like it's described in some of the books I read, but strong and dependable. A bond I didn't see coming and wouldn't break for the world. A love I've dreamed of but never expected to feel.

I don't know if you feel the same, if that bond touches you the way it's

claimed me. I can only hope it does, that it tugs at you and gives you the same sense of finally belonging that I cling to every time I hear your voice or look in your eyes.

I want to belong to you, Zeke.

I'll put my contact details at the bottom of this letter, and if you can forgive me for slipping into the night like this and want to hear my voice the way I crave to hear yours, you can contact me any time day or night.

I'm always here for you, no matter what.

Leaving my heart with you, and thinking about you every day.

Olivia x

He'd read the note so many times, the words written so neatly in Olivia's graceful handwriting were burned into his memory. The sweet earnestness in each sentence brought images of her sitting beside his bed, glancing at his face while he slept, trying to gather her feelings into something describable, transferable through the pen onto paper.

As Zeke sat on the foot of his bed, note in hand, watching Olivia sleep for going on the seventh hour, he studied himself internally. Taking himself apart piece by piece and examining each bit with genuine curiosity.

What was it about him which inspired such words of love and loyalty from a woman like her?

Physically, yeah, he supposed he wasn't bad on the eyes. Not everyone's cup of mocha, but then no one in the world appealed to everyone on the damn planet. Preening in a mirror wasn't his style; he was comfortable with his reflection for as long as it took to trim his beard in the morning.

He wasn't ripped like some of the Doms at the club, but he held his own in the gym when he deigned to visit. The scars on his back were a focal point, drawing eyes and judgement. Gym bunnies were either intrigued by them or

repulsed, but neither was his problem.

The gift God gave him was likely more of a deterrent than a lure. Both thicker and longer than average by a few inches, he'd been lucky Olivia entertained even the idea of accepting him, let alone doing so fully.

So, that left his personality.

Zeke choked on a self-deprecating snort.

For an old guy, his sense of humor wasn't too outdated; he made the subbies laugh at family barbeques, and the kids loved him on the nights he babysat. At least the oldest ones called him Uncle, not Grandpa—he wasn't sure his pride would stand up to that title just yet.

Maybe he had a temper, but it was kept under lock and key. When a man held a woman's trust in his hands along with her vulnerable body, there was no place for quick fists or a volatile tongue.

Patience, compassion, and *understanding* were far more effective at soothing a nervous submissive, and there were kinder ways to reprimand a recalcitrant female than beating the brat out of her.

Sex didn't really apply to these calculations, he reminded himself, studying the note again. At the time she wrote it, they hadn't shared so much as a kiss, so anything intimate wasn't relevant.

Perhaps he should just be grateful that she *did* love him instead of digging into the why. Did it honestly matter if it was his witty conversational skills or his burned, battered body which had done the trick?

No. No, the only thing he needed to focus on was loving her back and figuring out a way to keep her.

Collar, cuffs, or ring?

Olivia

It was incredibly annoying to wake in yet another strange bedroom, to discover that she was naked. Peering under the covers, she sighed at the sight of her pale legs almost glowing in the shadows, and her exposed red curls guarding the apex of her thighs.

Remembering Zeke's proclamation that he liked them short, she was grateful he hadn't shorn her while she slept.

Dropping the covers, she blinked away the fuzziness of her vision and took the time to examine the room in the light from the dimmer lamp beside the bed. Blackout blinds were on the windows, sealing off the view outside. The furniture was cherrywood; a light layer of dust covering most of it, but quality pieces from what her inexperienced eyes told her.

A rug sprawled over the varnished floorboards, the black and green threads matching the bedcovers.

It was very simplistic. Homey, but inherently masculine.

With a groan, Olivia forced herself to sit up and swing her legs off the bed, the first step toward returning to being a productive human female. The covers beckoned her back, luring her with siren songs of how soft and warm they were, teasing her with images of what they might accomplish if she just stayed in bed...

Tempting. So fucking tempting when fatigue gnawed lazily on her bones.

"No," she reprimanded herself sternly. "It's time to go to work and fall into the swing of things again. Find a bathroom, and take a shower. Rustle up a toothbrush, then hunt down caffeine and the laptop."

"Not happening, Livvy."

Her head jerked up, swinging toward the door where Zeke stood, arms folded across his chest, backlit by bright sunshine from what she presumed was a hallway. Her heart melted at the thought of him leaving a nightlight on for her so she wouldn't wake in darkness.

Dressed only in jeans, his torso and feet bare, he was edible. The top button of those jeans was open, the zipper fastened, but she swore the man had a future as a model if he wanted to pursue it. If a photographer captured that glowering intensity and fierce dominance, it didn't matter what the product was, the shelves would be empty in minutes.

"The team is relying on me—"

He grunted. "The team utilized you throughout your mother's terminal illness, Olivia. Aside from the day of her death and the one after, you continued to work without informing your employer of a death in the family." His disapproval was blatantly clear. "Two years of unceasing stress and you never asked for help. Is it any wonder you had a fucking mental breakdown?"

Mental breakdown was a little extreme, she thought. "I feel better."

"Callin' bullshit on that. Stand up," he challenged.

Did he think she was incapable of functioning because she'd gotten upset and burned her frustration off with work? That was just how she operated; she dealt with her emotions more efficiently if she focused on a problem outside the one bugging her.

Willing to rise to the bait and prove him wrong, Olivia pushed herself to her feet. She lasted all of three seconds before her legs began to shake, and her knees buckled. Her butt bounced back onto the mattress it had just vacated.

"What day is it, Olivia?" Zeke stalked over to loom above her. "How long do you think you've been asleep?"

Oh God, he smelled so fucking good. She sucked in a deep breath, letting his scent fill her lungs and bubble like champagne in her veins. Her eyes latched onto the happy trail leading down past his waistband, realizing her mouth was almost perfectly aligned with his cock.

What would it feel like to take him in her mouth? Would he fit?

“Olivia.”

“Huh?”

“What day is it?”

“Ah...” Oh, she was terrible with days and time. Losing track of both on a regular basis. “Monday?”

“No. How long have you been asleep?”

She frowned. She’d definitely slept longer than she had in... forever.

“Eight hours?”

His expression warned her that was a big, fat *no*.

“Ten?” Her eyes widened in shock. “*Twelve?*”

“It’s Friday morning, Olivia. You’ve been asleep for just over three days straight.”

No, that was impossible. She’d have been less surprised if he told her she’d *worked* for three days straight. Sleeping for that length of time seemed... excessive. “But... I remember...”

“Going to the bathroom? Protein shakes?” He gave her a knowing look. “I wasn’t sure you would. Waking you was a trial in itself, and you were hardly lucid. You’ve exhausted yourself to the point where your body is more acclimatized to functioning in limp mode, Olivia. So fucking tired that even sleepwalking was too much.”

She curled her hand between her bare breasts. “I don’t—”

Unfolding his arms, he grasped her head, sliding his fingers through the riot of bed-mussed curls to grip her skull gently. “It stops now. Atticus has given you a month’s bereavement leave, with permission to take more if needed. If I catch you on a laptop, there’ll be consequences. If I find you working on anything other than expanding your knowledge of pop culture, there will be bigger consequences.”

“Zeke—”

“No, Olivia. This might be overextending my reach as your Dom, especially with the... relationship being as new as it is,” he said with the slightest frown, “but Atticus was right when he said you need one. Drowning yourself in work isn’t healthy. On the heels of a close family death, it’s dangerous. My job as your Dom isn’t just to fuck you as creatively as my imagination allows.”

Was it wrong that she loved having him cradle her head this way? The support of his hands felt as though he was lifting the weight off her shoulders, giving her room to breathe. As gentle as he was, it didn’t escape her notice that he was enunciating his words fully, not drawling them in the way that made her squirm.

He was deadly serious.

“It means I have a responsibility to keep you safe and unharmed, even from yourself. So, starting today, you’ll have a new routine.”

“Um, no. I have my own...” She trailed off when his frown deepened.

“Your own routine is in the trash, angel. Mornings now consist of a shower, breakfast, exercise, and either reading or watching TV.” He tilted her head back, gauging her reaction. “A healthy meal at lunch, followed by something stimulating, then a nap. We’ll adjust dinner and evening plans as we go.”

That all sounded horribly *scheduled*. She liked things in their own place, neatly organized. Everything but her daily routine. Freedom to work as she pleased was vital to keeping her anxiety contained.

“I know you’re going to hate it. Breaking bad habits isn’t easy, but if we don’t break this one... I’m scared of what will happen if we don’t.”

“Zeke, come on. It’s not like I’m putting myself in danger,” she tried to reason.

“Sixteen-hundred-mile trip in a car not fit to star in a demolition derby,”

he reminded her pointedly. “Neglecting to keep Atticus informed of your circumstances. Attempting to stay in a house riddled with enough biohazards to kill a cat nine times over.” His eyes darkened, and she realized that she might be in danger now. “*Staying* in a house, unescorted, with a man who’s lusted after you since you were a fucking child.”

Olivia cringed, admitting how bad those infractions sounded when said aloud in a string of offenses. Perhaps she had been slightly inconsiderate with her own safety, but now she was aware of how... reckless she’d been, she could rectify that and make efforts to not be quite so naïve in future.

She was about to tell him that when he bent and kissed her forehead.

“I’ve waited a long time for you, angel. I’m not losing you now I’ve got you. That bond you talk about in your letter? Yeah, I feel it. It’s strong and vibrant, and so fuckin’ possessive that all I want to do is drag you to Loki’s shop and ask him to tattoo my goddamn name on you.”

“That would certainly make a statement,” she mumbled, dazed by the declaration.

“Don’t think I won’t do it if you push me past my limits.”

Of their own volition, her hands lifted to his forearms, not to push him away, but just to reinforce the connection between them. They were thick, corded with muscle; his skin was warm and smooth on the underside, finely dusted with hair on top.

Powerful, capable of hurting her easily, yet even when his emotions were riled, he treated her with the utmost care.

“I don’t like that you’re worried about me. I’ve never had anyone who cared enough to stage a one-man intervention on my behalf.” Olivia bit her lower lip. “I lose myself in projects because I’m the best *me* when I’m on the laptop. Outside of work, I don’t really know who I am. I mean, I love to read, and apparently, I’m a sucker for hot sex with an older, experienced man

whose penis declares war on women, but I don't think I'm like normal people."

Zeke snorted, then shook his head. "We have a month to figure that out, then. I don't love normal people, Livvy; I love *you*. I'm not expecting you to change so drastically that you lose yourself, but just enough to open your eyes and see the dangers that exist beyond the screen."

Like a child cuddling a stuffie, she hugged those three words tightly. Hearing them from him after she'd given up hope was akin to sinking into a hot bath after being frozen to the bone in a snowstorm; a little painful at first, until the heat erased the chill, and then it became wonderfully peaceful.

Olivia admitted that his expectation for her safety wasn't an unfair request. On the contrary, it was probably a smart one, considering she had a propensity for wearing blinders when it came to real life situations. He was right; she spent weeks of her time tracking down the worst of the worst through a computer without recognizing what was happening around her.

If a few weeks of rest and relaxation helped her to become more aware of her surroundings by reversing the effects of her constant exhaustion, then taking advantage of his help was likely a wise move.

"Okay," she acquiesced. "I will try and be more amenable to a change in routine."

"Thank you." Releasing her head, he gave her a warm smile. "Hit the showers, angel. I'll make sure breakfast is ready when you're done. There weren't a lot of clothes in your suitcase," he added with a disapproving frown, "so we made an educated guess at your size." He gestured to a set of drawers near the door. "You'll find everything you need in there."

"We?"

His grin flashed. "Atticus and I did some online shopping; he knows your everyday style better than I do. Alicia threw her opinion into the mix, so

don't be surprised by the rabbit onesie she ordered.”

“Rabbit... onesie?” Baffled, she gaped at him.

The grin turned carnal. “Atticus assures me the butt flap comes in handy.”

Liquid heat pooled between her legs. Cheeks burning hotly, she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, unsure what her reaction should be. Her nipples perked up, her breasts growing heavy at the thought of Zeke yanking down the flap when she was least expecting it, his fingers touching her folds and preparing her to take his thick length inside her.

“Apparently the princess struck gold,” he murmured, eyes glowing with the reflection of her arousal. She squeaked as he tugged her to her feet, but he only looked at her as though he wanted to eat her. “No sex until you're showered, fed, and the sight of you with all these curls in disarray doesn't make me want to be rough.”

“Y-You can be rough if you want.”

His hand skimmed down her side, over the curve of her ass. It sent thrills of excitement through her, even as anxiety skittered beneath them. She was completely bare, standing before him on incredibly unstable legs, and she wasn't used to being so openly vulnerable.

“One day,” Zeke promised, lowering his head to kiss the side of her neck where all the delicious nerves tingled in welcome, “when this tight pussy won't snap my cock off if I thrust too hard, I'll be as rough as you want.”

She jolted when he gave her ass three sharp pats, feeling the sting, absorbing the warmth that filtered through her. Leaning into him when he shifted and wrapped his arm around her waist, she let him lead her on a vaguely familiar path out of the bedroom.

A thought niggled at her. “Did you say it was Friday?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“So, tonight's the grand reopening of that club?”

His eyebrow lifted. “It is.”

“Are we... going?” Shit, why did she sound so hopeful? Peopling was not her thing; peopling in a club where there were too many faces was a bad idea. Trying to be social when there was presumably nudity and sex? That might just be the end of her.

“Avalon is a kink club, Olivia. It will be busy, a lot of sights and sounds that might be disturbing. Tonight might not be the ideal night to introduce you to everything the lifestyle entails.”

“But all your friends are going.”

