



THE
Darkest
ONES

KITTY THOMAS

THE DARKEST ONES

KITTY THOMAS

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Kitty Thomas
Digital Edition**

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Darkest Ones is a bundle of my 3 darkest titles: Comfort Food, The Game Maker, and Big Sky.

Comfort Food was my debut book, published originally in 2010 and is considered to be the OG dark romance book of the subgenre. If you enjoy Comfort Food, Game Maker has a “similar feel” in many ways. And Big Sky... well, I have no excuse for Big Sky. It is what it is.

These are all standalone titles so you can read them in any order, but I recommend the order laid out, first because Comfort Food is where it all started, and it's always a good idea to start at the beginning if you can, and you probably need Comfort Food and The Game Maker to dip a toe into Big Sky.

Hope you enjoy! Thanks so much for reading!

Kitty ^^

Comfort Food:

HER:

The first day of my captivity was like being born... or dying. They're both

kind of the same thing with the long tunnel and the bright light at the end. Maybe it wasn't like either, actually. Maybe I'm remembering it wrong because for me that day all there was was darkness.

HIM:

Today I found something beautiful and decided to break it. I wanted to see it shatter in my hand and crumble at my feet. Her name is Emily Vargas. She's bright and educated and stunning. Articulate. She'll want someone to talk to her.

"I would've paid 10x what I paid for this ebook... Grabs hold of you from the first paragraph and never lets go." - Pam Godwin, NYT Bestselling Author

"Sexy and twisted and masterfully written." - Julia Sykes, USA Today Bestselling Author

The Game Maker:

I was too isolated. I was about to be evicted. I made a final desperate call to the man who ruined my life, but he didn't come for me.

Someone else did.

And then there was Seven. When I first woke in the cell, I thought he was my captor, but he is a pawn, like me.

Seven is beautiful and kind. I want him so much I can barely breathe. He wants to protect me from our captor, but he can't.

We are both locked inside a game neither of us can ever hope to win, and even though it's wrong, I'm starting to want both men, not just the good one... the monster as well.

"The Game Maker is Kitty Thomas at her dark, twisty, mind-f*cking best!",

Anna Zaires, NYT Bestselling author of TWIST ME

“Thought-provoking, gritty, and darkly sensual, The Game Maker seduces with hope and tenderness and shocks with twists you won’t see coming. This is Kitty Thomas at her best!”, Charmaine Pauls, USA Today Bestselling author

Big Sky:

Veronica Cason lives in a small apartment with no clear view of the sky. It’s uncertain which might crush her first: her debt or the buildings squeezed in so tight that they surround her like ominous sentinels. She can’t breathe in the city. Her success is a lie, and her debt is coming to collect her — unless someone else gets there first.

When a stranger offers her a job at a ranch, it feels like salvation, but it could also mean her death if his motives aren’t pure. Which door has the tiger behind it? The claustrophobia of the city or ranch life under an open sky?

"Big Sky is my favorite Kitty Thomas story! It's taboo, hot, and so memorable, that years later I can still remember my feelings while reading."
~ Aleatha Romig New York Times bestselling author

COMFORT FOOD

KITTY THOMAS



Burlesque Press

Comfort Food
Kitty Thomas
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To Silence.
Not always the enemy of communication.

COMFORT FOOD

ONE

The first day of my captivity was like being born . . . or dying. They're both kind of the same thing with the long tunnel and the bright light at the end. Maybe it wasn't like either, actually. Maybe I'm remembering it wrong because for me that day all there was, was darkness.

I was blindfolded, sitting in a hard metal chair, with each of my legs bound to a chair leg and my arms tied up behind me. The sharpest bit of sensory input I had was the silence. It was a suffocating blanket from which there was no escape. Unless I started talking just to hear my own voice, a desperation I refused to display in the first five minutes of consciousness.

I remember thinking this was how spy movies often started, with sensory deprivation: the first step to get the prisoner to spill his secrets. I had no secrets. I was an open book, and maybe that was the problem. I was a minor celebrity on the public-speaking circuit, self-assured, articulate. The poster-girl for everything others wished they could become. Not a threat to anyone really.

I'd written a few books and had started to grow a following of loyal devotees. Someone would notice I was missing, at least by the time my next speaking engagement rolled around in a couple of weeks.

The day had started at one such engagement. A very nice luncheon, in a very nice restaurant in downtown Atlanta had been booked for the event. I usually started and ended my book tours in Atlanta because it was close to my home in the suburbs.

The audience was mostly comprised of women, my primary demographic, though I'd never set out to become some *voice of women*.

There was a smattering of men, but I wasn't paying much attention.

Women go through their lives a bit differently than men. We're always cautious. It's not that we live in abject terror twenty-four hours a day thinking some random man is going to come along and rape or kill us. Only the most neurotic of us think that way.

Still, you never know what kind of wacko out there has become fixated on you. And despite all the empowering speeches and the women's movement, in the grand scheme . . . women are prey.

This was the place I was at, the almost complete denial it had happened to me. Me, who is always so careful. Locks her doors, doesn't walk or jog with ear buds in her ears, doesn't take candy from strangers in vans. You know the drill.

I was listening to the silence and wondering how the hell this could be happening. Other things were running through my mind as well. Things that had me hoping maybe I did have some government secret and once I shared it, I could go on my merry way.

Rape. Death. Dismemberment. Maybe in that order, maybe not. Though that order would be preferable to Dismemberment. Rape. Death. Or Rape. Dismemberment. Death. You always want your dismemberment to happen after the death.

Death first would be the absolute best-case scenario. I'd seen enough woman-in-peril movies, and I was no MacGyver. I didn't really have any kind of ballpoint pens on me that I could somehow get out of a pocket and turn into a ballistic missile.

My mistake was a stupid one. I'd left my drink unattended. Men never have to worry about this shit. I guess because statistically speaking there are fewer female psychos stalking men than the opposite, and most confrontations between men are pretty straightforward.

Like all women raised in the current climate of fear and loathing of men, I was taught never to leave my drink unattended. All women know this. We do. Even if we aren't explicitly told, it seems to come with the packaging and wiring of being female. Just common sense in the age of the date rape drug. Expecting even the most sensitive male to truly understand any of this is like expecting a wolf to understand the finer points of being a rabbit.

Still. We seem to think there are exceptions. Like my luncheon.

There are no exceptions. If there were, I wouldn't be sitting tied to a chair listening to the questionably comforting sound of my breath going in and out.

I couldn't stop thinking about how my parents were going to react to all this. My sister, Katie, had died several years ago in an accident. She was deaf and hadn't heard the car barreling around the curve. The driver wasn't used to ice on the road. No one in the south is. My parents hadn't spoken about her in years because they couldn't deal with it. I couldn't imagine how they'd cope with my disappearance and wondered if they'd curse God for doing this shit to them twice in a row.

The door creaked open then, exactly like doors do in scary movies. At least now I knew what kind of story I was in, no sense fooling myself about it. The sound of his boots echoed eerily loud on the concrete floor as he approached me. He stopped maybe a couple of feet away as the silence stretched on for a small eternity. Finally, I felt compelled to speak.

"Why are you doing this?" My voice shook when I said it, and I hated that. I sounded weak. I'd never sounded weak before in my life.

It was such a cliché question. If these were to be my last words, they felt like stupid and unimportant ones, but I had to know. Why *had* he taken me? Did I send out a vibe or was he just obsessed? Was there something about me that screamed *Victim*?

I'd always tried to give the impression that I wasn't easy prey. I'd been fooling myself. It had been ridiculously easy for him to take me.

Then again, maybe I was being all wrong-headed in assuming right from the start my captor was male. Theoretically, it could just as easily have been a woman.

Somebody jealous of my professional success. Someone who hated me for some imaginary reason, like that her husband thought I was pretty or something. As if I can control who thinks I'm pretty. There was always that one-in-a-million reason for some woman to go apeshit psycho on you.

And I don't hate men. There is a very small percentage of men who choose to perpetrate violence against women, despite the ease with which they can do it. Most women don't hate men. Those that do, though, probably do so not because most men are violent towards women, but that they could be, if they wanted to. This knowledge sets up a kind of helpless rage in some women. One I'd never succumbed to until today.

He still hadn't spoken. I was carrying on this internal monologue in my head because I was afraid I might say something that would get me killed. Or worse. It was naive, but I wanted to believe I could somehow alter the course of events here by saying the right thing. My words, the thing that had made

me so compelling to people, were more useless than I wanted to admit. My only weapon had the efficacy of a squirt gun.

I could feel the heavy lump forming in my throat as he stepped closer. I couldn't see him because of the blindfold still covering my eyes, but I knew he was observing me, probably taking me in with amusement. It pissed me off that he held my life in his hands, and yet he might be amused with me.

I continued to wait for him to answer the *why are you doing this* question, but the answer didn't come.

There is a standard victim/victimizer protocol, an etiquette if you will. *Why are you doing this?* is the introductory question, sometimes followed by screaming or crying. I wasn't screaming or crying. I wanted to conserve my energy for my one possible moment of escape. Eventually he'd do something stupid. He had to.

After the victim's opening line, the victimizer usually says something so terrifying the victim wishes they'd never opened their mouth. This man, however, seemed to be capitalizing on the terror of uncertainty.

After all, if he spoke to me perhaps there was something human in there, something I could reason with, some tiny, frail hope I could bargain somehow. A large, cool hand rested softly against my cheek.

There was no violence or threat in the way he touched me. It was my cheek, so it certainly wasn't an overly sexual touch. Still, it was a threat to me. It said, *I have no problems breaching your personal bubble or touching you at any time.*

His hand remained pressed solidly against the side of my face like that for a couple of minutes at least as my heart continued to hammer in my chest. That huge, strong hand. He could easily beat me to death with it, or he could be gentle. Although at this point, even gentle was an act of violence. I didn't know which I preferred.