“Our friends, and yes, they are. It was their home long before it was mine. Besides, they’ll understand if we don’t go. Scaring you is a possibility, one I’d prefer to avoid. I’d like the club to be part of our social life again eventually—”

Bravery she didn’t know she was capable of made her speak. “It’s a big night for all of you, Zeke. You need to reconnect with them, and be there for the next step forward. I’m not as easily spooked as you think; I can handle spending a few hours down the rabbit hole.”

“Hmm. Why don’t we see how today goes? If you can follow orders like a good girl, eat, and take a nap without argument, I’ll consider it.”

Eyes narrowing, Olivia regarded him carefully. She *was* a good girl. Obeying orders when she worked for a man like Atticus came naturally—unless she had an emotional breakdown and decided to hold herself hostage in her office, she reminded herself. Eating wasn’t an issue, if there weren’t eggs involved; she loathed them.

The nap might be a bone of contention.

But she was keenly aware of how the bombing affected Zeke, how it had ripped at the close-knit family of friends. Things changed that day for everyone, and tonight... while she didn’t understand what it felt like to be

part of a community that way, she understood that the club was what brought them all together and had been instrumental in hooking up several of the couples.

Tonight was about going home again, and Zeke deserved to be part of it.

“I’m at your service, Sir.”

Zeke

At five p.m., just three hours before the grand opening of Avalon was due to start, Zeke sat comfortably in the armchair beside the window overlooking his postage-stamp sized garden and watched Olivia pick her way through the meal in front of her, segregating pieces of corn and setting them in a pile on one side of the plate.

On the other side, she’d set a smaller heap of tomatoes.

The rest of her food—rice, beef, peas, and minutely diced peppers—was going down well.

Fork poised halfway to her mouth, she flicked a glance at him. “You’re watching me eat.”

His lips twitched. “I am.”

“You watched me dance with death this morning as well.”

“Fifteen minutes on a treadmill at crawlin’ pace does not constitute dancin’ with death, angel.” Chuckling, he let the twitch become a smile. “It’s barely considered exercise.”

“Pfft.”

“I like the way your ass moves,” he added as she popped the fork between her lips. “Gives me ideas on how I’m going to fuck it.”

By the sheer grace of God, Livvy clamped her lips shut before rice sprayed the floor. Expression wary, she chewed with exquisite slowness as

the hazel of her eyes deepened. Once she swallowed, she cleared her throat.
“I beg your pardon?”

“Did I misspeak?”

Carefully, she set the fork down. “I think you said you have ideas on how to f-fuck...”

When she trailed off, her cheeks glowing with color, he tilted his head.
“Your ass.”

“Uh-huh. Heard you correctly the first time.”

“I know. Which leads us to a conversation we need to have before I take you anywhere near Avalon. Before I put my hands on you again.” Tapping his fingers on his knee, he studied her face and wondered how the hell he’d earned the right to touch her in the first place. “Trust me, Olivia, I want my hands all over you.”

That busy analytical brain of hers kicked into gear. “You’ve decided. About tonight.”

“Yes. Aside from tryin’ and failin’ to evade your nap time,” he admonished, “you’ve accomplished something today. That warrants a reward, don’t you think?”

Olivia sniffed and shoved at her curls as they tumbled around her face. “If being lazy and unproductive is something worth rewarding.”

“It is when you’re a workaholic on the verge of collapsing,” he said mildly. “If we go, there is no pressure on you to play, Olivia. I need to make that starkly clear. Should you want to explore, we will.”

“Do I need to give you consent every time?”

“No. This is new to you now. Once I know your limits, and you trust me not to exceed them, we’ll find a rhythm. For tonight...” Lifting his hip, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper, then crooked two fingers at her in a *come here* summons. “Take a look at this with

me. Anything you don't understand, I'll explain."

Licking her lips nervously, she pushed away from his space-saving dining table and approached him cautiously. Her eyes darted from his face to the paper he was slowly unfolding as though he was pulling a prank on her.

When it came to anything related to work, she was confident in the way of a woman who had no doubts about her talents. Switch that focus over to personal, ask her to step away from being a data mining machine into feminine shoes, and she floundered.

She was a complex creature, he mused, powered by anxiety and caffeine.

Patting his legs, Zeke waited until she perched herself on the edge of one knee. Tsking in disapproval, he roped his free arm around her waist and hauled her skinny ass directly on top of him, her back against his chest, and her legs spread over his thighs.

Keeping the arm where it was, he held the paper in front of her.

"This is a limits list, Livvy. It's a copy of the old one new members used to fill out for Avalon; there'll be an updated version available which you'll need to complete tonight, but for our purposes, this will do for now."

"Purposes?" she repeated quietly.

"Learning purposes."

"So... you're going to teach me what all these... activities are?"

"Angel, I'm gonna teach you *everything* you need to know about utilizing your submissive qualities. They're in here," he murmured, resting his chin on her shoulder so he had a view of the kink list. "We just have to play around with what feels right to you."

Her breath hitched. "There are a lot of things on here, Zeke."

"I know."

"Am I ever going to walk straight again after this?"

A laugh rumbled free. "I don't want to break you, Livvy. A little limp for

a few days would be most satisfying. Is there anything you already know?”

“I, ah...” She huffed out a breath. “Vaginal and anal sex. Cuffs, ropes, floggers, whips, anal play...”

Concern niggled at him as she reeled off almost half of the kinks. Either she’d been experimenting with her sexuality without losing her virginity to some undeserving shmuck, or she wasn’t quite on the same page as him. “Olivia. Have you tried all these?”

Her head snapped around so quickly, it was a wonder her neck didn’t crack. “No!”

It dawned on him. “You’ve read about them.”

“They might be mentioned in a book or two...” she hedged. “Obviously vaginal sex is checked off my done list.”

“All right, let’s try this a different way so we don’t get confused. I’ll state an activity; you tell me what you know about it and if it’s something you want to experience. I’d like it if you’d give things at least one shot to see if you’ll enjoy it before you say no,” he continued when she narrowed her eyes.

“Even anal?” she asked, aghast.

“Especially anal. Not tonight,” he assured her when her eyes sparked with worry. “I might choose to dabble with it, but I think that’s something we need to play with more at home.”

Olivia fidgeted, the weight of her ass wriggling around on his erection. “All right.”

It took them an hour to go through the list, and he wasn’t sure who was more traumatized—Olivia, discovering there was more to BDSM than her raunchy books suggested, or his poor, supercharged cock, begging for attention.

By the time they reached the end, her squirming was slightly maniacal, her breathing choppy, but they’d ascertained that she trusted him enough to try

everything but caning and watersports before she made her choices.

Slipping his hand under the waistband of her loose jogging pants, Zeke cupped her pussy in his palm, toying with her slit using only a fingertip. Her curls were damp with her juices, her labia swollen and plump to the touch. Gentle pressure, and he eased a finger inside her, wrenching a hungry moan to life.

“In the club, you’ll speak to the Doms respectfully,” he instructed. “The Masters are usually addressed by Master, followed by their name, or sir. For example, Atticus will be Master Atticus to you. Mistresses are the same, although it’ll be ma’am instead of sir. Manners don’t cost anything, do they?”

Another moan. “No, Sir.”

“Good girl. You have safewords, always. Red for stop, yellow for wait, green for everything’s fine. They always apply, at home and in the club.” He smiled as her fingers clutched the arms of the chair, nails biting into the fabric as she rocked her hips in an awkward rhythm. “Sex will become easier the more we practice. Relax and slow down, Livvy.”

“I need...”

“I’ll give it to you. Just relax and slow down,” he repeated, letting the limits list flutter to the floor. Bringing his free hand to her throat, he squeezed firmly, pulling her attention away from her pussy to where he controlled her breathing. “Jerking your hips won’t get you what you crave, angel. Roll them, nice and smooth.”

“Can I have your cock? Please?” She gasped sharply when his fingertips grazed her inner walls in just the right spot.

“Not yet.”

Her soft mewl of disappointment shot straight to his balls, demanding he rectify the problem. When he didn’t, her movements became edgy and frustrated as she rode his hand. Silky wetness began to pool in his palm.

There were less than two hours before the grand opening, he mused. Teaching Olivia how a dynamic worked, the highs and the lows, meant exposing her to the elements of both.

Might as well give her a taste of each side of the coin.

A second finger joined the first, fucking into her until she tried to lift her hips away.

“Ah-ahh,” he chastised, releasing her throat to secure her hip. “No escaping, angel.”

A few strokes against her G-spot and he brought her to the pinnacle, her muscles pulsing around his digits as her body tensed. Quick as a whip, he slid out of her, leaving her hanging on the edge of the orgasm she craved.

“What—”

It fizzled, the heat of the moment and her imminent climax fading. She gave him a confused frown, her lips downturned at the corners.

“It’ll be worth it,” Zeke assured her, thrusting back inside her pussy without preamble. He groaned, relishing her instinctive clench, teasing her back toward the peak she wasn’t going to reach for a while. “This is a game we call edging, Livvy. I’m going to torment you for a few hours, bringing you so close to coming you’ll almost be able to taste it, then yanking it out of reach.”

“No one wins that kind of game,” she whined.

“On the contrary,” he disagreed, nuzzling the side of her neck with his beard, “we both do. It’s all about control, Olivia. Patience, control, trust. Wanting something so badly, relying on someone else to give it to you, being denied... up you go again,” he encouraged, rubbing her clit with the rough pad of his thumb. “Trust me in this, and you’ll earn something greater in return.”

Her body arched, trembling in response to his touch. “But I *need*...”

“Will you submit, angel? Put my wishes above your needs?”

“I... oh,” she whispered. Unable to help herself, she ground onto his fingers, pushing them deep, her moans resonating. “All night?”

“No. Just until I let you come.”

That was the crux that some newbies never wrapped their head around. *Let, allow, permit.* Dominance was taking control, removing it from their grasp, and instilling the Dom’s power as law, with all the consequences that came with it.

Of course, with that power came untold responsibility—a Dom had his own lessons to learn; how to temper his actions and language, balance his desires with the safety and comfort of his sub. Pushing limits was fun and exciting, but not at the expense of causing harm to the woman trusting him with all she was.

The rapid flutter of her cunt warned him she was close; circling her ever higher, he captured her on the brink. “Submit?”

Her nails transferred to his arms, digging in sharply. Despite every muscle yearning toward climax, she squeezed her eyes shut and nodded once. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl.” For the second time, he removed her stimulation, and listened to her yowl of protest ring in his ears.

Thrice more, he nudged her to the precipice with skilled hands.

Thrice more, he denied her a happy ending.

Finally, when she broke down and sobbed, Zeke wrapped his arms around her, cradling her close, until her frustration and sobs ebbed. With a pat on the ass—and strict instructions *not* to touch herself, he sent her off to shower and change for the evening in the clothes he’d already laid out for her on the bed.

They were going to be tardy, but some things were more important than being on time.

Olivia

Submit?

That single-word question spun around in her head as they turned down a long drive, almost an hour after they left Zeke's house. It rang like a bell each time he slipped his hand beneath the hemline of her short dress and fondled her pussy until she was ready to scream.

The truck rode the stretch of fresh black asphalt smoothly, all the way down to a large parking lot where she counted no less than fifteen cars already lined up like vehicular soldiers. A few more were in the process of finding their own space, but Zeke just drove around them and braked to a gentle stop in one of the spots marked *Reserved*.

"It's gonna be a busy night," he commented. "Good. I wondered if convenience would outweigh loyalty."

"Convenience?"

"Mmm. With the club gone, the membership scattered, most of them staying closer to home in the city. No choice, after all. The lifestyle ain't just about sex, Olivia; Braun created a family here, rich with friendship, connecting people with others who enjoy the same societal-unapproved activities."

"But they came back?"

"Invites went out to the original membership only," was his reply. "New members will be encouraged to join after tonight, but this... this is for family."

Something warm flushed through her, and this time it had nothing to do with embarrassment or the orgasm he kept dangling in front of her and snatching away.

Did bringing her here tonight mean he considered her part of his family?

“Are you ready, Livvy?”

Nerves flickered and danced as she studied the long building lit with security lights. Beautiful stonework rose four feet from the ground before rustic wood took over, forming the structure. She spotted three cameras tucked beneath the guttering, estimating there wasn't an inch of the parking lot and drive that wasn't under surveillance.

A couple strolled across to the portico, arm in arm, and disappeared through the doors.

Olivia sighed as her gaze landed on the three freshly planted yellow bell bushes to the left of the entrance, each one with its own small memorial plaque and light. It wasn't hard to guess who they were for, just as it was easy to imagine a fourth bush standing for the man sitting beside her.

This was so far out of her wheelhouse. Sex, socializing, submission—the three Ss that made her anxiety skip and frolic in merry delight. She was a hermit, happier in her computer cave than in company, but Zeke made her wish for more. He *gave* her more.

Everything might be new and frightening... no, there was no *might*. It was new and frightening, a little exciting and a whole lot intimidating.

She jumped when his palm patted her knee, stiffening reflexively as she expected his fingers to trail up her inner thigh to torment her again. Between her legs was a mess; all hot and swollen, wet and needy.

“Easy, Livvy. Need a few minutes?”

No, she *needed* him to finish what he'd damn well started in his freaking armchair! The reassuring stroke of his thumb wasn't all that soothing when her clit throbbed jealously, demanding he divert his attention where it was required most. “H-How much longer?”

Chuckling, Zeke picked up her fisted hand and raised it to his lips. The

whiskers of his beard tickled her knuckles, his mouth kissed her skin. “Am I being cruel to you, Livvy?”

Her breath huffed out. “Only if you’re purposefully driving me insane.”

“Partly,” he admitted. “The other part is a reminder.”

“Of what?” she demanded, then yelped as his fingers smacked the top of her leg. Realizing her mistake, she amended her tone slightly. “Of what, Sir?”

“Better. A reminder that if you put yourself in harm’s way again...” He stroked a slow circle over the stinging spot on her thigh. “Punishing you is gonna be a lot more fun for me than it is for you.”

“Is this lesson number one, Sir?” she asked, far too breathily for her liking.

“No.” Zeke nipped her knuckles, then let her go and released her seatbelt before undoing his own. “Lesson number one is about to start now: Trusting Your Dom 101.”

Oh, they were really doing this, she thought as he climbed out of the truck and, after shutting his door, sauntered around the hood to open hers. Somehow, her hand slipped into his and allowed him to use it to tug her gently from the interior.

Honestly, she felt ridiculous in this outfit. Dresses were not her style, but he’d been insistent that she not only wear one tonight, but *this* particular one. Of course, after the hour-long drive when his fingers spent too much time teasing her to breaking point, she knew why he’d insisted.

Her upper arms and shoulders were bare aside from the thin black strap attached to the material cupping one breast, circling her neck, to cross over to the other. The dress hugged her tits and waist, stopping low enough on her thighs to at least cover her ass and a few inches of her legs.

A good thing, seeing as she was going commando.

The heels she wore weren’t high, but she still wobbled as she set them on the ground. Sneakers were her footwear of choice, along with her sturdy

shitkicker boots. Comfort over style was her preference.

Zeke shut the door and locked the truck, slipping his arm around her waist. The silky material of his suit jacket brushed tantalizingly against the bare length of her spine exposed by the damn dress, sending twitches of sensation radiating outwards.

“I think you know most of the Masters,” he told her as they walked toward the entrance. “Jasper and Atticus are two you’re well acquainted with, and Thane, of course. Braun and Liam, I think you met when I was in the hospital?”

“I’ve met all of them at one time or another.” In the war room during the operation to take Dominic down, at the hospital when they all were dealing with the aftermath. “I’d rather not be reminded that several of your friends are my bosses and coworkers, Zeke. Or that I have to look them in the eyes and relay data to them on Monday morning.”

“Bereavement leave,” he said, rubbing his hand up and down her arm. “Regardless, they won’t embarrass you in the office, Olivia. That ain’t their style. Anarchy might tease you some, but she’s highly adept at reading situations. She’s a good friend to have.”

Her steps faltered. “Tease me?”

“Archie’s what we call a brat,” he explained. “She enjoys riling Jasper up, and sometimes that mischievousness expands into her family circle. Don’t pay any mind to her when she’s in that mood—and don’t let her drag you into any of her schemes.”

They stepped under the portico, and the doors loomed ahead of her. Tinted glass, she noted as she got a whiff of fresh varnish. She gripped Zeke’s forearm as he led her directly to them, and through into a small reception area.

The wide, half-circle desk was manned by a perky blonde whose hair

resembled an electrocuted hedgehog. She beamed a smile and accepted the card Zeke handed to her, scanning it over a small glass screen set in the wooden desktop. When it beeped softly, she gestured to a small black box. “Thumbprint please, sir.”

Zeke obliged, pressing his thumb into the box. A light flashed green, and the girl handed back the card with an extra shot of dazzle in her smile. He just nodded his head, then gestured to Olivia. “My sub should have a card waiting to be activated.”

“Of course, let me have a look. Name, please?”

Olivia tried to speak and failed miserably. Clearing her throat, she whispered, “Olivia Hilliard.”

“One moment.” Turning to the keyboard, the blonde’s long nails clattered over the keys like machine guns, ramping up Olivia’s anxiety. “Ah yes, here we go.” She clicked on something, then opened a drawer and pulled out a box, setting it on the desk and sifting through dozens of cards like Zeke’s. Pulling one out, she shoved the box back in the drawer. “I’ll just scan this for you, then if you can insert your thumb into the scanner, I can link your card to the print.”

“Are you a submissive?” Zeke asked, wariness in his eyes.

“Yes, sir, but I’m not here to play tonight. My job is to oversee the security system and ensure it runs smoothly. I’ll be teaching a few people how to handle things, but for now, I’m the gatekeeper.” She swiped the card over the screen, then nodded to Olivia. “Ready.”

Hand unsteady, she reached for the scanner. Zeke’s fingers curled around her wrist carefully, supporting her as she set her thumb into place. The computer beeped in acknowledgement, and Olivia wondered what software it was running.

“All done.” Still smiling—which was unnatural, surely?—the blonde held

out the card.

“Thank you.” Zeke took it, sliding it into his pocket along with his own. “Have a good evening.”

“You too! Do you require the locker room?”

“Not tonight.” Still grasping Olivia’s wrist, he guided her away from the desk toward the doors on their right. He pushed through them, urging her to follow him; her stomach plunged into her feet with a sickening plop. “Take a breath, Livvy.”

The hum of conversation was akin to a hive of busy bees. It vibrated over her skin, setting her teeth on edge as she took in the amount of people gathered in the spacious area, talking in small groups, loitering around the sleekly curved bar across the room.

By her calculations, there were more than a hundred people in here, which was mathematically incorrect. The present number did not correlate to the number of cars in the lot.

“This doesn’t make sense,” she mumbled, stepping behind Zeke for cover.

“What’s wrong?” he asked immediately, turning to face her. “Livvy?”

“Where did all these people come from?”

It took him a second to figure it out. “There’s an overflow parking lot around the back of the club, angel. The previous area was too small, so they expanded it.” He bent and kissed her cheek, murmuring, “If you get overwhelmed, just say yellow. We’ll go outside and assess the rest of the night, okay?”

It was sufficient to hold the panic attack at bay. “Yes, Sir.”

“That’s my girl.” Another kiss, this time on the lips. “Let’s see if we can find a quiet corner. We can explore a little after Braun’s speech if you’re up to it.”

Olivia rolled her lips together, savoring the taste of him. Swallowing, she

nodded, tottering behind him on her stupid heels as he guided her through a maze of booths. Some were small and square, designed for two or three people; others were circular and obviously meant for groups. All padded green leather seats and varnished wood, with tables integrated in the center.

She counted a dozen of them, but they were full.

Maybe she could just sit in the corner on the brand new, plush carpet. The black of her dress wouldn't stand out too much against the dark hunter green, so she'd blend in if she kept still.

"Zeke!" someone yelled happily.

Her eyes darted over to the far corner of the room where the biggest booth of them all dominated the space, raised on a small dais requiring two steps. Her heart pounded once, then stuttered to a halt as she recognized several faces, and realized his friends were waiting for his arrival.

All *fourteen* of them.

Their booth didn't have one table in the middle but five, leaving ample room for them to get up and move without having to shuffle everyone around to get out. The dais was ringed by thick wood, topped with stained glass, offering a modicum of privacy aside from the open entrance where the steps were.

Fourteen.

"We've been summoned," Zeke said with a smile, lifting his hand in response. "Think you can handle meeting everyone at once?"

Well, her only other choice was to run as fast and far as she could in the other direction. Lifting her hand to her hair, she twined the long locks through her fingers and pulled down, using the pain as a grounding point.

She was *not* a human-sized sirloin steak strolling into the lions' den, she told herself. They weren't going to eat her or play with her for the fun of it. Full and engaging conversation didn't have to be on the menu either; some

Doms preferred their subs to be seen and not heard, if the books she read were to be believed.

“This is very unnerving,” she muttered to herself.

“You’ll be fine, angel.” Arm around her waist, Zeke escorted her the final twenty feet to the steps, then nudged her ahead of him. “Evenin’ all. I think most of you know her, but I’d like to introduce my submissive, Olivia.” He gave her a reassuring squeeze. “Olivia, meet the Masters and their respective other halves.”

Her insides wilted as all eyes landed on her with interest.

Alicia bounced excitedly on the seat, waving madly, while Atticus gave Olivia a nod that held... respect? Beside them, Anarchy grinned, her blonde head resting against Jasper’s shoulder. The man himself quirked an eyebrow in curiosity.

To the right of them, Thane lifted his glass and gave her a wink, while the woman with her hand on his thigh offered a friendly smile. Gray eyes studied Olivia with a weird kind of empathy, as though they knew how badly she fought the urge to bolt.

Braun, she recognized, although he’d accumulated a few more wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and there was more silver at his temples since the last time she’d seen him. The dark-haired woman by his side bore a striking resemblance to Alicia, which meant she was Boadicea. Her smile reflected Olivia’s emotions perfectly.

Sharing their table, Saul sat with a pretty blonde on his lap. He was one of the Masters she didn’t know much about; his involvement with the operation to take Jasper’s father down hadn’t really blossomed until Caera had been kidnapped, along with Anarchy and Myna.

Olivia had read plenty on Caera’s history. The fact she was Jasper’s half-sister and one of their father and stepmother’s victims was fascinating on

paper, but the reality of her childhood was far different.

The last section of the booth contained two couples. Both Loki and Liam were familiar; their women she knew more by their files. Blond, bearded Liam had been in a menage relationship with the stunning redhead playing hopscotch on the table with a stuffie. The redhead was shy, unassuming, and when she felt eyes on her, a flush kissed her face beneath the auburn stubble on her cheeks.

Hirsutism, Olivia thought. Bearded lady syndrome.

They were the ones who'd lost the most that fateful day Avalon exploded, taking Wyatt from their lives without a chance to say goodbye.

Her throat closed as she considered how much she owed a man she'd never see again. How much someone else was missing out on so she had this chance with Zeke.

As her eyes watered, she turned her attention to the dark-haired goddess sitting next to the man named after the God of mischief. They'd passed in the hallway of the hospital once or twice, and Olivia had studied the reports from the rescue mission in Montana religiously.

Myna Jackson was officially Olivia's heroine, although Anarchy, Caera, and the livewire known as Tabitha were close contenders. They were all *strong* women, powerful in a way that sang to her. They'd stood up to the bad guys, been beaten and assaulted while pregnant, and still managed to kick several asses under grueling circumstances.

They didn't cower behind locked doors, wishing the monsters would go away.

Belatedly, Olivia realized Zeke was speaking, introducing her to everyone formally. Not as Sonic, the data genius, but Olivia, his submissive.

Now, they were all waiting for her to say something.

"Hi," she croaked, sounding more like a frog squashed between a rock and

a boot.

“Zeke, why don’t you both sit down? We saved you a spot with us.” Thane’s partner patted the leather beside her. “Olivia seems apprehensive. Apparently, the service submissives are pleased with their new roles for the evening; they’ll be along shortly to take your drinks order.”

He barked out a laugh. “We have waitresses now?”

“We decided to implement some new policies,” Braun drawled, a hint of Irish flavoring his tone. He tapped his fingers on the table, checking his watch. “Now that we’re all here, there’s something we need to do before I make this damn speech. Darlin’, would you do the honors for me?”

Boadicea reached behind her and pulled out a file folder, spreading it open on the small table. Pulling out a thin pile of papers, she rose, and began passing specific sheets to each Master, moving around the tables with a limp.

Zeke perched on the seat beside the woman who’d spoken first, then tugged Olivia onto his lap firmly enough to discourage any protests. “What’s going on, Connie?”

“No idea,” she murmured as Thane took one of the sheets.

“Take your time reading the contracts,” Braun invited. “All the points we discussed the other day are noted. There are no loopholes, no traps. We’ve had a long, rough road to get to today, and a few of us wouldn’t have survived without the support of the group. This is my way—*our* way,” he corrected as Bodie shot him a look, “of not only saying thank you for your part in this saga, but keeping the family together.”

“Braun, Avalon is your baby,” Saul stated as his eyes roamed over the paper. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“Evander and I have already signed our copies. This time around, Avalon doesn’t belong to only me. All of us have shed blood for this family, all of us form the foundations of the club. It’s only right that it remains in the hands

which tend to it. We belong here, and now, it belongs to all of us.”

Several glasses lifted as everyone echoed, “All of us.”

Once the papers were distributed, Bodie handed out several pens.

“Make your marks, gentlemen, then hand the pens over to your ladies to witness.”

Olivia studied Zeke’s face as he hesitated, the pen poised over the dotted line. Quickly, she scanned the legal document and concluded that Braun was either insane for dividing ownership of his club between nine people, or a really nice fucking guy. “If you’re worried about the legalese, don’t be. It all looks above board; I don’t see anything about exchanging vital organs in return.”

Green eyes slid in her direction, wicked and aroused. “I’m not a Master, Livvy. I shouldn’t be accepting this.”

“Why not? They want to include you in their family.”

The pen wagged back and forth as he mulled over the decision, but around them, the others were already passing their papers back to Bodie. The more he hesitated, the more attention he drew from his friends.

“Problem, Zeke?”

He lifted his head to look at Jasper, then Braun. Respect was in his eyes now, and the bond Olivia felt between them was one that tugged low in her belly. He was as deserving of that respect as they were; he wasn’t lesser than them because he wasn’t a Master.

“I’m the newcomer,” he told them with the slightest crack in his voice. “I’d only been in Avalon a few months before shit went down. Not long enough to earn this. It should go to Liam and Sierra.”

Thane snorted, only to be shushed by Connie.

Liam growled in protest.

Braun’s dark head tilted. “It’s not the length of time that matters to us,

Zeke. It's the quantity of who you are, what you bring to the table, and the ties that bind you to Avalon. Bringing you into ownership of the club wasn't a decision made lightly, but it wasn't a hard choice to make. We're building a future here, one that will hopefully last for a long time, and we want you to be part of it."

"For the record," Atticus added with a wolfish grin, "you've been voted in as the new Master, effective as of tonight. Braun's announcing it during his big opening speech."

Sierra whispered something in Liam's ear and, when he nodded, stood up and approached Zeke. Her eyes met Olivia's, and she ducked her head shyly before stepping closer to lay her palm on his bearded cheek. "When I joined the club with Wyatt, you were one of the only people who didn't judge me on my looks. In fact, I think you lectured him on treating me better."