With violence I could have the appropriate socially-approved victim response. I knew from experience anything else could produce a very different physical reaction.

AT SEVENTEEN I'D gotten involved with my first real boyfriend. He was cute and had that edge of danger that girls of that age are so fond of. He gave off an air of something wild and frightening, and I'd been along for the ride

We'd fooled around a lot. My strict religious upbringing didn't allow for

more without fear of God's wrath coming down on me, and orgasms weren't worth an eternity in hell. Though in hindsight, the idea that some deity could be bothered to punish any one individual for what they chose to do with their clothes off, seems stupid at best.

He'd pressed me down on the bed, my legs hanging over the edge. We were in his room; his parents were downstairs. The sounds of the nightly news drifted up to the bedroom. I was lying there, my pants forgotten on the floor, though I was still wearing a shirt.

He wanted to go down on me. It was more than I was ready for at the time, and I was paranoid about getting an STD, *the* STD. Yes, this was how empty my education in sexually transmitted diseases had been in the abstinence climate. Still, I'd said no. I'd meant no.

He'd ignored me, spreading my legs wide for his perusal, gripping my wrists tightly against my thighs as he held me down. "You'll like this, I promise," he said.

I struggled, but he was too strong, and I didn't have the proper leverage to shove him away. He buried his head between my legs, slowly laving the bundle of nerves there. I wanted to cry out, but I couldn't face the shame of his parents running up there and finding me half naked on his bed.

Somehow it was worse knowing I could have stopped him. It was one violation or another. His tongue on my clit, or his parents knowing what we'd been up to, thinking I was a slut.

"Please, please don't." I'd begged him, and yet he hadn't stopped.

It was incredible how little time it took for my resolve to melt, for "Please, no" to turn into "Oh God, don't stop."

When he was finished, I just laid there, my legs shaking from the force of my orgasm. They'd turned to jelly, and I felt weak, drugged in the post-orgasmic afterglow euphoria. The orgasm I couldn't possibly go to hell for. He looked up into my eyes, a self-satisfied smirk on his face and said teasingly, "I told you you'd like it. Now, what do you say?"

"Thank you." It was our little inside joke. It had never previously been applied to anything sexual. The words had slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them, and on some level they were true.

He and I never talked about the incident after that, and he never directly forced me again. He never had to. I didn't give him the opportunity because it was too confusing. In his mind, I'm sure he believed he hadn't done anything wrong, since he'd successfully changed my mind by turning my body against

me. In the end I'd liked it. The entire sordid event from start to finish.

The juxtaposition of fear and helplessness, set up next to complete pleasure and eventual surrender. I'd masturbated for months afterward to the memory of the event. It was several years before I mentioned it to a friend.

She'd insisted it was no different than rape. I suppose she was right, but I'd never seen it that way. I'd for some reason never had the normal emotional response. I'd gotten off on it. Something was different in the way I was wired and that, perhaps, was the only thing that had saved me. Over time I developed an intense shame about it, not because I'd been violated, but because I wasn't properly traumatized by what had been done to me. Because I sometimes still touched myself thinking about it.

I THOUGHT he'd left me alone again, but then I heard another metal chair scrape against the floor. His heavy weight fell into it, and he placed something on a table. My breath hitched.

Moments later, a spoon was prodding at my lips. I opened my mouth, and warm chicken noodle soup slid down my throat. Comfort food. Oh, sweet irony. I wasn't worried he'd drug me. Why would he?

Drugging had been a convenience of transport. He had me where he wanted me, no doubt in some eerie sound-proofed basement cell. I heard him crumble crackers into the soup before feeding me another bite. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. Intense fear tends to shut down the hunger response.

After the second bite, his hand gently fondled one of my breasts through my clothing. I stiffened and flinched away. He didn't yell or hit me. He simply placed the bowl back on the table and got up. Then his footsteps started to recede in the direction they'd come from.

So this was the game he was playing? Either I would accept his touch, or he'd starve me to death? I hear it's a horrible way to die, second only to drowning or suffocation. Those things could still be on the menu. It was early yet.

"Please . . . wait." I hated myself for saying it. Hated myself enough that had my hands been free and a razor been nearby, I might have pressed the blade into my skin and bled out right there in front of him.

I was already bargaining, doing the *appease the captor and maybe he won't hurt you too bad* thing. In turn, he would show a small kindness here or

there to gain my total dependence on him And voila . . . instant Stockholm Syndrome.

His footsteps stopped, and I heard him turn, still as silent as ever. After a moment, he returned and sat back down in the chair.

I was trying not to hyperventilate. I wasn't sure what I'd have to allow him to do to let me breathe into a paper bag. This was how our agreement began. He never said a word, never made any kind of verbal threat. He didn't need to.

It was a tacit agreement. I would give him what he wanted, or else. Right now the bargaining chip on the table was food. I was still arguing with myself over that one, berating myself for not being stronger, not holding out longer. He hadn't tried to fuck me yet. Having my breast fondled was a small price to pay to eat.

The spoon prodded at my mouth again and I opened up for the warm liquid. He'd gotten the good crackers. The oval-shaped Townhouse kind. The kind I liked. I had a moment of almost hysteria wondering how long he'd watched me, how much he knew about me. Did he know this particular food somehow idiotically made me feel safe?

I tensed as I heard the spoon clank into the bowl again. I knew what that meant. Every cell in my body felt poised, on edge, trying to inch away as his hand closed over my breast once again. He hadn't moved to take any of my clothes off. He seemed to want me to agree to every step of my desecration.

I didn't want to respond, but his thumb caressed over my nipple through the layers of clothing so gently, so enticingly that I found myself arching toward him. I wanted to jerk away, but if I did he'd leave and take the food with him. This time my begging might not bring him back.

This pattern repeated itself over and over. First a bite, then a fondle, until the soup was gone. He wanted to make sure the conditions were clear to me, that nothing would be given to me freely. I would pay for it all.

I kept rewinding the day in my head. What if I'd done something differently? What if I'd never left the table? Had it been necessary to reapply my lipstick that close to the end of the day? Had a tube of waxy color called Sassy Vixen really been the catalyst to take my freedom from me?

I knew it was crazy to think that way. He would have gotten me sooner or later if he was determined enough. That moment in time wasn't the definitive moment. I would have had another unguarded moment later and would have paid for it then.

We'd gotten through the bowl of soup and an awkwardness descended. It was as if he'd only planned this far and had no idea what his next step should be. Maybe he was waiting for me.

Okay.

"Please tell me why you're doing this." My voice was stronger now. Maybe it was the captive/captor alliance we seemed to have formed. He didn't seem the kind to lash out with no planning. He instead seemed the type who could wait multiple eternities for everything to work to his desire.

No reply.

He placed his fingers on my lips, gently silencing me. He had no intention of answering the question, and I had no power to make him do so. He knelt on the ground beside me and I heard the knife as it cut through the ropes binding my legs to the chair.

I had the urge to kick him in the face, but I didn't. If I kicked him, I was escalating the situation to real physical violence, and he would no doubt retaliate. This wasn't someone with gentlemanly scruples. Before I could make a solid decision against kicking him, my chance slipped away, as he moved behind me.

He sliced through the ropes around my wrists. I hadn't realized how much they'd cut into me, but they burned now that the air hit them. He came back to stand in front of me, bringing my arms around with him, placing my hands primly on my lap like I was a posable doll. I could barely feel myself breathing.

I have a deep and abiding fear of knives. Honestly, I don't know many people not afraid of knives. For most, a knife is scarier even than a gun. If someone kills you with a gun, it can be quick, painless. Knives don't offer that possible luxury. They are intimate and violent in a way a gun could never hope to be.

Despite my hands and legs being free, I still didn't fight back. He had a knife, and I was blindfolded. It didn't take a mathematician to work out those odds. Before I could reach up to remove the blindfold, his hands were encircling my wrists, rubbing them, as if he were actually concerned he'd hurt me.

But I knew that wasn't the case. Anyone who drugs you, kidnaps you, and locks you in a cell doesn't care if they hurt you. Maybe he just didn't want to hurt me, yet. In one quick movement, he ripped the blindfold away.

Although the scrap of dark fabric hadn't been pleasant, it had acted as a

sort of safety, a filter. Now there was nothing between us. I looked into the coldest, blackest eyes I'd ever seen, fathomless pools of something I couldn't quite recognize as human. There was an otherness about him, something that made him different from me, from anyone I'd ever spoken to before.

I expected him to start the verbal threats now that the mystery of my captor was over, but he didn't. He just stared. I was his science project.

In another situation I would have found him attractive. He was muscular, had a firm jaw, great hair, not an ounce of body fat. I imagined this was what Ted Bundy's victims felt at some point, that it was utterly impossible he could want to hurt them and be so beautiful at the same time. The unbelievable shock someone so attractive could be a predator.

Why would he have to be? Didn't women just fall at his feet automatically? I had the sudden bone-chilling terror that this man wanted something he couldn't get from a date, perhaps my body chopped up in little pieces and arranged in neat white paper in the freezer. I shuddered at the thought and quickly tried to block it out.

Monsters aren't supposed to be beautiful. It's the rule. The Hunchback of Notre Dame was ugly. Frankenstein's monster was ugly. Nosferatu . . . ugly. Ugly was in the rulebook. And yet the man kneeling calmly before me wasn't ugly. Not on the surface. Look anywhere but into his eyes and he was the man women fantasized about from puberty onward.

He stood and backed away from me then, his gaze pinning me to the chair. He wasn't holding the knife in a threatening way, but he still held it. He started toward the door, then thinking better of it, he turned, came back to me, and pulled me out of the chair. I was almost to the begging point again, but he wasn't interested in me.

He stacked my chair on top of the one he'd been sitting on, folded the card table, and took the bowl and spoon.