Zeke smiled ruefully. "The boy loved you in his own way."

"I know. His way was hurtful sometimes, often cruel, but he was who he was. We loved him despite his faults, but he made up for a lot of them when he saved you." Brown eyes shimmered with tears, but she held his gaze steadily. "We love you too, Zeke. If this is the way forward, we want you with us. This is where you belong."

Olivia felt her lip tremble as Zeke grasped the slim wrist attached to the hand touching his face. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath as though Sierra's words freed something inside him, and when he exhaled, some of the tension in his body eased. "Thank you, sweetie. I needed that."

Her smile was a shade brighter when she stepped back and, obviously embarrassed by the brief exchange, hurried to her Dom, snuggling under the arm he held out.

"What do you think?" Zeke asked Olivia.

In answer, afraid to use her voice in case it betrayed her, she leaned

forward to pick up the hand clutching the pen and set it on the paper, right on the dotted line. Her opinion didn't matter, not really, not here, but it was evident how the others felt about the matter.

They wanted him with them, and when family was so important to him, it seemed stupid to let him doubt their intentions.

Blowing out a slow breath, Zeke nodded and signed his name, printing it neatly below. When he passed her the pen, she did the same, feeling honored to be part of him coming home.

“To Master Zeke,” Liam called out, “and a new chapter in Avalon.”

The group erupted with, “Master Zeke!”

Chapter Six

Zeke

Two hours later, he was exhausted from all the congratulations and conversations.

Braun's speech had gone down well, delivering hope and anticipation for the future along with respectful remembrance for what had been destroyed, and the lives taken in the process.

A stab of pride jugged into him every time someone called him *Master Zeke*. It wasn't a title he'd strived to attain, but he was honored that the group of people he viewed as family deemed him worthy of it.

Olivia remained glued to his side, her own energy levels waning. Each time her anxiety ramped up to panic attack levels, he used his hands to tease her back to the edge of ultimate distraction, refusing to let her orgasm until they were alone.

When she whimpered tiredly, Zeke made his excuses to the couple talking his ears off and grasped her hand in his. "I think it's time we explore a little, Livvy. Kick your heels off and take them to the booth, then come back to me."

She blinked several times, as though figuring out why he wanted her in bare feet. Carefully, she stepped out of her shoes, bending to retrieve them. "Back to the booth, Sir?"

"Mmm-hmm. We'll pick them up... after."

A shiver of awareness rippled from head to toe; she swallowed hard, licking her lips in a sign he was tweaking her nerves. Glancing around at the people between her and her destination, she paled slightly—she really wasn't comfortable in a crowd. "You'll wait here?"

"Right here," he confirmed.

"Okay. I... I can do this," she muttered to herself, straightening her

shoulders as her fingers turned white on the heels. “There and back. Head down. No talking. Easy.”

Amused by her mutterings—her lips were still moving as she marched off with determination toward the corner—Zeke decided he was going to enjoy breaking down all those insecurities of hers tonight. By the time he was done unraveling the complicated pieces of her, she’d be boneless, mindless, and completely unaware of the triggers that made her so damn antsy in her own skin.

“Master Zeke.” Jasper sidled up beside him, nudging him in the ribs with his elbow. “Are your ears bleeding yet?”

“Only a bit. Feels nice to be appreciated, though.”

“You mean a great deal to a lot of people, brother.” The sadist’s ice-blue eyes glinted beneath the lights. “If there’s anything you should take from tonight, it’s knowing that Sierra came out of her shell for you. If that doesn’t make you one of us, I don’t know if there’s much else that will.”

“That was a surprise,” Zeke admitted, keeping part of his attention on the stunning redhead bulling her way through people as though she wore blinders. “A pleasant one.”

Jasper followed his stare, his eyebrow lifting. “Not as surprising as this turn of events. You do realize that Sonic is like a little sister to the guys in the office, right? The big hunks of mercenary muscle who disassemble bad guys into messy pieces?”

“Olivia.”

“Huh?”

“I’m trying to break her habit of working herself into the ground. At work, she’s Sonic. Anywhere outside of Heisler Security, she’s Olivia. There needs to be a distinction between them.”

“I guess that answers my next question.”

Zeke slid him a sidelong glance. “Are you defending her honor, Jasper?”

“Well, it’s me or a couple dozen merc soldiers.”

“I see. I’m not sure which is more intimidating.” Scrubbing his hand over his beard, he watched the woman in question toss the shoes into the booth. From his vantage point, it was easy to see the longing glance she sent toward the exit, but as per his orders, she headed back toward him. “Olivia is mine, J.”

“No need to warn me off. I’m happy with what I’ve got. Just make sure the slipper fits before you weld it onto her foot.” Jasper patted him on the shoulder. “Never took her for a sub, but some women just need the right man guiding the ship.”

Understanding where his friend was leading the conversation, mixed metaphors and all, Zeke inclined his head. “You have my word she’ll be looked after. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and I intend to keep hold of her ‘til my last breath.”

Flushed with nerves, Olivia approached, her steps wary. Her toes curled into the carpet as she stopped an arm’s length away, surreptitiously avoiding Jasper’s gaze.

Zeke nodded, answering Jasper’s silent request to speak to her.

“Olivia, you look gorgeous tonight. I don’t want to appear rude, but I need to hunt down my kitten and punish her for... whatever I can think of.” Grinning, the sadist took a step back. “I’ll leave you two to enjoy your evening. Zeke, if you can’t find an area that works for you tonight, don’t forget the private rooms are upstairs now.”

He barely stifled a laugh as Olivia’s eyes immediately looked to the ceiling. Moving closer, he wrapped his hand around her nape. “Let’s take a walk, Livvy. See you later, J.”

They parted ways; Zeke used his hold on Livvy’s neck to guide her toward

the ornate wooden doors that were currently closed. He liked how simple it was to read her through that light touch. It was akin to having his fingers on her emotions, physical reactions, and inner thoughts all at the same time.

“Is this how it was before?” she asked.

“The layout?”

“Yes.”

“No. Evander and Braun made some changes—improvements, I guess. The bar used to be on the opposite side of the room; where it is now, there used to be a stage. We had a seating pit in the middle.” As they reached the doors, he used his free hand to open one, ushering her through. “The club was essentially three barns linked by walkways.”

The floor sloped gently upwards a few feet in a short but wide corridor that opened into the next section of the club. This part was eerily similar to how it had been before—multiple play areas with various pieces of equipment. The stations were more... defined, he supposed, set on foot-high platforms barricaded by red velvet ropes for safety purposes.

Tonight, it was busy.

There were as many spectators as there were participants, admiring the scenes in several stages of completion.

Across the room, at the rigging station, a Domme was putting the finishing touches on a complex Shibari pattern on her female submissive, using two different-colored sets of ropes. Her sub’s eyes were closed, her expression serene, as she swung gently in her restraints.

On one of the spanking benches to Zeke’s left, a short and slightly paunchy Dom lavished attention on the upturned ass of his chosen partner for the night. He counted three, clear handprints on her ample bottom, and the Dom was lazily twirling a leather strap, limbering up his wrist, winding up for the first lash.

The scent of sex and anticipation mingled with the fragrance of fresh paint, new leather, and varnished wood. An oddly pleasing combination.

Olivia was dumbstruck, frozen to the spot.

Under his hand, she was rigid. He shifted position, standing behind her as he shuffled them to the side, out of the way of incoming players. With an arm around her waist, he leaned her back against him, moving his hand from her nape to between her breasts.

“Breathe, Livvy.”

A woman cried out in high, desperate yelps, accompanied by the rhythmic smack of flesh on flesh. The beautiful music of a thorough spanking didn't change, but the cries grew fervent.

The Dom with the tawse went to work, leather striking skin. His sub whimpered loudly, squirming wildly, but despite her lack of bondage, she didn't break position.

“Talk to me, Olivia,” Zeke demanded when she shuddered.

“T-This isn't like my b-books.”

“No?”

She shook her head slowly, her hair swaying with the movement. “This is real.”

Zeke lowered his mouth to a bare spot on her shoulder, kissing the exposed skin softly. “Say the word, angel, and we go back through to the bar. Scaring you isn't the goal here. We can try again another night when it's not as chaotic.”

Her head fell back. “I don't think I can do... that.”

He followed the direction her trembling arm pointed, frowning when he couldn't pinpoint what *that* was. Taking a guess, he offered, “I wasn't plannin' on strappin' your ass tonight, Livvy.”

Her laugh was a little on the frantic side. “No. No, I mean... public. In the

open.”

“Upstairs then.” Setting his teeth on her skin, he bit lightly, feeling her squirm. “Look around, tell me what arouses you. What makes this innocent pussy wet and eager for my cock.” He centered his hand over her belly, curling his fingertips into her flesh with firm pressure. “Tell me what speaks to you.”

There was a lot to choose from—spanking, flogging, strapping, Shibari, an interesting bastinado scene, anal play... perhaps too much for her to understand. Granted, the more complex scenes were now located in the next section along—medical play, blood play, watersports, and the like—but this was still a huge leap forward for her.

“I don’t know.” She sounded distressed. “Zeke, I think my brain is leaking out between my legs.” The sharp crack of a short-tail whip made her jump and moan. “Too much stimuli.”

He’d edged her further than he intended, he realized. A few hours of teasing, bringing her to the brink almost a dozen times without release, was driving her crazy. Still, he’d asked her to do something, and the Dom in him desired an answer, not an evasion; no matter how plaintive her pleading might be.

“Pick one, Olivia.”

It was incredibly tempting to cup her sex and discover for himself how crazy his actions made her, but he was curious as to what she’d choose. He’d stolen a few peeks at her reading material, and some of the kinkier scenes opened even *his* eyes.

Breathing unsteady, she gestured to where a blonde submissive was draped over the wide girth of a barrel, her hands and feet cuffed and chained to the floor on either side. The Dom—Saul, Zeke noted in amusement—was stretching open her asshole with a sizeable plug. “Anal play? Or bondage?”

“Either. Both. Please, Sir, I need you. All of me belongs to you, so why does it matter?”

“Because *you* matter to me,” he told her. With one last nip on her shoulder, he spun her around and linked their fingers together. “Keep up. I have no qualms about tossin’ you over my shoulder if you don’t.”

Her soft *oooh* of delight was lost in a masculine cry from the far end of the room.

Damn near dragging her over to the corner, he slammed his hand on a silver plate set into the wood, impatiently tapping his foot. When the wooden paneling slid aside to reveal the elevator car, he wasted no time bundling her inside, and slapping the up button.

“An elevator in a sex club?” Olivia asked.

“A new addition. I prefer going down...” Trailing a fingertip along the middle of her dress, Zeke smiled wickedly. He was drawing a circle over her mound as the elevator finished its ascension and pinged open quietly, spilling them out onto a wide, secure balcony overlooking the scenes below.

It ringed the entire upper floor, standing four feet high, and the guard rail was ornately carved. The open space in the middle offered a bird’s-eye view of the scenes taking place below, but Zeke was impressed by the almost-translucent net secured to eyelet hooks on the inside edges of the balcony floor.

He knew there were two sets of stairs leading downstairs in case of an emergency—fire or otherwise, but aside from that, this part of the club was focused entirely on providing safe, private rooms without taking away the communal experience.

Six privacy rooms ran along each side of the floor, with three at the far end.

With Olivia’s hand in his, he strode down the row of numbered doors,

checking the lights above each one until he found one that glowed green. One of the last available, he noted, giving the door a light knock for form's sake.

When only silence came from within, he pushed it open, then paused on the threshold.

“In these rooms, you're perfectly safe,” he said somberly. “Once the door locks, it registers on the system in the security office, and the safeword recognition software kicks in. Red is your word, Olivia. Use it, and not only will I stop whatever I'm doing, but there'll be someone up here within moments to check on you. Only the Masters and the security team have keys for these rooms. Okay?”

She nodded, her bottom lip pinched between her teeth.

“Verbal answer, angel. Are you okay with this?”

“Yes. I'm good with it, Master Zeke.”

A growl reverberated in his chest as his cock throbbed. Teasing her all night came with consequences, and her use of his new honorific played havoc with his libido. Yanking her against him, he claimed her mouth, stealing the breath from her lungs as she gasped.

The scars on his back pulled as he lifted her, swinging them inside the room, and kicking the door shut with a decisive crack. His hand lashed out and flicked the lock; the unintrusive buzz of the system activating barely audible over the soft keening coming from his sub.

Not just sex, he reminded himself sternly. Tonight was all about showing her what she'd signed up for; their first night together had been interrupted by the revelation of her secret, and while he planned to be careful, he also intended to be thorough.

Breaking the kiss, he inhaled deeply. “Strip off the dress, Olivia. Fold it and set it aside. I want you on your knees, thighs spread, hands linked at the bottom of your back.”

She blinked at him, those beautiful hazel irises shrinking into thin rings of honey brown around pupils the size of the moon. Indecision and nerves scrolled over her face like words on a page before she fumbled for the hem of her dress, gathering the material up and over her thighs, revealing the delightful patch of curls at the apex.

Wetness streaked her thighs, and he was gratified by the quick flash of dark pink flesh.

More creamy skin was exposed as the garment continued upwards, exposing the flatness of her belly, and then the curves of her breasts. Tight, dusky nipples popped free, begging for his touch.

As the dress slipped over her head, all Zeke could do was stare.

There'd never be a time when he looked at her and didn't see perfection. He wasn't an idiot; he knew firsthand how time and age took its toll on a person, but with Olivia... if he lived to be a hundred and still had enough fuel in the rocket to go a round or two, he swore that she'd be as beautiful at seventy-five as she was now.

Her movements were shaky as she obeyed his order and folded the material, placing it beside her on the floor. Her knees dropped to the carpet, inching them apart until her thighs formed a wide vee, giving him an excellent view of his night's efforts. Her arms curled around herself, her hands merging into one at the base of her spine.

"Good girl," he purred, circling around her slowly. "Back straight, Livvy. Open your shoulders. Relax and take a breath."

Her eyes were on him, even though her head stayed still. He felt them tracking his steps, following his path. Understanding she possessed an inherent need to feel connected, he rewarded her with a gentle stroke of his hand over her hair.

"Don't move. I need to gather a few things, but while I do, think about

lettin' go. How it's gonna feel when you're in my hands, all those nasty doubts and insecurities fallin' away."

"Falling away?"

"Mmm-hmm. When you submit, you give everything to me, Olivia. The good and the bad. I take control. I handle the responsibility." Skimming his fingertips over her shoulder, Zeke strolled to the equipment drawers masquerading as a wardrobe, opening the doors with a flourish. "A submissive offers up her entire world to her Dom, and in return, he repays her trust with pleasure and peace."

The room was on the small side, adding an aura of intimacy. He was already figuring out how to utilize the queen-sized bed, what tricks he had up his sleeve to make the evening memorable. The larger pieces of bondage furniture—spanking benches, stocks, Saint Andrew's crosses—were downstairs, but there were plenty of alternatives to take advantage of in here.

Tracing his fingers across a row of nipple clamps, Zeke let his attention soak in all the toys at his disposal. Clamps, collars, cuffs, vibrators, dildos, anal plugs ranging from the size of his little finger to three times the girth of his cock. Ropes, chains, gags, handcuffs. Crops, floggers, whips, canes. Hoods and blindfolds. All manner of lubes, and various oils.

Humming under his breath, he selected two pairs of cuffs, a small bottle of silicone-based lube, a training plug, and a condom. Nothing fancy, just the basics, but enough to give his sub a taste of how decadent submission could be.

"All right, angel, on the bed."

Her eyes were still tracking him, wary and apprehensive. "I... I thought..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm on my knees, and I... don't you want..." Her chin jerked

toward his cock.

Adding a touch of steel to his tone, Zeke lifted an eyebrow. “Don’t I want your mouth on me? Do I not want to feel your tongue licking the precum from the tip, your lips tight around the root?” As she blushed from her breasts up, he grinned. “Do I want to deny myself the knowledge of how it feels to have your throat rippling around my shaft, hearing the frantic gagging sounds you make, when I come?”

“I... yes?”

“I want all of that, Olivia. Down to the last drop of cum dripping off your chin when I pull out.” Skirting a line in the sand, he waited for her to protest. She’d indicated that ejaculating on her face was definite *no*, and he respected that. “However, if I come down your throat tonight, that needy cunt will have to wait for what it craves, and it’s been such a patient little pussy, hasn’t it?”

Olivia nodded as though his voice was hypnotizing her.

“Thought so. Up on the bed, knees wide, hands behind you. Ass in the air.”

She really was superb at following commands. Although she lacked the grace of a more experienced sub, scrambling to her feet and almost planting herself face-first into the carpet, her eagerness to obey was worth so much more than a dash of elegance.

On fresh sheets, she adopted the position he required, displaying herself for his pleasure. And what a pleasure she was, he thought, caressing the upmost curve of her ass. Soft skin, easily marked, quivering beneath his touch. Swollen labia, a beautiful shade of dark pink, glistening with her juices.

His hand ran up her spine in reassurance. “So obedient. Comfortable?”

“Ah... a little weirded out.”

“Why?” Zeke dragged his nails back down her spine, then set his chosen

toys on the bed beside her, separating one pair of cuffs.

“I don’t really spend much time naked with my ass in the air,” she replied cautiously. “There are things out in the open that haven’t seen the light of day before.”

His laugh was rich and full. “Livvy, if you had the same view I do, you’d know how much of a goddamn travesty that is.” Careful not to yank her arm, he grasped her wrist and slipped on the first cuff, tightening and checking it. “Although I can’t say I mind keeping this gorgeous pussy all to myself for a while longer.”

Her hips jerked. “A while longer?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Strapping the second cuff into place, Zeke used the short chain to link them together, pinning her hands to the small of her back. Eyeing her for signs of panic, he treated himself, sliding his finger along her slit. “One day, we’ll play downstairs, Livvy. Everyone will watch me take you apart and put you back together again.”

Her laugh was riddled with nerves. “Oh, I thought you meant you wanted to share me...”

“That can be arranged, if it’s somethin’ you want to try.” Masking his groan, he eased his finger deeper. The idea of sharing the delight of her was... distasteful, for his own selfish reasons. Sharing meant letting another man touch what belonged to Zeke, and he was disinclined to consider that unless Olivia stated, loud and clear, that she wanted it.

Silence.

“Olivia?”

“I think that right now, I have more than enough man to keep me busy without adding a second one into the mix, Sir.” Her voice was strangled.

“I like that answer.” Covering her cuffed hands with his free one, he tapped the rough spot on the front wall of her vagina, pleased with the

responsive hunch of her hips. “Sir sounds so delightful coming from you.”

A few minutes of controlled fingering brought her right back to the edge, her voice turning hoarse as she begged for release. Leaving her poised precisely where he needed her, he dragged his finger out of snug, wet heat and rimmed the pucker of her anus.

“Zeke? Sir?”

“Finger first,” he told her quietly, “then the plug.”

Grabbing the lube, he flicked the cap open, dribbling silky liquid between her cheeks, rocking his fingertip against the resistant muscle. Sinking into her, just a little at a time, in time to her whimpering moans. When he was in to the first knuckle, a bare inch of penetration, he withdrew and prepped the training plug.

Plenty of lube and firm pressure eased the small toy deep, settling the flared base into position as Olivia’s hips twisted to escape it. “There, Livvy. Relax now, all done.”

“It burns.”

Zeke stroked her ass. If she thought a tiny plug the size of his finger was uncomfortable, accepting his cock was gonna open her eyes to the dual-edged sword that was anal sex. Pleasure and pain balanced on the same fine line. “It’ll pass. What’s your color?”

There was a pause as she assessed herself; a quality he admired. Some subs were quick to respond, answering without fully appraising what was happening inside them, but Olivia took the time to make sure her reply was honest. “Green, Sir.”

“That’s my girl.” Picking up the remaining set of cuffs, he restrained her ankles with the same care he’d taken with her wrists, then attached them to the quick release cords bolted to the short posts at the foot of the bed. “How about now?”

The cords didn't have much give in them. The length ensured her legs weren't spread painfully wide, but they didn't allow her a lot of room to move either. Her calf muscles flexed as she tried to draw her legs beneath her. "S-Still okay, Sir."

"Good girl. There's nothing to worry about, Livvy. The restraints can be undone in seconds," he assured her as he stripped off his shirt and cast it aside. A quick trip to the toy cupboard yielded a deerskin flogger with nine-inch falls, the perfect introduction for a novice. "We're keepin' this simple tonight. I'm gonna make you fly, then give you the orgasm I've denied you all evenin'. Think you can handle that?"

"Yes, please." Her cheek rubbed against the sheets as she nodded. "Please, Sir."

Flogging was an artform, one he loved. It was all in the wrist, as far as he was concerned; arousing a sub was as attainable with soft, slow lashes as it was with hard, stinging blows. Without knowing her pain limitations yet, he was willing to take his time and build her up.

Tickling her shoulders with the tips, he trailed the flogger down her back, over the jut of her ass. Up and down, again and again, until the rigid set of her muscles turned fluid. Her small noises of appreciation made him smile just as much as the subtle softening of her position.

Submission.

It was a beautiful journey, especially when her honest emotions made it so damn enjoyable. With her, enjoyment became something *more*. He found himself admiring the pinkening of her skin, paying more attention to her signals. When she relaxed and entrusted herself in his care, it was like feeling pieces click into place, unifying them.

The flogger kissed her flesh as though the fronds were an extension of his mouth. Adding a little bite to those kisses, Zeke watched her intensely for

signs of discomfort or panic. Her quiet moan of approval silenced his concerns, and he upped the ante again, taking care not to strike any of her vulnerable spots as the deerskin smacked down again and again.

As the strokes became increasingly harder, he limited them to her ass and the backs of her thighs. The sounds she offered in return were darker, deeper, than he'd heard before.

Gloriously raw.

“Color, Olivia.”

The eye closest to him rolled in his direction, heavy and dazed. When she spoke, her voice was thick and slurred. “I think I’m a rainbow.”

“Need somethin’ more specific than that, angel.”

“Hmm. Purple.”

Instinctively, he slowed the lashes. Flying her like a kite was all well and good, until she forgot how to safeword. When they gained a better understanding of what the other was capable of, he'd risk letting her soar without strings, but for her first real scene, he thought a hand on those strings might be best.

Subspace came with consequences; subdrop wasn't fun and games.

Setting the flogger down, Zeke ran his hands down her bound arms, checking her fingers for color and warmth. He couldn't help but smile when they squeezed around his, grasping his index finger. “Any tingling, Livvy?”

“Lots,” she said with a giggle. “But you're miles away from them.”

“Your pussy is gonna get what it deserves,” he replied with a dark hum of approval. Pleased that her hands were warm and pink, he trailed his fingers down to her feet, skimming the tips over her exposed soles.

Manic laughter erupted, her feet kicking futilely against the restraints, trying to escape. “No tickling! Please, God, no tickling!”

His smile grew wolfish. The one thing a Dom like him loved playing with

was a weakness, and tickling was such a fun vulnerability. Sliding one hand between her thighs, he thrust two fingers into her pussy, feeling her stretch delightfully around the intrusion. Juices all but poured into his hand, slick and copious.

With his other hand, he attacked the smooth sole of her left foot.

Olivia wriggled and bucked, squealing and moaning in rapid succession. Her hips tried to ride his fingers even as her legs shivered and made a good attempt at evading the torture. Her inner muscles were spasming, sucking on his digits, drawing him deeper. “Master Zeke, stop! Stop! I’m going to pee! I swear I’m going to—”

Before she orgasmed, he cut off all contact. Edging her one last time for the night. Her outraged cry was strangely satisfying, and he absorbed her frustration as he stripped off his jeans and boxers.

Her poor pussy clenched on emptiness, her thighs quivering with anticipation.

In under thirty seconds, he rolled on a condom and added an extra layer of lubrication to his shaft—not that she needed it. Tiny strings of her arousal dripped from her labia, and he took a moment to admire the darkly flushed red of her cunt as he fisted his cock.

When she tried to flip herself onto her back, he scowled and set his palm on the middle of her spine, pinning her down before she hurt herself. Lining his crown up against her opening, he leaned over her, using his pelvis to apply pressure.

The lax muscles in her back began to stiffen; he reminded himself to fuck her at least once a day until her pussy acclimated itself to his size. An unnecessary reminder, in all honesty. The day he forgot to slide his cock inside her was the day he died.

Olivia whimpered as he breached her, and he folded himself over her to

set his fists on either side of her head, mindful of her hands trapped between them.

“Come when you want, Olivia,” he told her quietly. “As many times as you need.”

Olivia

There was a bomb hidden somewhere beneath her belly button.

Olivia felt it growing, expanding, heating up. Just waiting for someone to step on the trigger plate and detonate it, blowing her sky high into a million pieces. The thing in her ass no longer burned, but that too was linked to the device ticking away the seconds before *kaboom*.

Only a few days had passed since she first felt Zeke inside her, but taking him again was reminiscent of losing her virginity a second time. Her body was primed for an orgasm, hours of touching without a release setting her up for a long, hard fall, and she was swollen and needy in a way that blew the fuse box in her brain.

The position she was in left no wiggle room. Her knees were wide apart, setting her pussy at just the right height for him, and the grip of the cuffs around her ankles were like hands, tight and comforting. Her soles were still tingling with the aftereffects of his goddamn tickling, the sensation throbbing in her clit.

Drool leaked from the corner of her mouth, soaking the sheets as he pressed his advantage. The head of his ruthless cock forged deeper, reawakening the nerve endings with tiny snaps of bliss.

Despite his weight draped over her back, Olivia felt safe here. The scent of him, the heat, was more like a blanket than a threat. Even her sex was enraptured with the intruder prying her open, welcoming him in with greedy

squeezes.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

Zeke curled tighter over her, his arm slipping beneath her neck to lift her face off the sheets. Before she found the words to thank him, he thrust, forcing her to take almost all of him in one powerful drive of his hips. The plug in her ass didn't feel as small as it had anymore, making her pussy seem ridiculously narrow.

A cry wrenched from her at the same time she inhaled, and she choked on both.

There was no time to recover from the shock; he surged again, bottoming out with a groan of satisfaction. Out of her control, her pussy rippled around him, so happy to have something to clamp down on.

“Master Zeke,” she whined, surprised she remembered his name.

Her own was a distant memory, somewhere back before her body surrendered to him.

Teeth latched onto her bared shoulder, a warning she heeded. The pinch of pain shot straight down her spine, zeroing onto the bullseye between her legs, and came damn close to detonating the ache in her core.

“Come on my cock, Olivia,” he growled into her flesh. “I can do this all fuckin' night. This cunt was made for me, wasn't it? It's all mine.” His beard scratched her skin, adding more tendrils of spiky pleasure to the mix. “It takes every inch of me. It belongs to me.”

She nodded quickly, moaning as he withdrew to the tip. Sucking in a hurried breath, she yelped when he rutted into her again, his thrust hard enough to rock the anal plug deeper into her ass. “All yours, Sir!”

“Say it again.” Another bite, a scarce inch from the first.

“All yours!”