I could have spent hours, days even, berating myself for not at least trying to run past him for the door, but I was glad I didn't. There was a combination keypad on the wall. Leaving required a retina and thumbprint scan. Whoever had me, had some discretionary funds. Maybe I was part of a secret government study.

The door shut loudly behind him, and I was alone in the cell with nothing but the clothes on my back. Concrete floor, concrete walls, unknown ceiling composition, all gray. A toilet sat in one far corner with no lid and there was an odd drain in the floor a few feet from the toilet. It was like prison without

bars, or windows, or a bed.

I didn't know what time it was or why this mattered to me, but there was something disconcerting about not knowing whether it was day or night. When would I sleep? Not that it mattered. There was nothing to do but sleep.

In the movies, there's always a way out. It doesn't matter where the bad guy traps you, there's a way out. You can pick a lock, or use some kerosene, a match, and some sort of fuse and make a bomb to blow the door off. You can crawl out through the ceiling tiles, or smash a window, or find some weak point in the wall and start chipping away at it with a sharp tool you just happen to have in your pocket.

My cell was a fortress. It made the movies seem very contrived. It really isn't that hard to create an inescapable fortress if you stop to think about it. All you need is a solid floor, walls, and ceiling, and one exit using fingerprinting and retinal scans.

TWO

I once read somewhere that predators conduct something called *the interview* with their potential victims so they can determine if their intended prey is worth the risk. Of course they don't call it *the interview*; that's criminal profiler talk.

I wondered if I'd been interviewed. I was known to give several talks a month. Had he been at one of them? Pulled me aside? Asked me charming, disarming questions? Pegged me as a lamb? A Red Riding Hood?

I didn't know. But surely I would have remembered those eyes. And if I hadn't seen him for the predatory animal that he was, I would have noticed his good looks. Would I have gone to dinner with this man if he'd looked at me a fraction less coldly?

I wondered how long he'd stalked me and how easy I'd made it. Had I been careless with door locking, thinking no one was watching and just this once it was okay? Had he been in my home, rifling through my underthings? Making a checklist of all the items in my cupboards?

I had a lot of time to think about these things but not that first night. After being left alone in the cell, I escaped to dreams. I could feel the drugs still swirling around in my system, so despite the circumstances, it hadn't been that difficult.

I dreamed about the luncheon, that he'd been there. We'd made eye contact, and he'd flirted with me. I don't remember if in the dream I flirted back.

When I woke, it took me several minutes to separate fact from fiction. Waking in the cell was the real nightmare. The dream had been so vivid.

Colors, sounds, and smells more alive and immediate than I'd ever remembered them in life. I drank them up to hold onto them, somehow knowing it was the only sensation I would get for awhile.

The cell was kept at a steady temperature, never too hot or too cold. There was a vent in the ceiling, but it was too high to reach even standing on my toes or jumping. I stood under it a few days in a row, just waiting for some temperature fluctuation, anything that felt like something.

Everything was too constant here. The vent existed only to taunt me over what I couldn't have: a simple brush of air on my face.

The second day set up what was to be the routine. I'd been up for what felt like several hours, pacing back and forth. Part of it was the fact that I had no idea what was in store for me. This man held the power of life and death and everything else in his hands, and he wouldn't even make verbal threats I could psychoanalyze.

I decided this was by design. If he'd stalked me for any length of time, he knew how I craved social interaction. To speak to me would be to give me something he didn't want to give. Toward what purpose, I didn't know. If his intention was to drive me insane, he had a winner of a plan.

It wasn't until the second day that I noticed the lighting. It wasn't bright or super dim; it was this monotonous low illumination that stretched evenly over the ceiling. Like fluorescent lighting, but not quite bright enough for that. Maybe fluorescent lighting that had dimmed some. I couldn't begin to guess at the psychological makeup of someone who would buy lighting and run it constantly til it had dimmed to just the right level to torment me. Maybe that part was all in my head, and I was already going crazy.

Finally, I drifted to sit in one corner of the room, farthest from the exit. I pulled my legs up against my chest, resting my chin on them, and watched the door like it was going to do a trick. It was. Eventually it would open. Some part of me wanted it to because then at least whatever fate awaited me could happen and then be over.

When the door opened I changed my mind, silently begging for more time alone. My heart hammered in my chest so hard I was sure it was going to burst out. I took slow, measured breaths, trying to keep a level head. I'd considered rushing the door, but I had no chance of getting there quickly enough.

The door shut behind him with finality. That was it. Game over. That shot was gone. Not like I had any real shot, but when you're in no-win situations,

you have to play this imaginary game in your head, the fantasy where you beat the bad guy and escape.

The bad guy stood watching me with a metal tray in his hands. For a moment, I imagined beating him to death with it. But then I was back to how I would get his finger and eyeball up to the keypad. Plus there was the combination. I could starve to death trying to figure it out.

He smiled at me—not a friendly smile—as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. He probably did. I'd always had an incredibly expressive face; it's hard for me to mask my emotions even under the best of circumstances. If I have a nice fantasy, my lips curl in a smile. If I'd done that, I was sure he knew what it meant, that I was running through various grisly murder scenarios that didn't feature me as the victim.

He crossed the floor and sat Indian-style across from me on the very edge of what I'd always deemed my personal bubble. Chicken noodle soup. Again. I stared at the bowl trying to determine what his game was. If it was time for breakfast, shouldn't he be feeding me something breakfast-like? Or was this another effort to confuse me on the time of day?

Did he seriously think soup was going to make me forget he had me locked up in what was basically a sensory deprivation tank? Or was this just a way to deaden the sense of taste so it was as deprived as my other senses?

He crumbled the crackers and lifted the spoon to my mouth. I'm not sure where my courage to speak came from. I was far past scared, but I was also angry, probably as much at myself for sitting and doing nothing as I was at him.

"I can feed myself!" As soon as I'd said it, I flinched. So much for bravery. I guess I expected him to hit me. Your average psychopath isn't known for his restraint. I braced an arm over my face as if it would stop any blow he decided to deliver.

Nothing happened.

With slow wariness, I lowered my arm. He sat mildly waiting with the spoon in his hand. I looked for anger in his eyes, but all I saw was calm, and the slightest tinge of amusement. I amused him. That made me angry enough to stop being scared again.

I wanted to lash out, fight. At that moment I didn't care if he killed me. I'd gotten it into my head that whatever he had in store for me would be worse the longer it took him to mete it out, and I saw no escape. If he killed me quickly, that would be better.

I was also more clear-headed than I'd been the day before. The drugs had worked their way for the most part through my system, and I wasn't so hungry I'd do anything. I cringed as I remembered letting him touch me through my clothing just to eat. There would be more of that and much worse if I didn't act now.

I slapped the spoon out of his hand and threw the bowl across the room. The glass shattered against the wall, breaking the silence. My mouth followed suit. "I don't want fucking chicken noodle soup! I want you to let me go, asshole!"

I was sure that would do it. Someone as anal as he appeared to be would snap under the strain of my rebellion. I was adorably naive. He stood with the tray in one hand, picked up the spoon, and left the room.

That was when it occurred to me how unbelievably stupid I'd just been. Yes, he was anal, and yes my little outburst would likely make him angry. But the amount of restraint he'd shown so far made me realize it was unlikely he'd offer me a quick death no matter how many outbursts I displayed. He'd spent too much time on this plan.

He was only gone a few minutes, but during those few minutes, I ran through at least twenty possibilities of what he might do next. He might starve me was one option. I'd managed to get some bravery due to the fact that I'm not usually that hungry when I first wake up, but starving wasn't something I wanted to do. I was reminded of this fact because I'd just the day before allowed him to fondle me once for each bite of soup.

He could kill me. A part of me wanted him to. It would be easier than living with what I would no doubt become if he kept to the same MO. He could have gone to get some dramatic implements of torture, or just the knife he'd used the day before to cut my bonds. I shivered at the last option and scooted back into the corner as if I could press myself through the wall to freedom on the other side. Maybe he would be quick about it.

The door creaked open again and my eyes shot up to meet his, terrified to see anger, but afraid not to know the status of my situation. He still had that calmness. He shook his head and grinned. If he hadn't been a sociopath, he would have been appealing. He had one of those boyish lopsided grins that tried to inch a little way up his face and made him look safe. It didn't fit with his eyes.

Instead of knives or guns or a million other nasty options, he had a broom, a mop, and a pail. He dragged a small trash can into the room behind

him, and the door slammed shut again. I watched as he swept up the solid pieces of the soup and the glass from the bowl and dumped them into the trashcan. Then he mopped the floor, and without a word, took everything he'd brought into the room out again.

A few minutes passed before he returned to the cell; this time he wasn't carrying anything. He strode too fast across the floor toward me, causing me to cower in the corner like a wounded animal. He stopped just short of reaching me and crossed his arms over his chest. He looked like a parent disappointed in a child, as if I had been petulant and not within my rights and the bounds of normal human behavior to react in the way I had.

His cold gaze compelled me to speak. "I'm sorry." My voice trembled and sounded foreign to my ears.

Could this weak, helpless creature really be me? I'd spent the past five years giving speeches on empowerment and self-improvement and here I was, reduced to this. And so quickly.

I looked up at him, and he continued to regard me with something like interest. I could practically feel the violence curling within him, waiting like a viper to strike, but it never did. Instead, he stared at me as if he expected me to continue speaking. So I did.

"Please talk to me. Why won't you speak to me? Are you going to hurt me? Are you going to kill me? Please . . ."

He smiled. I don't know why I asked why he wouldn't speak. I knew why. It was becoming increasingly clear. I didn't know exactly why me, but I had a good idea why he wasn't talking.

He'd studied me, stalked me, knew everything about me. Human contact, speech, words, music. I needed stimulation. And he wasn't giving any of it to me. I was pretty sure he was trying to break me, and considering my lack of escape options, I was pretty sure he was going to succeed.

People always think they'll never break. They'll never give in. CIA operatives somehow crack, but not them. We live in this world where everybody watches so much TV, it makes them think they're superheroes. I'm strong, but anyone can be broken. I knew this. It's only a matter of opportunity, will, and persistence.

What prevents it from happening most often is most people sociopathic enough to break and condition someone properly don't have the level of self-control required to do it. Most with the control aren't big enough sociopaths. This was why I feared this man so much, not because I was his prisoner, but

because I saw in him the blending of these qualities, which made the possibilities of what could happen endless.

He continued to watch me, cruel amusement curving his features, as if this was so much more fun than he'd ever anticipated the long nights he'd probably jerked off to the fantasy. Then he turned and left. The room felt quieter without him in it, as if his presence could somehow equal words for me.

Several hours passed, during which I paced the floor, and danced. I know that sounds insane. It is insane. It was day two, and I was flitting across the floor like a prima ballerina. But you don't understand how desperately I needed sensation, any sensation to make me feel like something rather than nothing.

When I was a little girl, I took ballet. I was pretty good, going all the way to acceptance at a major dance academy in New York. But in the end I decided against it. A ballerina's career is often over by twenty-five. By the time I was imprisoned in the cell, it would have been over for five years already.

I was glad I hadn't made a career of it. It would have ruined my feet. Although, I couldn't help but think ruined feet was better than being the prisoner of a sociopath.

So I danced. To distract myself, to move myself out of this plane of existence and into another, one where I was free. The cell was a perfect stage, plenty of room to *pirouette* and *tour jete* across it.

Even though the room was a static seventy-something degrees, I could feel the air move on my face as I whipped around and spun in circles. I felt my feet touching the floor with precision I'd never lost since giving it up. I heard the music in my mind as memories of old skipping records from the dance studios of my childhood played inside my brain.

I believed I'd won a round. I'd beaten the system he'd so carefully set up. When I couldn't dance any longer I sank to the floor. I was thirsty and getting hungry, but I wouldn't scream for him to feed me.

Screaming would have been normal; I knew that. But I'd already seen the way he didn't react when I'd smashed the bowl. Everything would happen on his timetable according to his wishes, and anything I did to try to goad him would make it happen that much slower. Of that I was certain now. Besides, my throat was too parched to scream; it wouldn't help.

I didn't know when he would return with more food for me, or water, and

I needed to conserve energy. Within minutes of my sitting on the floor in my corner, the door clicked open, and a bottled water was placed on the floor next to it.

It was cold, fresh out of the fridge, and I was profoundly, indescribably grateful for it. I was also suspicious. Had he been sitting outside the door listening to me? Were there listening devices? Something else? As I drank the water, I scanned the top of the walls.

This was an area I hadn't paid much attention to. After all, I couldn't reach the ceiling. What was the point of lying on my back all day analyzing it?

Then I spotted them. In the ceiling, at various points, were what appeared to be smallish black dots. On first glance, from the distance I was from them, they would look like random markings.

Pinhole cameras.

The son of a bitch was watching me. For all I knew, he had sound attached. He'd watched me dance and brought me water afterward. What the fuck did that mean? One thing was becoming clear, though. He'd entered the room three times since I'd been conscious. Each time I'd been sitting in the far back corner. That probably wasn't a coincidence.

If I was right, he wouldn't enter the room unless I was sitting in that spot. How could I use this information to my advantage? Obviously I had to eat, so I'd have to sit in the corner at some point, but I might be able to prevent extra unwanted visits by staying closer to the door when I wasn't hungry. Sleeping closer to the door was probably a good idea too.

Now I was back to trying to figure out the water. I had a clear enough idea of what was going on; thank you Psych 101. Behavioral conditioning and studies of Stockholm Syndrome had not gone to waste. Though I was aware that even with knowledge of what he was doing, it wouldn't stop him from succeeding, eventually. Or sooner, rather than later, since he'd known my weakness going into things.

I should have learned to be alone with myself, to not have to have noise or company or stimulation. I should have learned to meditate, taken up yoga or deep breathing practices.

I had fleetingly thought earlier about masturbating. I know that sounds wildly inappropriate. When you're in this sort of situation you don't want to do anything even vaguely sexual; it looks like an invitation. But it wouldn't have been sexual to me, not really. It would have just been comfort, stress

relief, so I could avoid having a panic attack.

But there were cameras, and I knew it now. So no matter how much I wanted that release, I wasn't going to do it. It was tactile stimulation of the best kind, a weapon in my arsenal against the insidious plans already set in motion against me, but the risks weren't worth the payoff.

After I'd finished the water, I placed the bottle back beside the door and went to sit in the corner. I wanted to see if he was watching me closely enough to take the bottle right away, or if he'd wait. He was studying me, but I was also studying him.

I wondered if he'd tie me up to keep me from dancing, or doing yoga, or just plain moving in any way that had meaning besides mindless pacing. Tying me up would require violence on his part, something he didn't seem willing to bring into the equation just yet. Of course, he could always drug me again.

I stared at the empty bottle, my eyes widening. I couldn't remember if the safety seal had been on or not. I'd just unscrewed the lid and drank; I'd been too thirsty to think about it. Most mundane safety issues weren't concerning me right now.

Several minutes of paranoia passed, and I didn't feel myself getting sleepy. Finally, I relaxed and slumped against the wall.

I didn't remember falling asleep, but I knew I'd slept when the sound of the door creaking woke me. The dream had been loud and colorful, my subconscious mind flooding me with the sensations I needed to keep me reasonably sane, to help me hold out through my waking hours.

I panicked for a second, thinking I'd been drugged and tied up, but my arms were free. I was alert, and sitting up, watching him warily as he came into the room. I could smell the chicken noodle soup coming out of the bowl and found I was hungry, much hungrier than I'd thought.

He placed the metal tray on the ground and sat across from me in the same manner as before. He arched an eyebrow as if questioning whether I'd learned my lesson or not. Would I throw my food again and be sent to bed without supper? My mouth remained shut but my eyes told him I understood. Throwing the soup was pointless. It wouldn't result in a reaction; it would only make it longer before I could eat again.

He crumbled the crackers in and lifted the spoon to my mouth. It was still soothing, despite everything, a microsecond of safety and warmth in every bite, my mom taking care of me when I was sick. I tried to shut out those

thoughts.

The soup wasn't for my benefit. It was for his, to more easily break down my defenses. The water had been the same. Small kindnesses. So I would come to trust and depend on him. I couldn't forget what he was, that I wasn't his guest.

I'd been afraid he would fondle my breasts again, but he didn't. Instead, every few bites he trailed his finger down my cheek. I fought hard not to flinch and equally hard not to lean into his touch. I tried not to react at all. I just sat there and let him do it, and then it was over and he was feeding me again.

Every few bites he'd do that same comforting gesture as if I were a wild cat he was trying to tame. As if he were rescuing me. Sometimes he stroked his hand through my hair, and once, in a moment of weakness, I leaned into the touch. It was stimulation, connection, communication. It was something. But every time I leaned in, I hated myself just a little more.

When the bowl was empty, he left the room. I sighed, leaning back against the wall, trying not to hold onto memories of his hand on me as if it were a good thing. A few minutes later, he was back, and I tensed again. Was this when it would start?

He held a strip of black cloth in one hand and moved slowly toward me. I struggled to my feet and backed away to a different part of the room. He advanced. Finally, I was backed into another corner and had nowhere left to go.

My eyes pleaded with him not to do it, but I didn't fight him. I didn't waste words because I knew he wouldn't answer them. I was shaking as he tied the blindfold around my eyes.

But I let him. I let him because I knew he'd do whatever he wanted anyway, and I was developing a sense of gratitude that he hadn't physically hurt me yet. He hadn't hit me, or cut me, or any of a million other things he could have done. He hadn't raped me, yet. And he seemed disinclined to do those things, at least in the classical way.

When the blindfold was in place, he took me gently by the arm and led me from the cell. We went down what I perceived to be a hallway, and he took me into another room, locked the door, then removed the blindfold.

We were in a large but plain bathroom. All decorations and pictures had been taken off the walls, if they'd ever been there in the first place. The mirror had been removed, and there was a faint outline on the wall where it

had once hung.

There was a sink with toothpaste and a plain white toothbrush and a shower with a plain white curtain. On the toilet seat were clothes in my size: gray sweatpants and a white top that buttoned up like an art smock. No panties or bra.

There was a chair in the bathroom where he sat and regarded me.

“Please turn around,” I said. I didn’t believe he would do it, but he did. He turned his chair to face the door, as if he were a gentleman. I thought for a brief moment about wrapping my hands around his neck and squeezing, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to kill him before he could break my arm.

I turned on the water, quickly shucked my clothes, and got under the spray. I drank in each sensation, the hot water spraying over my body, the floral scent of the soap and shampoo. After I’d finished, I rested my forehead against the cool tile and let the water run down my skin. I was afraid at any second he’d jump up and pull me out of there, but he didn’t.

When I stepped out, I noticed he’d taken my old clothes away from me. Of course, I couldn’t keep those. Those clothes would make me feel too much like a person. I slipped into the sweats and shirt, buttoning it quickly, and picked up my towel.

The towel was warm, fresh from the dryer, and it smelled like a spring meadow. Well, not really. It smelled like what we’re told by the dryer sheet people that a spring meadow smells like. But I believed it right then. I resisted the urge to put the towel against my nose and inhale.

“Okay, I’m finished.”

He stood and turned, giving me a once-over before replacing the blindfold. This time I was less afraid because it had become part of a routine, a natural continuation of actions before. He led me back to my cell and then was gone. That was the second day.

This pattern went on for seven days. I knew the time that passed because I used my fingernail to scratch a mark every day into the concrete behind the toilet. Three meals and a shower equaled a day.

He never tried to stop me from dancing. He must have known I’d eventually break anyway. There’s only so much pleasure one can derive from even a well-loved activity when it’s the only thing to do.