It grew into a turbulent rhythm. The faster she said it, the more he

pounded into her, until she screamed it through an orgasm. His teeth closed over her skin again and again, never breaking it, but with enough pressure to bruise.

Sweat slicked them together. Through the vicious slap of flesh on flesh, over the death-defying beat of her pulse in her ears, she heard the embarrassingly wet sound of her pussy being plundered, fucked into a sloppy mess.

Yet she didn't care. Couldn't, not when their breaths were in sync, their bodies trapped in a savage dance of lust and need. Her fingers curled into his stomach, her nails digging gouges into the ridges of flexing muscles, before they latched on.

His growl of delight was utterly fascinating for several eternal seconds before his stance shifted, changing the angle of penetration.

Her previous orgasm, the power of it, faded into non-existence as her second loomed on the horizon. The wide crown of his cock hammered into her, punching the specific spot on her inner wall that made her toes curl.

Like a blacksmith beating hot metal into shape on an anvil, Zeke *formed* her.

She craved the bite of his teeth, the prickle of his beard. Her body demanded to be ridden harder and faster, to be taken roughly and left bruised and battered. This sense of helplessness, of being at his mercy, didn't scare her.

He didn't scare her.

He could take everything, strip her of breath and control, steal sight and sound, and she would submit without hesitation. Because for everything he took, she knew he'd give it back tenfold before he was done.

Another scream ripped out of her, the climax shearing through her like knives, shredding her nervous system into pieces. Her pussy strangled his

cock, his curse ringing in her ears. One minute he was in her, the next he was gone, and her inner muscles spasmed uselessly on nothing as pleasure rolled through her in brutal waves.

She felt the plug tug once, twice, before the tight ring of muscles released it.

Fingers found her clit, flicking and teasing, keeping her locked in an endless spiral of spinning bliss as pain dug claws into her asshole. The head of his now-bare cock pried her open more than the plug, then spurts of hot liquid filled her back passage.

Olivia tried to turn her head to see what he was doing, and caught a glimpse of her Dom, gloriously naked with his thick shaft in hand, his head thrown back as he ejaculated into her ass.

Marking her.

Her head thumped back onto the sheets with exhaustion, her body twitching with aftershocks. There was no chance of steadying her breathing or her heartrate, so she just lay there in shock, listening to his predatory grumbles of possession, and basked in her boneless state.

When the painful pressure of his cockhead left her asshole, she collapsed.

“Christ Jesus,” Zeke muttered, gently fondling her butt. “That was unexpected.”

What was more unexpected was the feel of the plug sliding back inside her, sealing his spend in her back passage.

After that, her awareness became vague, as though she existed but didn't. She sensed his fingers removing the cuffs on her wrists, and the far away motion of her arms being massaged and gently rotated. The same with her ankles and legs, but it was all so distant.

She was floating, drifting, lost in fatigue and the peace of finally belonging.

Something warm was wrapped around her. Hands touched her overly sensitive sex with care, but she just smiled dopily and nodded her head at only God knew what. Time was meaningless, reality a dream, and she loved it.

“There’s a good girl. Head on my shoulder now, that’s it.” Zeke’s voice hummed over her skin, sending shivers down her spine. “Precious girl. Close your eyes and rest, Livvy. Everything’s fine. God, I fuckin’ love you.”

Warmth filled her chest the way it did whenever he told her those words. For so long, she’d feared her love for him would never be reciprocated, that what she felt for him was destined to be her only companion. Memories and longing, dreams and shattered hope.

Knowing he felt the same, feeling the power of it rumble through those words, was more than she’d imagined.

Nuzzling her face into a place where his scent was rich and decadent, she breathed deep and told him how she felt, mumbling it even though it was blatantly clear in her mind.

“Shhhh, Olivia. You did so well. Let me take care of you now.”

Well, who was she to argue?

Zeke

Did he not understand the meaning of slow and gentle anymore? Had he lost his comprehension of guiding a novice sub through the ropes of a scene?

Cradling Olivia on his hip like a toddler, Zeke made sure the blanket covered her fully before he flicked the housekeeping switch on beside the door and left the private room. He approved of the new system, especially when it meant spending less time trying to tidy up, and more with his sub in aftercare.

Tonight of all nights, lavishing care and adoration on her was imperative.

How brave she'd been; he was in awe of her. As the noise from below rose and broke into their peaceful bubble, he understood he'd pushed several limits, and wasn't quite sure what to do about it. The more she responded to his touch, the fiercer his need became until... well, it was the first time he'd cream-pied a sub's ass without fucking it as the main event.

There was a quake in his muscles telling him to take a break, but until Olivia was snuggled on his lap, those lush lips of hers locked around the rim of a water bottle, and her faculties in order, his own needs would have to wait for attention.

Carrying her around the balcony to the elevator, Zeke pressed the button to go down, pleased when the doors opened immediately. He rested his cheek against her hair as they descended, reminding himself to check the bites he'd left on her shoulder.

She brought out the beast in him, literally.

Biting was a kink he rarely dabbled with, despite the pleasure it gave him. Seeing his marks on a woman's skin was a stamp of pride, but with Livvy, he imagined it was going to rile his primal side again. Though he'd been careful and hadn't broken the skin, she would wear the bruises, his teeth marks, and feel his possession when the muscles ached.

They emerged into the chaotic energy of the play area, and his hand automatically rose to cover her ear, hoping to lessen the swell of sound—moans, flesh slapping, impact toys cracking and snapping. Shrieks and groans, whimpers and gratified cries of release.

Apparently, he didn't need to bother—Olivia snuffled her nose into his throat, and with a soft sigh, began snoring lightly. How fucking adorable could she be?

Shifting her slightly in his arms, he made his way back into the bar area

and wound through to the aftercare room. His friends—those who were still alert—gave happy waves from the table as he passed.

As soon as he stepped into the purpose-built space, a little sub he vaguely remembered from the original membership stepped out from the desk with a welcoming smile. Silver-blond hair tipped with blue, pretty green eyes, and a pixie nose.

Like hell could he recall her name.

“Master Zeke,” she murmured respectfully. “What would you like me to fetch you this evening?”

“Water, please. Chocolate for my sub.”

“Of course, sir. Feel free to sit anywhere; I’ll find you in a moment.”

“Thank you.” Looking around for a suitable spot, his attention was grabbed by a hand gesturing in his direction from the far corner. Smiling, he wandered over to a couch the size of a small boat where Thane curled up with his head on his Mistress’s lap. “All the excitement is wearing our subs out, Constance.”

Threading her fingers through her sub’s hair, Connie returned his smile. Her expression was serene, sated, and Zeke guessed his own face reflected some measure of that peace. “It’s an exciting time. Three years is too long to go without a home. What do you think of the rebuild?”

Easing himself into the opposite corner, Zeke arranged Olivia so she was tucked against him, her back against the couch arm. She snorted indelicately, mumbling under her breath, but her body was still lax. “Good workmanship.”

“Hmm.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Maybe it feels a bit... modern. There are some elements of the old club which work well, and a lot of the new improvements are certainly needed, but...”

“It requires breaking in.”

“Like a new pair of sneakers,” he agreed. “I approve of the privacy rooms.”

“Made good use of one, if your girl is anything to go by.” The Mistress studied Olivia as her hands continued to soothe her man. “Is she everything you dreamed of, Zeke?”

“And more besides.”

“Excellent. We’ve been worried about you for a long time. Before the explosion, you played with a selection of women, but after... even after you healed, you lost that spark in your eyes.” Connie’s keen focus switched to him, making him want to wither under her scrutiny. “It wasn’t only facing death that knocked your confidence, was it?”

Perceptive shrink, he thought in amusement. Kissing Olivia’s hair, he shook his head. “Fallin’ in love with someone half my age, then havin’ to learn to live without her was pretty guttin’. Denyin’ those feelings took more energy than I thought. When she came home, it was a smack to the face.”

“Love is a bitch.”

The service sub hurried over with a tray in her hands. Gracefully, she set it on the small table beside the couch, placing it where he could reach the contents easily; two bottles of chilled water and a small bowl of Hershey’s Kisses. “If you require anything else, sir, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thanks, pet.”

With a small bow, the girl hurried back to her station.

“The staff are efficient,” he commented idly, snagging one of the bottles. Taking the cap off, he took a few deep swallows, then set it aside.

“Evander and Braun made sure serving the community was worth their while,” Connie replied, shushing Thane softly as he grunted. “You know, aside from doing their favorite thing and being helpful little bunnies. Reduced membership rates for our friendly service subs is an added bonus.”

“They get time in the club?”

“Split shifts, from what I’ve seen on the schedule. Everyone gets their playtime, don’t worry.”

Damn, as an owner—even a minority share owner—did he need to have his finger on the pulse of the club? Were there going to be meetings where ideas and shit got passed around and discussed, or was it more of a silent ownership?

Zeke found himself getting excited about the prospect of being involved. The Avalon family was back, and it was only going to grow from here. If it was tended and shaped, nurtured and encouraged, Avalon would come to mean something to more than just those who knew it now.

His gaze dropped to Olivia, and the possibilities she presented. She had a tech-smart brain, and her skills didn’t only apply to hacking and research. With a few nudges of persuasion, he thought she’d be an asset to the club’s marketing team.

For ten minutes, he chatted with Connie until Thane woke properly, looking groggy and shellshocked. As the Switch guzzled a bottle of water, they discussed how he was dealing with the physical demands of his past injuries, and how Zeke could tackle some of his own with a visit or two to Myna, Loki’s beloved.

Olivia’s reemergence into consciousness wasn’t quite as dignified as Thane’s. One moment, she was limp and asleep, her body loose under Zeke’s gentle stroking, and the next, she catapulted awake, rocking back and almost cracking the top of her head beneath his chin.

Eyes wild and unfocused, she blinked rapidly.

He cupped her cheek gently, his fingers tapping the pale skin. “Bad dream?”

The sound she made was a dry croak.

Grabbing the open bottle of water, he held it to her lips, angling it so she could only sip instead of gulp. The last thing she needed was sucking down the bottle just to throw it back up again when her system revolted. “Atta girl, Livvy. Slowly does it.”

“You’re very good with her,” Connie commented. “I see why you’re smitten with her.”

“Smitten,” Thane scoffed, sending Zeke a companionable wink. He scratched lazily at an itch on his bare chest. “That expression he’s wearing is love, sugar. I should know, I’ve seen it in the mirror enough times on my own damn face.”

Hearing their voices, Olivia stopped drinking. Water dribbled down her chin as she froze, her eyes rolling toward the opposite end of the couch. Her pale skin illuminated with a fierce blush, then she hurriedly tried to drag the blanket around her exposed front where it had slipped down to her waist.

“Leave it,” Zeke ordered quietly. “These beautiful tits belong to me now, Livvy. I’ll show them off if I feel like it.” As she fidgeted nervously on his lap, he set the bottle aside and spread his hand over the soft weight of one breast, shielding her from view. “Thane ain’t interested in how you look naked.”

“I do like breasts,” his friend replied, but those tiger-like amber eyes weren’t on Olivia. Nope, the man exhibited great wisdom by raking his gaze over his Mistress. “But I only have eyes for one delicious pair.”

“Smooth,” Connie told him with a roll of her eyes. “We all know it’s my ass you love most. No,” she scolded when he growled playfully and shifted to lift her onto his thighs. “That wasn’t an invitation, Thane. Behave, or you’ll wear the cage for the rest of the night.”

Zeke grimaced, feeling his balls draw up into his body and his cock shrivel in sympathy. He shook his head when Thane shrugged off the threat and

pretended to snack on his wife.

“See? Nothin’ to worry about, angel.” Rubbing his thumb over her nipple, he sighed contentedly. Why did everything seem *right* when he was touching some part of her? It didn’t matter whether it was her cheek, her breasts, or even a quick skim of their fingers.

The smallest contact between them brought him peace.

Five minutes ticked past before Olivia finally relaxed, apparently convinced that she wasn’t under any outside scrutiny. When she returned her head to his shoulder and sighed, Zeke rewarded her bravery with a soft kiss, tugging the blanket around her so not an inch of her torso was visible. “Good girl, Livvy. Want some chocolate?”

“No, I... I think I just want to sleep.”

Frowning, Zeke tipped her head back with a knuckle beneath her chin, assessing her eyes. Now the shock of her rude awakening had passed, she really did look exhausted. Another reason why he should’ve toned the scene down a bit, he admonished himself.

Concerned about subdrop, he hummed quietly, low in his throat. “All right. We’ll sit here for a while longer, then I’ll take you home. Drink some more water,” he ordered without heat, “and snuggle in.”

“It feels rude.”

“Sleepin’?”

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his shirt. “We have company.”

“Angel, I don’t care if you fall asleep with a state senator in the goddamn room. You are my priority.” Determined to rehydrate her, he picked up the second bottle and opened it, pressing it to her lips. “Which means, if you’re tired, you sleep. I’ll take care of everything else—you’re the only thing that matters.”

She drank, but he got the feeling it was only because he wanted her to; she

liked to please him, which in turn made him eager to make her happy. “I love you, Zeke.”

“I love you, too.”

Chapter Seven

Olivia

Apparently, sex with Zeke was akin to running a marathon.

At least, her body believed so, the morning after their night at Avalon.

Before she woke fully, several aches and pains made themselves known, particularly her shoulders and hips. Between her thighs...

Zeke was asleep on his stomach, his leg hooked over hers, and his arm thrown across her belly to keep her close. She loved how relaxed he was, his face rugged yet untroubled as he slept. There were years' worth of living etched into his features, some good and more bad, but she was drawn to the stories still untold in words.

Loving him came easily; a strong statement, considering she'd never loved anything but her mom and her work, but it was true. Being assigned to watch over him in the hospital had been a godsend, and now that their love was expanding physically, she realized she'd been waiting for him without knowing it.