On the seventh day after my shower, he returned me to my cell. He removed the blindfold and stared at me, as if he could read my thoughts, or was trying to gauge his progress. He reached out and started to unbutton my

shirt.

I pushed him away, but he didn't try to force me. He didn't start yelling; he did nothing but shrug and then turned toward the door. I panicked. I couldn't be left alone like this, in this endless routine of nothing.

"Wait. Please don't go." It had been a week. He showed no signs of releasing me. On the first day I'd been willing to trade groping for food. I needed to be touched now.

Dancing wasn't enough sensation, hot showers weren't enough. I had started to crave the gentle caresses that accompanied meals. I knew it was sick, twisted, but I needed to connect, to feel some sort of communication with him.

He stopped next to the door and turned toward me. There was something almost like pity in his expression. It was the closest thing I'd ever seen in those black eyes, and I wished suddenly that I could read his thoughts, so I'd know what to do. He pressed his thumb up to the fingerprint scanner.

"Please! Please don't leave me here. I'll do anything you want." I moved to him and reached out and touched him for the first time of my own volition. My hand gripped his arm; I couldn't let him leave me alone again. I couldn't keep up this maddening pattern forever. It had to stop, anything to make it stop.

My mind was going down trails I wished it wouldn't. His soul was ugly, but physically, he was beautiful. I could give in to that. I could let that touch me without feeling the need to vomit. And I wouldn't be blamed for it. I was the victim here.

He firmly, but gently removed my hand from his arm and walked me to the other side of the room to my corner. He shook his head at me, his eyes serious.

He turned again, and this time I didn't follow him. He left me alone in the cell, and I slid to the floor and cried.

THREE

Another week. That's what pulling away cost me. He didn't beat me or throw me down and force me; he just gave me another week. This time it was worse. It was worse because he denied me his physical closeness, touch.

For the next seven days he fed me three meals a day, chicken noodle soup, no deviation. I wanted real food and I was willing to do just about anything to get it. Soup is great, but three meals a day and it becomes less filling. You start to feel *full* but *hungry* at the same time.

He didn't come into the cell at all. He just opened the door and slid the tray in at regular intervals. He didn't touch me or physically feed me. I felt completely bereft. I couldn't believe I'd become so attached to my captor's presence until I experienced the absence of it.

The hot showers became a distant memory. Instead, once a day he'd send in a large pail of tepid water, a sponge, soap, and shampoo. And of course a clean towel and a new set of the exact same boring clothes he'd been dressing me in for a week. And a comb as well as a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Now the drain across from the toilet made sense. When I dragged the heavy pail to the corner to bathe, I was aware of how completely exposed I was. If he wanted, he could watch me clean myself, and he probably

did. I was careful to ration out the water so I had enough to bathe, and also to wash and rinse my hair.

I'd stopped dancing. I didn't want to hold out anymore. I didn't want to hold onto whatever I could because I knew he was breaking me and succeeding. Dancing just made it take longer. I wanted to be done with it so I

could move on to the next thing I would have to endure in his care.

Only in my dreams did I feel anything. I'd started dreaming about him, his hand on my face, feeding me. Even my subconscious mind had turned against me. Instead of dreaming in vivid bright colors and loud noises and vibrant tastes, I had begun to dream about the cell with him inside it.

My desires had shifted from wanting the outside world to just wanting him to come back into my cell and for my punishment to be over. I wanted to prove I could be better. I could obey and do what he wanted.

Finally, on the seventh day he stepped inside. He sat across from me as if nothing had happened, as if we hadn't had a period of non-communication for days, and he started to feed me. When he touched my face, I leaned desperately into his hand. I wanted him to be pleased with me, to know he could trust me now.

When the soup was gone, he took the tray away. I experienced a moment of panic, fearing I'd done something to upset him, that he would abandon me for another week, but he returned a couple of minutes later. He approached me and started to undo the buttons of my top. I didn't pull away this time.

. . . She didn't resist as he removed first her top, then her sweatpants. She stood naked and shaking, self-conscious. She wanted to cover herself but was afraid if she did he'd punish her again. So she stood there, looking down at the ground as he observed her. She knew he must have watched her on the video monitors while she bathed, had probably stroked himself to the sight of her. And yet, it was different for him to be so close.

He raised her chin so their eyes met, and he smiled. He was pleased, and she couldn't help the tiny flush of pleasure that went through her body at that idea. Then his mouth caressed over hers, an echo of everything he'd been from the beginning . . . gentle. As if everything he did, he only did it for her own good. To teach her.

She responded, her mouth hungrily accepting his touch. His hands drifted to her breasts, fondling her. She didn't think of pulling away. Instead, she thought of how she could get closer and pressed her breasts harder into his hands, her body screaming for more contact with his.

He put the blindfold over her eyes and led her to the door. She was terrified of where he was taking her. Were there others in the house?

She found she had little to worry about as he took her into another room.

The combination keypad went off in a series of nondescript beeps, and then he laid her back on a bed.

She'd forgotten beds, what they were like, what pillows felt like against her flesh, or soft mattresses. She still wore the blindfold as he spread her legs apart, his fingers dipping into her and grinding against her heat. She was wet, so wet for him that she could hear it as his fingers pumped in and out of her in a chaotic rhythm. Then his mouth was on her sex, driving her on until she screamed.

"Yes, please, please don't stop touching me." Her breathing became erratic as she crested over the wave of her orgasm. Release, sensation, pleasure after so much nothingness. Then he was inside her, still gentle, thrusting in a steady soothing rhythm, like the ocean waves beating on the shore. She felt his release and then he pulled out of her . . .

I LAID on the bed panting hard as the door clicked shut. The blindfold he'd used to transport me still covered my eyes. I didn't remove it. I was afraid if I did, he'd take me off the soft warm bed and put me back in the cell. I didn't want to go back there. If I had to be his whore to stay out of there, I would do it.

I had the sudden urge to cover myself, but resisted it. I refused to move one inch from where he'd left me. I would move when he allowed me to move and not before. I needed him too much to make him angry with me now.

Maybe half an hour passed before the door opened again, and immediately I could smell food. Not chicken noodle soup. Real food. He removed the blindfold.

Complete sensory overload.

There was roasted turkey, dressing, sweet potato casserole, corn, those great fluffy homemade yeast rolls. I dug into it as if I'd been starved, and in some ways I had been. Everything tasted so good, so much better than it normally did when I had these things at Thanksgiving. There was sweetened iced tea and a small plate to the side that had a warm slice of pumpkin pie on it. A can of Reddi Whip sat at attention waiting to cover the pie.

I was probably eating like a pig. He didn't seem to care, so I didn't care. He didn't appear to be conditioning me to have proper table etiquette. When he'd been stalking me, he'd probably watched me eat at dozens of functions,

and this wasn't how I normally ate, the shovel-in method.

Once I'd convinced myself the food wasn't going anywhere, I slowed down and started to look around the room. The first thing I noticed was sunlight. I had a window! It was bulletproof glass (something I found out later) with bars over it. Still, it was a window. There were light, gauzy curtains to soften the starkness of the bars. The sun was shining, and the sky was blue, and I could see it. I knew what time of day it was, finally.

The room was lush with bright, rich colors, like those from my dreams. Fabrics hung on the walls and draped from the ceiling. It felt like being in a genie's bottle, only much roomier. There were several floor lamps and a few comfy chairs, the kind you could sink into and then have trouble getting out of.

Next to the window was a calendar with the date circled. June 3rd. It had been mid-May when I'd had my last speaking engagement. The room was even larger than the bad cell, and it had almost everything one could think of. There was a CD player and hundreds of CDs. There was an ornate desk and comfortable-looking swivel chair. A beautiful red leather journal sat on the desk with more pens than I could count. There was a clock on the desk that told me it was three-thirty in the afternoon.

One wall was all bookshelves with more books than I could read in a year. Scanning the titles I noticed some of them were old favorites of mine, and others were books I wanted to read but had never found the time. A few were books I'd never heard of but in genres close to the others.

He watched me as I ate and took it all in, then crossed to a small table, lit some incense, and put a CD in the player. Rich, classical music filled the room.

The bed I was sitting on was piled high with pillows and had a gold satin comforter on it that somehow didn't look gaudy.

When I'd finished eating, I cautiously got up. I was aware of and self-conscious of my nudity but I didn't dare try to cover up for fear he'd take everything away again. My feet sank into the softest, thickest carpet I'd ever felt, and I had to physically stop myself from lying on the floor and rolling around on it like a puppy.

On the far end of the room was a large walk-in closet, almost big enough to be its own room. The closet was filled to the brim with gorgeous clothes, all in my size.

"Can I . . . ?" I asked, reaching for a pair of designer jeans and a plum-

colored cami top.

He nodded and crossed the room to open a dresser drawer to indicate bras and panties, all matching and from a high-end designer. I quickly dressed, trying not to let it upset me that he watched every movement I made. I'd just had sex with him. He'd touched and looked at every inch of my body. Now was a stupid time to be getting modest.

When I was dressed, I padded back to the closet to look at the shoes. There must have been a hundred pairs. I wanted to dive into them and try them all on, but not until I was alone again. Instead, I went through a few boxes until I discovered some silvery wedge sandals and put them on.

He watched me for awhile longer as I went through the room pawing through things, quietly oohing and aaahing, momentarily forgetting I was a prisoner in a nicer cell. Then he got up and took the tray and silently went to the door.

"Wait," I said.

He stopped in the doorway and turned to me, his eyes questioning.

"Won't you speak to me now? Please? I did what you wanted." I cringed even as I said it. What he wanted had been to break me so utterly that I would beg him to rape me, and I'd followed his plan to perfection.

He placed the tray on the floor and crossed to me. Then taking me in his arms like a lover, he kissed me again on the mouth and left. I don't know what I'd expected. If he'd spoken to me I would have believed I could start bargaining. I could have read him better, dissected him.

If I could communicate with him in any other way besides letting him use my body, would I still so willingly allow him to do what he wanted with me?

After he'd left me to my own devices, I explored the rest of the room. There were two other doors, both without a keypad. I tried the first one, and it clicked open.

There was so much power in that moment. So much that I felt breathless with it. To put my hand on a doorknob and have it click open, to submit to my desire to go through it. It was almost more exciting than what was behind it.

A ballet studio.

The wall was lined with mirrors, though I couldn't bring myself to look too hard at my reflection. There was a closet with leotards and ballet shoes, all in my size. In one corner of the room nearest the door stood an old-fashioned record player and stacks of records, many I recognized from my

time dancing.

There was a lot of Tchaikovsky. I thumbed through the records and put one on to play. I did a *tour jete* and then a *grand battement*. There was a fan in the corner of the room and Degas prints on the walls, perfect for spotting when I did turns across the room. I would definitely use the studio, but I was curious about what was behind door number two.

The same excitement as before hummed through me as I placed my hand over the second doorknob. There was a momentary fear it might be locked, but it clicked in my hand and relented as well.

It was a bathroom, and not just a bathroom. It was The Bathroom. The kind of bathroom you'd find in *Architectural Digest*. There was of course a toilet, sink, and a mirror. I practically ran to the mirror and wished I hadn't. My eyes looked too haunted to be mine.

Where did my soul go? I couldn't see it anymore. In the cabinet were piles of make-up, all in my brands and colors. Surely I could put enough of it on to hide the look in my eyes.

In the center of the bathroom was the king of tubs. A giant whirlpool, the kind that could double as a hot tub, if not a small swimming pool. There was a cart next to the tub filled to the brim with loofahs and bath gels, body scrubs and bubble baths. Unlit vanilla candles lined the wide brim of the tub, and a box of matches sat in a tiny tray on the cart. I could hardly believe I was allowed to take a bath anytime I felt like it. A bath. I could light the candles and soak in the bubbles, and read as long as I wanted.

A large shower stood in one corner of the bathroom, and next to it there were cabinets with stacks of fluffy bath towels, the kind so large you could wrap them around an elephant. And they all smelled clean and fresh from the dryer. A couple of white terrycloth bathrobes hung from hooks on the wall.

I went to the adjoining room and scanned the bookcase briefly before picking a classic and then running water in the tub. I poured some vanilla bubble bath in and lit the candles. I wanted to do everything at once. It hadn't occurred to me yet not to be happy.

I hadn't sat and thought about the fact that I should want out, not better accommodations. I was still his prisoner, still completely at his mercy and whims. He could take it all away at any second and put me back in that bare cell, that limbo. But I refused to think about any of that. Instead, I sank into the tub and turned the jets on and began to read.

I was in the middle of the third chapter when he entered the bathroom. I

hadn't heard the door click open; I'd been so engrossed in that other magic place you go to in books. I dog-eared the page and closed the book, letting it fall to the floor and looked up at him.

The jets from the tub had made more bubbles, a false covering for the modesty I'd recovered after an hour in my new cell. He stood in the doorway naked and more beautiful than he had any right to be considering the circumstances. Since we were in the bathroom, and not in the bedroom where there was a keypad on the door and bars on the window, I could pretend things were normal.

I was his wife or girlfriend. He was rich—something obviously true beyond my fantasy life. He paid for everything while I did what wives and girlfriends of rich men did, pampered myself. I could pretend I'd given consent, that we had a relationship.

I wasn't sure if the music in the other room had gone off on its own or if he'd turned it off, but suddenly the only sound in the room was the water bubbling furiously around me, and my own ragged breath, part from arousal, part from fear.

He crossed to the tub and turned off the jets, and once again the room was cloaked in silence. I watched him cautiously as he got into the tub with me, disturbing the private sanctum I'd created because I'd created it with things that belonged to him.

The thought flitted through my mind that in some sense I belonged to him. I'd sold myself for pretty things, though at the time I had thought my price was much lower, since all I'd wanted was for anything to happen but him to leave me alone. For someone to communicate with me some way. Any way.

. . . He slipped his hands underneath the water to caress her skin and she let him. She knew she would either be his prisoner in a bare cell, or in here, these three rooms where she could pretend everything was okay.

His dark eyes drank her in as he pulled the drain on the tub. It took several minutes to drain out and while it did, he stroked her underneath the surface of the water. He dipped his fingers inside her and she found herself arching into his touch, grinding against his hand, begging for the contact that would get her off.

The water swirled away, leaving a mass of leftover bubbles. He rubbed

her clit in light circles as she gripped his shoulders and whimpered against him.

“Please . . . ” she said. She was sure she was begging him to stop, to not do this to her, let her keep her soul. But her body kept moving up to meet his touch, and some dark part of her feared she was begging him never to stop. Wetness pooled between her legs as the last of the water drained out and his hand started grinding harder against her while she panted.

He was beautiful, and he smelled good. He made her body hum with pleasure, and he gave her everything. She didn't have to worry about the things others did: bills, jobs, social pressure. All she had to worry about was pleasing him.

She couldn't decide if she wished he would speak to her. On the one hand, if he chose to speak, his words could be cruel and demanding and her fantasy would be shattered. With only her soft sighs and whimpers as a background track, it was easier to pretend.

He ran his tongue over her belly and up between her breasts before latching onto one nipple. His grip dug almost painfully into her hip as he fucked her harder with the fingers of his other hand. He didn't let her come. Instead, he took her just to the edge, that maddening place when you'll do nearly anything to achieve release, when you are beyond the capability to reason.

He lifted her out of the tub and carried her back to the other room while she clutched at him, panting into the warm soft hollow where his neck met his shoulder. He set her down on her feet and wiped the bubbles from her body with one of the towels. Then, while she was still half crazed by the lust he'd created in her, he gently, but forcefully pushed her down to her knees.

The room seemed to narrow. It was suddenly too small, cramped, and claustrophobic. She wanted to scoot away, but he'd linked their hands in a mockery of love and he held her in place, patiently waiting.

He could take the fantasy away at any moment. All he had to do was yell at her, or physically hurt her, push her down and rip through her without regard for what tore or bled. But he didn't.

“Please . . . don't . . . ” She looked up at him, wanting to find humanity somewhere buried inside his eyes, something to back up the almost civilized way he'd behaved with her. But he just watched her, and waited, knowing his lack of words took all of hers away.

She couldn't bargain with him, and so she bargained with herself instead.

If she did what he wanted, things would go easier for her.

Her mouth latched around him and she sucked. He released her hands to run his own gently through her hair. Caressing, reassuring, comforting.

She'd had a boyfriend a few years before who had taught her how to deep throat. It wasn't a wasted tutelage because his breathing was getting heavier and louder. Then he came. He used one hand to massage her throat and help her swallow.

She wanted to die, but he wouldn't let her. He lifted her off the floor and laid her out over the bed. Then he held her wrists against her thighs and returned the favor.

Her eyes drifted shut and she pretended it was her boyfriend, back when she was practically a child and he'd held her down to make her orgasm. She thought about all the nights after when she'd masturbated and made herself come to that memory. And she writhed against the tongue of her captor and came again . . .

HE LET GO of my wrists and went to the closet. I laid there, not daring to close my legs, trembling. He picked out another pair of designer jeans, and a black baby doll crop top and laid them on the bed, then he left me alone.

My hands shook as I put the clothes on. I didn't bother with a bra or panties, I just wanted to be covered, and I thought he probably preferred me without underwear. I hated myself for taking that into consideration even for a moment.

I was thirsty, but he'd thought of that. I hadn't noticed it when he'd carried me into the bedroom, but he'd brought me a large bowl of fruit: grapes, blueberries, strawberries, mandarin oranges, and pineapples. Sitting next to it on the side table was a bottle of water.

He was setting it up so he didn't cause me pain; I caused it. I caused it by rebelling. All I had to do was give in, submit in mind and body and I would never be hurt again. He'd see to my every need and give me the best of everything. He'd be better in bed than most men who take women willingly. He said it with everything he did, every touch, every caress, every physical pleasure he bestowed upon me. *Give it all to me. Give me your will.*

And that was when I knew. I had to kill him.

FOUR

I was falling too far, losing bits and pieces of my mind. If I didn't escape soon, I knew I wouldn't be able to. In the other cell there was no hope because there were no weapons. Now, I found myself surrounded with them. Not traditional weapons, of course, like guns and knives, but makeshift weapons that would do the trick.

Suddenly everything my eyes touched held a dark purpose. Shower curtain? Strangle him. Pen? Jab him in the throat. Lamp? Knock him out. I cataloged at least fifteen different ways to incapacitate him and then still more creative ways to finish the deed.

I couldn't let him live. He knew too much about me. He could hurt my family or friends, use them to lure me back. No, he'd signed his death warrant by taking me and even more so by giving me the tools with which to end him. He wasn't as smart as he thought. If he were, he never would have put me in the nice cell so soon, when I had some small piece inside me that was actually still me.

I've always been a squeamish person. The tiniest drop of blood freaks me out. It was the thing that had held me back. Besides my fear of not succeeding and being hurt or tortured to death for my crime, I was too squeamish.

Before, if I'd succeeded in killing him, I'd have to know the combination, then pop out an eye at the very least to get through the security. The fear of starving in a cell with a corpse had stopped me cold.

There were no pinhole cameras in the ceiling here. He must have thought I wasn't a danger anymore. He must have thought lack of dancing meant he'd

broken me completely, that I was so desperate for his touch I would gladly stay in my pretty crate like a good dog.

He was wrong. I waited though, formulating my plan, calculating. I didn't want him to suspect, so I let the new routine settle in for a few days. I ate the fantastic food he brought me; I spread my legs for him, let him do what he wanted. I read and took bubble baths and painted my nails and tried on outfits.