He was well worth the wait.

Moaning under her breath, she stretched, trying not to disturb him. She was warm and comfortable, in no rush to move aside from the vague warning issued by her bladder, but she had a little leeway before vague became insistent.

Content to drift away again for a few more minutes, she shifted slightly, then froze as her tired eyes focused on the shape at the end of the bed. The hazy peace of waking shattered in an instant, her breath sucking in to scream bloody murder.

The woman sitting cross-legged just inches away from Olivia's feet shook her red-and-blond head, lifting her index finger to glossy pink lips and tapping them to indicate silence. She resembled a freaking candy cane; the

white-blond of Jasper's family genetics clashing with the unnatural shade of bright red, but the overall effect was pretty cool.

"Tabitha?" Olivia hissed, once her heart started beating again at a normal rate.

"Expecting someone else?" Flipping a sharp blade between the fingers of her other hand nonchalantly, Jasper's half-sister lifted a sleek eyebrow in question.

"I wasn't expecting *you*," was all she managed to splutter. "I... we..."

"No need to be embarrassed. Sex is a natural function." Slim shoulders shrugged as keen blue eyes perused Olivia's face intently. "About time you took an interest in doing the nasty. A thirty-year-old virgin is no fun at all."

Olivia's mouth dropped open. "What?"

The blade stopped flipping, jabbing in Zeke's direction. "I like him. Had to do some digging, make sure he wasn't hooking up with an idiot."

What the hell was happening here? Had the universe folded in on itself while she slept, transporting her to an alternative dimension where insane assassins just dropped in for an early morning chat?

"You are an enigma. Mysteries give me a thrill, almost as much as killing people." The easy, no-fucks-given tone spoke volumes about the woman. "Excellent at your job, not so hot at socializing with anyone on this side of a computer screen. Reminds me of me, somewhat." The blade began moving again. "Got my brother to do some hacking. Ashford is like you; he doesn't stop hunting until he finds what he needs."

"Ah... okay?"

"Do you understand how lucky you are, Olivia?"

Immediately, her eyes flicked to Zeke. Warmth filled her, comforting and sweet. God knew she needed the bolstering strength when faced with a self-admitted killer. "Yeah."

Tsking, Tabitha rolled her eyes. “Not with him, although you did fall on your feet there. I’m talking about your stepfather.”

Cold slithered into the equation, battling with the warmth of her emotions. “Jared?”

“Mmm-hmm. Zeke was right to bring me into the game. I play it much better than Jared ever could. I found his playroom.” Disgust emanated from her, and Olivia decided she didn’t want to know what had the power to turn a killer’s stomach. “He’s dead now.”

Olivia choked loudly enough to wake Zeke. His fingers flexed against her hip, but her attention was locked on Tabitha. Horror and relief, and all manner of emotions she couldn’t name in that instant flooded her.

“Livvy?”

“Shush, Zeke. The girls are talking,” Tabitha chastised.

“Tabitha?” Blinking sleepily, he frowned. “What the hell?”

“Shush,” she repeated, irritably this time. “You’ll get a phone call sometime over the next few days, I imagine. I left enough clues to lead the Nevada cops to Jared’s playroom. As much as I prefer my kills to escape the attention of local authorities, what he did warrants explanation.”

Zeke grunted and rolled onto his back, dragging himself into a sitting position against the headboard. His hand reached out and linked with Olivia’s, forming a connection she was incredibly grateful for right now. “He was saving her for last?”

Tabitha pursed her lips. “Perhaps not the last, but she was next. The cops will discover the remains of several bodies. Fortunately, Jared made it easy for them to identify his victims. Heads in jars are tacky mementos of a kill,” she muttered, obviously unimpressed. “I did my own check of missing girls in the county and matched six out of six.”

Bile rose in Olivia’s throat. “He was murdering girls?”

“For a drunk and an addict, he was surprisingly adept at it. They all had similar features to you. The shrine he kept on the wall was dedicated to you, but I made sure he confirmed his plans before I... well, perhaps you shouldn’t know the details. It wouldn’t be wise for you to let anything slip about the manner of his demise to the cops when they talk to you.” The smile curving those pink lips was blood-curdling. “He was planning on grabbing you once the medical bills for your mother were paid off. He saw no point in cutting off your financial input, even though he’d lusted after you for years.”

“Tabitha,” Zeke warned.

“She deserves to know. Part of her already does. She’s smart; she’s good for you.” As her dialogue followed the twisted path of her insanity, Tabitha wagged her finger at him. “Your stepfather was a pedophilic murderer, preying on young girls to quiet his desire for *the one*. Ashford’s calculations estimated that, at the rate you’ve been repaying the debt, your life expectancy was no more than six months. There were many variables.”

Her skin felt cold and clammy. Her stomach churned with nausea as memories assaulted her like a rolling timeline. How many times had she been in close proximity to the man, alone, with no idea that he was...

“Why?”

Tabitha’s candy-cane hair swung gently as she tilted her head. “Why you, or why did he wait so long? I have the answers to both questions.”

She wanted all the answers to every single question she hadn’t thought of yet. There were too many buried beneath the shock. Gripping Zeke’s hand as a lifeline, she blinked slowly. “Tell me everything.”

“I’m not sure that’s... all right,” her lover capitulated when she gave him a look that pleaded for him to understand. He squeezed her fingers, offering his support even though she knew he didn’t agree with her finding out all the sordid details.

He was extremely calm for a guy who'd woken up with a blade-toting lunatic perched at the end of the bed.

"I'll skip the gory bits if it offends your sensibilities, Zeke."

Olivia's heart lurched as his voice turned to steel. "I'd rather she skip the nightmares."

The little ninja leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. Eyes glimmering like glacier lakes, she tapped the flat of the blade against her lips. "See, this is why I like dominant men. Not for me, obviously. I'd kick any man who tried to make me do his bidding in the balls, then cut his throat, but I understand the allure of it." Humming under her breath, she licked the broad flat of the metal absently. "Mercurial, the whole damn lot of you. Loved-up puppies one minute, rabid wolves salivating over a kill in the next heartbeat."

Zeke's answer was a growl.

"Just like that." Delighted, Tabitha spun the blade around to point at him. "However, this is off-topic, and I have a flight to catch in a couple of hours. So, let's get down to the nitty-gritties, shall we? Jared married your mom because a working wife meant he didn't have to get his sorry ass off the couch. Ten-year-old Olivia was a bonus, *but* your mom was a good maternal influence. Basically told him that she expected him to be a father, to protect you like you were his own flesh and blood."

It shouldn't have hurt so much, but Tabitha's opinion seemed like a glowing recommendation. The fact that a relative stranger saw the kind of person Crystal had been, meant a lot. No, more than that. It meant everything.

"Being an asshole, Jared agreed. As long as the drugs and alcohol were plentiful, he was happy to ogle you from a distance. Things changed when you hit puberty. By that time, your mom was aware of his unnatural interest in you, but she couldn't afford to leave him. All her paychecks went into the house, and there were no savings. Jared accumulated several drug debts,

using you as collateral. She was in a difficult position.”

Difficult? Olivia almost scoffed at the understatement. Her mom hadn't been able to do right for being wrong. If she stayed, there was a high risk of Jared acting on his urges; if she left, there was no question that bad men would have tracked them down and...

Olivia closed her eyes, hating her stepfather with every fiber of her being.

“When you grew some tits and started maturing, he had a problem. His obsession continued to fester, and your mom threatened to kill him if anything happened to you, accident or not. So, he went on the hunt and found his first victim.”

“How many? In total?”

Tabitha shrugged. “Nineteen. One a year from your thirteenth birthday, up until you went home. With you back in the house, under his roof, his frustration multiplied. So did his kills. Ashford peeked at the local PD reports on the missing girls; only one case listed Jared as a potential suspect, but they dismissed him because he was stoned out of his fucking mind.” Tabitha's expression stated her opinion clearly. “The majority of the girls were taken from at least fifty miles away from his base. After Crystal died, twenty years of waiting came to an end. For the first time, you became actively available on his list.”

Olivia died inside. She thought of nineteen bright lights snuffed out by a monster, all as a pacifier to sate a need he felt for *her*. No wonder she'd been creeped out by him as a kid.

A shiver rocked her as she thought of the past couple of years, and all the opportunities he'd had to... shit. Leaning forward, she raised her knees and pressed her forehead to them.

This was fucked up in so many ways.

“Will... can...” She blew out a tremulous breath. “Will the police find

them all?”

“Empathy isn’t usually my style,” Tabitha mused, “but I find myself drawn to your distress.” Her tone gentled. “Jared wasn’t an intelligent man. His killing floor was in an old military air raid bunker out in the desert, several miles away from civilization. Apparently, he and two former buddies used to go out there and get wasted; they grew up and became respectable citizens. He did not.”

What a surprise, Olivia thought dourly.

“Being a lazy prick, he didn’t dispose of the bodies adequately. The cops are more than capable of finding them. Of course, with the number of dead involved, the case will be turned over to the FBI, and they’ll probably bring in a forensic anthropologist to match all the remains to the correct victims. They’ll go home, Olivia.”

“I hope you made him suffer,” she said vehemently, lifting her head to stare at the woman who talked about death as though it was the weather.

“It was fitting.” The smile gracing her mouth was every bit as sinister as anything her half-brother could summon. It reflected in her eyes, coldly amused. “I made sure he was truly repentant for the sins he committed. And that,” she added with a fleeting glance at her wrist, “is all I have time for this morning. So, to recap: Jared’s dead, his victims will be returned back to their families, and all is good.”

“Thanks for dropping in,” Zeke told her dryly.

“I’ll be back. Perhaps next time, you’ll be doing something more interesting than sleeping.” Unfolding her legs, Tabitha stretched before she slid off the bed. The blade spun in her hand to point at him. “Take care of this one, Zeke. I like her. Chain her to the bed if you have to.”

“Mmm-hmm. Try not to get yourself arrested or dead, Tabitha. We’d miss you.”

Her lethal toy disappeared into some mysterious space at the back of her jeans. Raking a hand through her hair, she shot him a wicked grin. “Damn straight, you would.”

Whistling under her breath, the half-pint assassin ambled from the room.

“She is insane.”

Olivia glanced at her lover . “You think?”

“Certifiable.” Rolling on top of her, he braced his weight on his forearms and stared down into her eyes. “That was a lot of stuff she dumped on you. How are you holdin’ up?”

“I’m not sure my world is on a solid foundation anymore.”

He sighed. “Olivia, you know I’d have taken him apart if he touched you.”

Torn between despising herself for her stupidity and appreciating his support, she lifted her hand to cup his cheek. His beard prickled her palm reassuringly. “You didn’t even know I was in Nevada, Zeke. It’s difficult to rescue an idiot when no one knows she’s gone. If Jared had gotten his hands on me...”

“He didn’t. He won’t.” Zeke bent and kissed the corners of her mouth. “The assassin with a screw loose put him down like the sick mutt he was. He got everything he deserved, Livvy. It doesn’t bring back any of his victims or negate whatever they went through, but he got some of it given back. Knowin’ Tabitha’s methods, he was regrettin’ every damn day of the last twenty years of his life when he died.”

“But the girls...”

“The girls are not your responsibility,” he said sternly, his eyes darkening. “Jared’s actions were not yours. What he did does not reflect on you. The weight of his choices and his deeds are not yours to bear.” His voice took on an ominous tone. “It’s okay to grieve for them, Olivia, but I’ll be damned if you shoulder the guilt for his sins.”

She closed her eyes and drew in a ragged breath. He was right; they both knew it. That didn't mean her heart wasn't aching with that guilt and sense of... God, she had no words for the emotions strangling her.

"I want to go to the..." Her throat closed. "Funerals."

Zeke's hum of sympathy caressed her fragile nerves. "That might be distressing for the families, angel. If they know who you are, how you were connected to Jared—however innocently—they might not be welcoming." He wasn't drawling anymore, which told her he was serious. "Grief isn't always tears and depression, Olivia. It manifests into anger, rage, a need to cast blame. This mess isn't your fault, but that won't stop people from greeting you with hostility."

When she dared to look at him again, his face was set in concerned lines. "I know."

"God, you rip my heart out when you're sad," he muttered. "All right, let me pull Atticus in on this. Once the families have been notified, we'll put some feelers out and see if any of them would be receptive to your presence. We're not going to fuckin' Nevada for mourning families to take their fury out on you. No arguments."

Her arms curled around his neck, holding on tight. "I don't want to argue, Zeke."

"Good. What do you say we have a lazy morning, maybe make love if your pretty pussy is agreeable, and when you feel up to it, we go visit Connie for an informal chat between friends?"

"That's your subtle way of telling me I need to see a shrink now that my stepfather turned out to be a homicidal pervert?"

"That's me tellin' you that you're not alone anymore, Olivia. No matter what, you've always got me at your back, but it's about time you learn that you still have a family to lean on." He kissed her cheek, his lips stopping the

tear sliding down the side. “A whole flock of annoyin’, chatterin’ people who love you as much as I do.”

“Is this real?”

“’Bout as real as it gets, Livvy. Seems like we’ve got a long haul ahead of us, with one thing or another, but I’m in for the duration. I love you, Olivia.”

She thought of everything she’d written in that letter two years ago. Back then, it felt as though she’d inked her heart onto the paper. Now, she realized that however much she’d loved him then, she’d only scribed a fraction of her love down in words.

The rest of it was right here, bursting at the seams with what she felt for him.

“Ready to ride this out with me, angel? My life, yours, in tandem?”

Before she kissed him as though the world was ending around them, she muttered two words.

“Yes, Sir.”

Epilogue

Olivia

“Are you sure you want to do this, angel?”