I pretended I was okay. I was docile, submissive, pleasing. My eyes lit up when he entered the room, and I eagerly did whatever he guided me to do. Thankfully his tastes weren't too exotic. I'd gotten through the first times, and nothing had changed. I could handle it until I could make my move.

It got to a point where my acting became almost too good. I leaned into his kisses just a touch too eagerly, sighed a little too deeply when he brought me off with his mouth or fingers. I was falling for my own seduction. So it was now or never, while my desire for freedom and escape still meant something to me.

I still understood his touch wasn't the only touch in the world, and the pretty things he lavished me with weren't the only things in existence. There was still a world outside that room. So the fourth day in the new cell, the first day clouds darkened the window so the sunlight couldn't stream through, I was standing by the door, waiting.

I intended to kill him and run for my life, in case any other dragons guarded the castle. I had a pen and a sock in my pocket, and the heaviest table lamp in the room held in my hands in a death grip.

The lamp normally sat on the desk beneath the window, so his eyes wouldn't find it missing in time to stop me. I stood, tense, waiting. I'd decided his mistake was conforming too closely to a routine. He always brought my breakfast at nine am, according to the clock on the desk. It was no trouble at all for me to be standing crouched by the door at 8:55.

I knew I had exactly one shot at this. My intention was to hit him the second the door opened. Then if he fell forward into the room I could use the sock to keep the door from sealing shut, jab the pen in his throat to finish him off, and run for it.

The keypad clicked to life on the other side of the door. When people have these moments they believe are big, they often speak of time standing still, how it dragged on forever in slow motion. But for me it didn't drag. It was so fast I almost missed it. The door swung open and I pounced.

There was no time to be precise. The fraction of a second I took to aim, would be all it would take for him to stop me. I wasted no energy on that; I just swung out. His hand gripped my wrist so hard I knew if he twisted just slightly he could break it.

That was it. My big escape plan. And it was over before it even started. I searched frantically for something, anything to use as a weapon. It couldn't be over this quickly.

There had to be a way to beat him. He couldn't have shut off all my routes of escape. Criminals always made a mistake. Didn't they? Maybe his mistakes would never make a difference to me one way or the other. My sole source of help might be some random stranger noticing something shifty about this guy and following him.

I released the lamp finally, and it crashed to the floor. My eyes met his and instead of the anger I expected, they held disappointment.

Something inside me died.

If I didn't get out now I would lose myself entirely to the beautiful monster in front of me. I dug into my pants and pulled out the pen. He still stood partially in the doorway. If I could get past him before he stepped the rest of the way into the room, I could still escape.

The pen plan was even less successful than the lamp plan. I just wasn't fast enough or strong enough. I had a moment of absolute shame over that, shame that I wasn't a superhero, or one of those girls on TV that somehow manages to overpower someone three times their physical strength. Fiction had sold me pretty lies, and none of them did me any good now.

He moved the rest of the way into the room, and the door clicked shut. I knew he wasn't going to give me another opportunity like that. I'd had it and lost it. He released my arm and instinctively I backed away from him. The disappointment he'd had in his eyes was replaced by some indefinable hardness.

It wasn't quite anger. It wasn't human enough or uncontrolled enough to be anger. And he was always in control.

"I'm sorry. Please, I'm sorry. Please don't hurt me." I moved backward until the heels of my tennis shoes hit the wall behind me.

He calmly held his hand out to me, and I took it. What choice did I have? He led me to the door and then produced the blindfold from his pocket. I didn't try to fight him; I complied.

Whatever he had planned for me would be worse if I kept fighting. After

the blindfold was in place, I heard the electronic beeps of the keypad, and then the door lock released. He took my hand gently and led me from the room. My arm still tingled where he'd gripped it to prevent me from hitting him with the lamp.

I was crying as we walked down the hallway. I knew he'd restrained himself from harming me. It was confusing to a degree I couldn't handle. It made me feel ridiculously and inappropriately grateful to him, and I knew that was what he wanted.

We didn't go far, so I knew we weren't going back to the bad cell just yet. In fact, I was sure we were next door. He closed the door and removed the blindfold. It was a plain gray room, much like my cell, only there were screens everywhere. Half of them showed the cell he'd kept me in originally. The other half showed my new suite of rooms. I didn't know where the cameras were exactly, what they were hidden in, but the point was they were there.

He'd known I was waiting for him with the lamp. I'd had no chance. Satisfied with my new understanding of reality, he put the blindfold back in place.

When the next door opened, I heard birds and felt a warm breeze on my face. He removed the fabric from my eyes and we were standing outside. The sun was starting to peek through the clouds.

I shouldn't have been shocked by what I saw. I'd seen something similar staring out the window of my room, but I just hadn't thought it would be like this on all sides. He linked his fingers through mine and led me around the house, as if we were lovers or friends, his grip never tightening or becoming threatening.

I could break the hold at any time and run, but to where? From the outside I could see my assumptions of his wealth weren't idle. He had money, possibly never-ending pots of it. The house wasn't a house, it was a fortress, a mansion. In another time, with slightly different architecture, it would have been a castle.

There were trees in the front yard and then what felt like a vast nothingness that stretched as far as my eyes could see. There were woods in the distance, but it was so far off I thought it might be a mirage. His house was situated on what felt like a grass-covered desert that seemed to roll on forever in all directions.

We could be literally anywhere. The driveway went on for what appeared

to be several miles. And what then? He led me over to the large garage that housed his cars, plural. No surprise that there was a combination keypad over the door.

He released my hand and sat on the grass, staring up at me, that look of mild amusement on his face, as if to say: *what now?* What now was right. I spun slowly in circles trying to grasp how far out we were, the vast nothing.

If there had been lots of trees I could have believed we were close to a main road somewhere and I just had to find it, but we weren't. I wanted to run. I should have, but I couldn't help but believe running would make my punishment worse.

There was nowhere for me to hide, and without a car, nowhere for me to go. He wouldn't go to all this trouble just to release me. I fought with myself over what I should do. I'd been so ready to kill him and now, faced with such a long trek to even a deserted road, I was giving up?

I found myself walking down the driveway, toward the vast nothing that I hoped eventually would turn into something. I felt his cold eyes on me, sending a chill over my skin. I knew he was toying with me, and I was buying into it, but I couldn't just stand there or go back to my cell.

He was there, ready at every turn. He'd known I would try to kill him, and he'd been prepared. He knew I would do what I was doing now, and he was mocking me. But to react any other way would have been unnatural for me. It would be to give in. He won either way. It was a game stacked against me on all sides.

I walked until I was a good bit away from the house, if one could call something that imposing a house. I didn't look back. I was afraid to see him following behind me at some kind of perceived safe distance. Eventually I did turn back because I couldn't stand the way my stomach clenched at the idea that he was close behind me, playing with me and waiting to pounce.

He was still sitting there, casually in the grass. I was too far away now to see his face, but I could make out his shape. And then he stood. My heart dropped into my stomach. I imagined he was smiling, a hunter intent on outrunning his prey, though I was too far away to see his mouth to find the truth of this theory. He started to move toward me.

I turned and ran. I'd always been in great physical condition, but I couldn't run for distance worth shit. I just never built up that kind of endurance. It didn't take long before I was winded, and he was close enough for me to hear him running up behind me.

I couldn't outrun him; I knew it. I'd known it from the beginning, but if I didn't make at least the token effort I'd be beating myself up over it for as long as he let me live. If there had been trees, I could have zigzagged between them and hidden. It was just too open here.

His feet pounded closer and closer to me against the ground, dry and packed hard from lack of rain. Before he caught up to me, I stopped, turned around, and held my hands out in surrender. He stopped running a few feet from me and smiled that unfriendly smile, then nodded. Then he turned and started walking back toward the house.

I stood there for a moment, gawking after him. I wanted him to physically drag me back kicking and screaming but he wasn't doing that. He seemed so sure I'd follow. Well fuck that. He'd had me almost three weeks. I wasn't that far gone.

I stood defiantly with my arms crossed over my chest. He turned and when he didn't see me following right behind him, the smile left his face, and his eyes narrowed. He started to stride purposefully toward me, and I found my feet defying my desires and moving me back toward the house.

For all my tough thoughts, I didn't want him to hurt me. At root I was a coward, and I knew it. I didn't take enough risks, never had. I was just the kind of girl men like him dreamed of taking. The kind that was too afraid of pain to rebel in any meaningful way.

I'd stopped running because I was terrified of him knocking me physically to the ground. I was afraid if he did that, if he got a taste of violence toward me, he wouldn't stop. We were in the middle of nowhere, and he was my only hope. Keeping him from turning on me was the only thing that mattered.

He slowed his strides to match mine as we walked together to the house. If the situation were different, it would have been companionable silence. I didn't know how he managed the willpower to not reprimand me. But he'd managed the willpower to do every other completely calculated thing he'd done. So why not?

He was the most terrifying person I'd ever encountered, like a wild animal, and yet he reasoned. Predatory animals are so frightening because you can't speak or understand their language. You can't reason with them.

As we got closer to the house, I kept thinking of the ramifications of its size. Surely a house that big, there had to be servants at some point. He couldn't possibly do everything himself. So people came to the house, and if

they came to the house, I had a chance. If I screamed my head off someone would hear me.

He pulled out the blindfold, and I let him put it on me. When the cloth was removed from my eyes again, the fear I'd been secretly harboring was realized. I was back in the bad cell.

"Please, take me back to the other room. I'm sorry. I won't try anything again. I won't try to get away."

He skimmed his fingers lightly over my face, cupped my chin, and brushed his lips softly against mine. I leaned into the touch because I knew it was the last one for awhile. I hated myself for trying to savor it. I should be happy he wouldn't touch me, that I'd have a fucking break from his constant ministrations, but all I could think about was that I'd have to dance again in order to feel anything at all.