Olivia slid onto the leather seat carefully, settling into the comfy chair with a little wriggle of her butt. Her nerves were strung out after a particularly long and arduous session with Connie; the Mistress was beginning to pull out all the stops, encouraging her to dig deep into repressed memories to start the healing process. “It’s not about want, Zeke. It’s something I need to do.”

Her lover glowered at her. “This is not your weight to carry.”

Six months after Tabitha’s unexpected morning visit, the investigation into Jared’s activities was coming to a close. The FBI had found the remains of all nineteen victims, identifying eleven within the first month.

The other eight had taken longer.

Only a week ago, Olivia had stood next to Zeke beside an open grave in a quiet cemetery, bearing witness to the internment of one of those young girls. One of the original victims whose family hadn’t been traced.

Rather than let the girl be buried with only the priest to remember her, Olivia insisted being there was the right thing to do. In her mind, it was the least she could offer when a life was snuffed out in lieu of her own.

“Jared was a murderous asshole. I’m not going to wear the blood he spilled on my hands, but the girls he killed are connected to me through him. Some of them have families who’ll make sure the memory of their loved one continues through the generations; some of them don’t have families left to do that.” She rubbed her palms on her jeans. “This is my way of honoring them.”

Zeke pinched the bridge of his nose. He’d stuck with her through every horrible step of the last six months—every interview, every update, all the

pain and grief. It was his arms she'd woken in when nightmares of being hunted and murdered by her stepfather ripped her screaming from sleep night after night.

"Nineteen names need a big tattoo, Livvy."

She nodded, her skin already twitching. For the design she'd chosen, Loki estimated she needed to spread her chair time over two days, maybe three, depending on her pain tolerance. "I know. I can do this, Zeke."

He gave her a rueful grin. "Angel, you can do anything you put your mind to, I have no doubts." He picked up her cold hand, squeezing her fingers in the warmth of his. "Let me share the burden with this."

Olivia blinked in surprise. "What?"

"Names and dates take up a lot of space. I'll get the same tattoo with half of them. We'll both honor them." Rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, he reached up with his other hand to brush a lock of hair away from her eyes. "Am I worthy of this mission, Livvy?"

Tears stung her eyes. "You're the only one worthy."

Chuckling, Zeke bent and kissed her sweetly. "Thank you."

Sniffing, Olivia wiped at her eyes as Loki approached from the reception desk, checking to make sure no tears had escaped without her noticing. She offered him a hesitant smile, still vaguely uncomfortable with social situations.

"Hey, guys. Good to see you." Loki slapped Zeke on the back, winking at Olivia. "Are you ready to see the ideas I came up with for this memorial?"

"Slight change of plan," Zeke told him. "We'd like matching tattoos, Loki."

"Matching, huh?" Frowning, Loki pursed his lips as his friend explained what they wanted. "Okay, let me show you what I've put together. Because I had Olivia in mind, the designs are more on the feminine side. That doesn't

mean I can't adapt one into something suitable for you both."

Biting her lip, Olivia watched him as he picked up a tablet, tapping his finger on the screen several times. She took it when he offered it to her, her throat tightening at the sight of the first design.

Ornate angel wings filled the screen, all pale gold and pink. Most of the feathers had the name of a girl and the year of her death, but there were a few that were just color.

"This is beautiful," she murmured.

"It makes a statement," Loki agreed. "Depending on how big you want the tattoo and where you'd like it placing, I can expand to include the last names. It feels more intimate just to have their first names, but that choice is entirely yours. For Zeke, I could tone down the ornamental aspects, give it a more masculine twist."

"Zeke?"

He studied the image, then her face. "It's pretty, but it's not the one."

"It's not?"

Shaking his head, he flicked his finger at the screen. "Keep lookin', angel."

Obediently, wondering how he knew it wasn't the right one, Olivia switched to the next design. The bouquet of wildflowers was sweet, vibrant in color, and the center of each one held initials and a date. "I'm not sure you can masculinize flowers, Loki."

Grinning, the other Dom lifted an eyebrow. "When your Dom is this guy," he told her, patting Zeke's shoulder, "I don't think you have to worry about his masculinity. Skip the next two designs if flowers aren't gonna do it for you."

She did, plus several more that didn't quite hit her approval button. Glances at Zeke confirmed her thoughts on each one.

The next swipe of her finger made her breath catch. Lip trembling, she studied the work of art she didn't know she needed, but wanted with everything in her heart.

A green field, fading unevenly at the edges, bisected by a sandy path leading toward a rainbow, and the golden gates beneath the colorful arch. Footprints dotted along the trail, growing fainter the closer they got to the gates.

All nineteen names and dates were scribed into the path.

She turned her face to Zeke, his face blurring behind tears, and he gave her a smile that proved to her she'd fallen for the right man.

"*That's the one,*" he murmured, kissing the top of her head. "Stunning, Loki."

"Thanks. Myna gave me the idea for this one. My only concern with this is the amount of time it's going to take in the chair. It's a detailed piece, and it's your first tattoo." Loki gave her a thoughtful frown. "I can schedule several sittings, do it section by section as long as your tolerance holds out."

Chewing on her bottom lip, Olivia shook her head. "I can handle it."

The men exchanged glances; Zeke lifted his shoulder in a shrug.

"All right. Give me twenty minutes to reconfigure the design for you both and you can approve it before we begin. Any preference as to which names you'd like, Olivia?"

She supposed it didn't matter, not really. The girls were dead and gone, no longer capable of caring about mortal dilemmas. They'd be remembered, inked into skin, and that had to be enough. "No."

Retrieving the tablet from her, Loki winked and walked back over to the receptionist desk, talking to the woman behind it.

She was a bit of an eye-opener, Olivia thought. Neon-pink hair, eyes the same color, a whole host of tattoos and piercings in the strangest places.

She'd introduced herself as Ginny, the shop manager, and smiled as though Olivia and Zeke were the most important people to ever grace the establishment, which was kind of cool.

Across the room, a guy with a sleepy expression bent over another man who rested on his side, working on the thick, exposed thigh. His hands were steady as he guided the tattoo gun over skin, humming along to the music pounding from the speakers in the corners of the room.

She approved of Loki's place. Yellow walls made the space feel warm and almost homey when combined with the leather couches, a few soft furnishings—obviously a feminine touch in play there—and the selection of hand-drawn designs framed on the walls.

“Have you decided where you want it?” Zeke asked quietly, yanking her wandering thoughts back to him. His smile flashed when she jolted. “Nervous, angel?”

A little, not that she'd admit it. The buzz of the gun sounded more threatening than she anticipated, although the man stretched out on the table seemed unperturbed. Judging by his existing ink, it wasn't his first rodeo, so how bad could it be if people came back time and time again?

“Y'know, seein' you in this chair gives me the urge to strap you down in the medical exam room at Avalon,” Zeke told her, his eyes glinting with mischief. “Mmmn, yes, I do believe you'd look delightful with these pretty feet in stirrups, that perfect pussy on display.”

The noise she made was how she imagined a squashed guinea pig sounded.

Chuckling, her Dom slid his big hand into her hair, fisting it gently as he tipped her head back. “I love the noises you make, Livvy. Hell, I just love you.”

There it was—the warmth spreading through her whenever he said those

magic words. Words she never thought she'd hear from him. He was the one thing she wanted, the one person she couldn't live without, and through some unexpected miracle, he was all hers.

“Marry me, Zeke.”

Surprise flared in his gaze before the green darkened with arousal.

Olivia swallowed hard, just as surprised by her proposal, yet unwilling to take it back. Everything she had, everything she was, belonged to him. He didn't demand she give it all, which made it so much easier for her to hold it out in offering.

Releasing her, Zeke stepped back, his thumb rubbing back and forth over his mouth, barely concealing his smirk. “You mean that, angel?”

“Yes. I love you, Zeke. I think you were always meant to be mine.” Nerves edged into her voice, so she cleared her throat quietly. “I know I'm supposed to be yours.”

Agreement lit his face. “I ain't got any doubts about that, Livvy. None at all. You sure you want to be saddled with an old man for the foreseeable future?”

Olivia scowled, displeased with the way he phrased the question. “Just because you're older doesn't mean you'll die first,” she told him with a bite in her tone. “I could—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence,” he growled, his expression darkening so fast, her breath caught in her throat. “My girl is gonna live forever, you hear me? Don't care what strings I gotta pull, you ain't dyin'. Ever.”

“We all go, one way or another, Zeke.” Shuffling to the edge of the chair, she reached out and took one of his tense hands, straightening his fingers from their tight fist and curling hers around them. “I want to be saddled with *my* old man, my first and only love. I want kids with you, a family to carry on our story. I just want to be yours in every way possible until the clock runs

out.”

He visibly relaxed, using their joined hands to tug her to her feet. Bending his head, he nuzzled the sweet spot he'd discovered down the side of her neck. “You'll never be anything but mine, angel. Did you get me a ring?”

She choked on a laugh. “Did this not strike you as the most impromptu proposal, Sir? I wasn't exactly planning on springing this on you.”

“Hmm.” He nipped her, then sank to one knee, pulling something from the front pocket of his jeans. “Good thing one of us was prepared then, right?”

Olivia's legs went weak. She stared at him, mouth open. “You...”

“Me.”

“H-How long have you had that in your pocket?”

Zeke held the pretty silver band up so the light caught the metal and the cluster of small diamonds around a larger sapphire. “Oh, about a month now. Been waitin' for the right moment to get on my knees and beg you to give me a chance to be your husband. You need me to beg officially, angel?”

A laugh bubbled free. “I asked you. You're the one who needs to say yes.”

He exchanged one hand for the other, provocatively stroking her ring finger before slowly sliding the beautiful ring over each knuckle. When it was perfectly situated, he kissed it. “That's my answer, Olivia.”

She launched at him, wrapping her arms around his neck as his circled her waist. His laugh of delight reverberated into her when he stood, lifting her easily, and proceeded to kiss her breathless.

“Is there a flat surface anywhere?” she demanded huskily, the instant their lips parted. “The chair, a desk, the floor?”

“No sexy shenanigans in the shop.” Standing a few feet away, Loki grinned at them as though *he* was the one who'd proposed. “However, Gin does have a bottle of champagne reserved just in case of such an event.”

“And you told me it was wishful thinking!” came the receptionist's voice

from across the room. She popped up from behind the desk, bottle in hand, and all but danced her way over to them. “Congratulations! This is so freaking awesome!”

Olivia flushed, belatedly remembering they weren’t alone. She lowered her eyes shyly as Zeke let her slide to the floor, kissing her temple. He kept his arm around her, shifting her against his side, maintaining the connection she craved so deeply.

With the other hand, he shook Loki’s, then took a hearty pounding on the back before the other Dom dragged them both into a hug. “Can’t think of any two people more suited to each other.”

Lifting his eyebrow, Zeke counted pairs off on his fingers. “Braun and Bodie, Jasper and Anarchy, Thane and Connie—”

“Oh, shut up and take the compliment.”

Ginny wagged her phone in the air. “Pretty please with the biggest cherry on top, can I post the video on our social media? Romantic stuff gets so many views, and this is just gold.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. It was all on video, the whole proposal? She eased forward slightly, her gaze locked on the phone even as she heard Loki telling his office manager not to post anything until Zeke gave her explicit approval—because they had friends to tell first.

Joy bubbled up inside her. She was *engaged*. There was a gorgeous ring on her finger, a handsome Dom on her arm, and maybe if luck fell on their side, they’d have a beautiful baby to hold one day.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered to Ginny, shooting a glance at Zeke. “Post it tomorrow afternoon. We’re going to the club tonight, so we can tell everyone who matters then,” she told Zeke. “I don’t want this to be a secret. Loving you isn’t something dirty and horrible; it’s everything.”

“All right. Whatever my angel wants, she gets.”

Ginny squealed. “Thank you, thank you!”

“Gin, can you fetch some glasses for the champagne while I go over these designs? I’m sure our lovebirds are itching to get out of here and celebrate properly.”

“Oh, of course! No drinking until after the session though,” Ginny called over her shoulder as she hurried off. “Rules are rules, Loki.”

“Rules are rules,” he muttered mockingly under his breath, flipping her the bird when she happened to glance back at him. “Best damn manager around, but she drives me fucking crazy.”

“Bet you wouldn’t be without her,” Zeke rumbled.

“Hell, no. She’s the one keeping us in the black; Indigo and I might be the talent, but Ginny is the one cracking a damn single-tail at us when we hit a rough patch. She does all the promos, comes up with a dozen ideas a day on how to improve things. Thanks to her, we’ll have enough clients in the door in the next month or so to warrant hiring a new set of artistic hands.” The pride in his voice gave Olivia a warm feeling. He might be married and a father now, but he loved his manager in the way only good friends could love. “Gonna have to think about giving her a raise soon.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Olivia snuggled deeper into Zeke’s side, content to just stay right here until someone demanded she move.

“Speaking of clients...” Loki offered the tablet back to Olivia. “What do you think of these, Livvy? If you’re happy with them, we’ll get started with yours. If you’re ready, that is.”

She didn’t look at it, didn’t need to. Loki was a perfectionist when it came to his work; she trusted he would make her remembrance tattoo stand out the way it should.

Instead, she stared up into Zeke’s eyes, losing herself in the green. “I’m

ready, Sir.”

For whatever came next.

The End

Thank you for reading Learn For Me!

While this may be the end of Club Avalon, rest assured that Avalon and its beloved Masters (and Mistress) won't be left behind.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kay Elle Parker is a born and bred Yorkshire lass, residing near Harrogate, North Yorkshire. She spends her days working with animals, and her nights writing down the erratic journeys of the characters inside her head. Reading and writing are her passions (finding the Kindle app for her phone was a godsend and a curse!) Wanting to give readers a story to remember and characters to love is her main objective.

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