It didn't matter what I did or didn't do in that cell. I would be there until he thought I'd properly learned my lesson. He turned and left me alone, that deafening door click sealing my fate. Would it be a week? Two weeks? Surely a murder attempt, no matter how lame, would require more than one week's penance.

I pounded on the door until my knuckles bled, screaming and begging for him to let me out, to not abandon me again. I couldn't be alone like this again. Being in the cell now was worse than the first time. Seeing how bearable my imprisonment with him could be, and what I was getting instead.

I pushed down the feelings of shame at having displeased him enough to warrant punishment. Some part of me still knew it wasn't true, or thought it might not be true. I wasn't sure anymore, but I was starting to feel like I deserved the bad cell now.

He'd given me everything, and I'd tried to kill him. I finally moved back to my corner, cradling my injured hands. I soaked in the stinging feeling because it was something, and it let me know I was still real.

Not long after that, the door opened. My usual bathing necessities were slipped into the room, along with a tray with bandages and ointment for my hands.

"Thank you." I couldn't stop the words. And somehow I knew any attempts at escape now were just denial and an unwillingness to accept reality.

I scooted the pail of water, soap, and bandages to the drain and first worked on my hands. I was sobbing by the time I'd finished bandaging. It

was like that moment when you know you're going to die and it's too late to do anything about it. You just have that sickening knowledge that that's what's about to happen, that apprehension.

I knew what had happened, I just couldn't stop it. I wouldn't scream for help; I couldn't. Not anymore. I couldn't scream because he was taking such good care of me. He'd gotten me bandages.

The rest of the day I didn't make a fuss. I did what I was supposed to do. I ate my chicken soup, and I slept in my corner. I scratched off a day into the concrete behind the toilet and ran my fingers over all the other days I'd spent there.

I don't know why I still hid the marks. I knew he watched me and had probably at some point caught me doing it. But he'd ignored it. He didn't seem to care about my crude calendar. I repeated the date over and over again in my head because it was important for me to know what day I was on.

When I slept that night I dreamed of the good cell, bubble baths and music, rows and rows of books and CDs, blush pink nail polish, and fuzzy slippers. And I dreamed of him. His eyes boring through me, seeing all my secrets, his hands on my body, and his voice whispering in my ear.

When I woke up, I was bleeding.

FIVE

In the master bathroom of what I had come to call *the good cell*, in the cabinet had been tampons and pads. Both. I hadn't thought anything about it at the time. If I was going to rebel and potentially fail, I should have thought about it and picked another date.

Now I was stuck in a bare cell bleeding like a stuck pig. It was disgusting. Still, he didn't change the routine. Whenever he opened the door I begged him for something. All he had to do was go down the hall to the bathroom and get it, but he didn't acknowledge my request. Instead, he let me bathe twice a day.

Finally, I stripped off my clothes and went about the cell naked. I knew he did it just to punish me. Feminine protection in his book was a luxury not a necessity.

I spent a lot of time in the corner thinking, trying to analyze my captor. I wondered what his background was. Surely he had to understand psychology at least a little to be able to do this. Maybe he was some type of quite literally mad scientist, using me as a study in behavioral conditioning.

That's the thing about conditioning. You can know it's happening all you want; it doesn't change the results. Eventually you break, reduced to something less than human. I felt like an animal as I crouched in the cell, blood dried on my leg. I felt wild.

I reacted like an animal. I found I listened for every little sound, watched every movement he made. I read body language and communicated through touch more than I had in my entire life. I spoke to him, mostly when I was scared, begging. But I hadn't spoken any words of substance in over three

weeks.

He opened the door again and brought in my food. It was the first meal since I'd decided to hell with clothing. I wondered if he would be repulsed by it, if he was the type of man who was deeply disturbed by a woman's natural cycle. But he seemed neutral on the matter.

I spoke then, not my normal begging or pleading, but something more meaningful. I wanted to fight this degradation of communication and not forget how to talk.

"Are you a scientist?" My voice sounded strange to me when it came out at a normal volume and pitch, not through tears or panic.

He had been on his way out the door when he turned sharply toward me, his face shocked. It seemed to unbalance him that I would bring up casual conversation at a time like this.

It made me bolder. In my time as his prisoner, not once had I ruffled him even the tiniest bit. He'd expected everything I'd done, found it amusing and predictable, and now I had done something he found surprising. A part of me was afraid I was digging my hole deeper, but another, much larger part believed I might buy myself reprieve from my punishment if he found me sufficiently interesting. So I kept talking.

"You aren't shocked by anything I do, except maybe this. So I wondered if you'd studied it. I studied it in college. I was originally going to be a psychologist specializing in research, like this, only . . . more ethical."

His lips quirked up in the least disturbing smile I'd witnessed on him so far. Still, he didn't speak to me. But he didn't leave me alone either. He sat on the ground a few feet away, watching and waiting for me to continue.

I wrinkled my nose at the soup and crackers he'd put before me. God, I wanted the real food again. I'd do anything for a steak and a baked potato. I crumbled the crackers in and started to eat. I wanted to touch him, wanted him to touch me, but I knew if I made any move toward him, he'd leave again.

"Instead, I ended up getting my degree and writing self-help books of all things. But then you probably know that." A pause. "Why did you take me?"

No answer.

"Do you hate women?"

No answer.

I took another bite.

"If you talk to me, I'll still do whatever you want. I'll still let you touch

me.”

His eyes darkened; I’d crossed the line. He stood and went for the door.

“Wait. Please. I’m sorry. I won’t ask for anything. I know you have your reasons, okay?”

He turned and nodded at me once, then sat beside the door. The distance he’d put between us wasn’t lost on me. I took a deep breath and then a few more bites, chasing it down with water. He wasn’t leaving, and so I felt brave enough to ask what had been on my mind for awhile now. Getting my period had reminded me of more than just basic survival, but biological realities.

“Are you going to kill me if I get pregnant?”

No answer.

My voice shook a little as I spoke. I wasn’t crying, but there were tears in my voice, that catch you get when you start to get emotional but are holding back the floodgates.

“ . . . Because I know you can’t just take me to the hospital. And I don’t know if you have anyone you can bring in . . . or if you would even want me then. Please, I don’t want to die. I was on the pill before. The prescription is in my purse. You can put me back on it . . . ”

He shook his head.

I took another bite, and more water to try to calm down so I could talk without going into blubbering sobbing fits. “No? You *want* me to get pregnant?”

He shook his head again.

“Are you sterile?” God, I hoped so. These were genes you didn’t want to spread. I didn’t want to give birth to another sociopath.

His eyes were cold as he stared at me. As far as he was concerned, the question and answer portion of the day was over. But I could see in his eyes I’d figured out the truth, and I felt relief wash over me. One less thing to worry about.

I finished my food without speaking again as he watched me. I didn’t know what else to say. I wasn’t sure what more he could take from me, but I knew he’d think of something if I pushed too hard. As it was, I wasn’t sure if I’d be in the cell longer now because of speaking.

When I finished eating, he took the tray and brushed my hair out of my face with his fingers. I leaned into him. I was ready to do anything he wanted, just to let me out.

The cell was bad because there was nothing to do, but it was worse

because it meant I had been bad. I'd displeased him, and that was starting to matter to me. I'd fought the desire to please him, but I couldn't help it. I knew what he was doing to me, but it didn't change how I felt, how I longed for him to touch me.

"Please, take me out of here," I whispered, as he ran his fingers through my hair. "Please."

I stood, and he kissed me. I moved my arms around his neck, but he gently took my wrists and moved them down by my sides. Then the kiss was over and he was leaving again. He turned away, and I felt the panic bubbling over.

I'd made no progress. I'd just been a diversion, but it wouldn't affect anything. What if he never forgave me for trying to kill him? What if he never let me out of the cell?

"No . . . please don't leave me. I'll be your whore. I'll be whatever you want, please."

I heard him punch in the combination code and then the click of freedom I couldn't have, and he opened the door. He turned and smiled at me, the smile of victory. Then he let the door shut softly behind him.

Several days passed, the bleeding stopped, and I was still in the cell marking off the days. He'd supplied me with clothing again and my bathing supplies, but I chose to remain naked. I wasn't sure if this was considered disobedience, but I was counting on his self-control slipping, that at some point he wouldn't be able to stand not taking what was bare to his gaze.

But if it fazed him, he composed himself before entering my cell. He brought my food and bath stuff, looking at me, but nothing more.

On the seventh day I expected it to be over. I'd done my time, surely he would touch me again. I would let him, and then I would be rewarded and get to go back to the good cell. The room where I was favored. But day seven came and went without him making any move toward me.

I hadn't built up the nerve to talk to him again since that one day. I was too afraid to change the routine. I wasn't sure exactly what sins had mounted against me and if speaking was one of them.

I needed touch, comfort, something. I was losing my tenuous grip on sanity, on reality. Everything felt fuzzy, and sometimes I wasn't sure if I was awake or asleep. I prayed it was a nightmare, and I'd wake up back in the good cell again. I'd stopped dreaming of escape because every part of me knew it wasn't possible. My subconscious mind chose to spare me the

torment of dangling carrots I couldn't eat.

Instead I dreamed of the good cell, something I had some hope still of achieving. As the days slipped onward, I began to doubt I would ever get to go back there. Maybe what I'd done was so bad he could never forgive it.

I'd hoped being in the cell naked would entice him to come to me, that he wouldn't be able to resist taking what he considered his. But nudity alone wasn't cutting it. In an act of sheer desperation, I laid on my back in the middle of the room so every camera saw me. I spread my legs and touched myself. I didn't know if the cameras had sound attached, and I wasn't sure if I was moaning for his benefit or because I couldn't help it.

It had been more than a week since I'd had an orgasm. In the short time I'd been in the good cell, he'd brought me to release so many times it made my head spin with it. Now as I stroked myself, I realized how much I missed the pleasure he gave me.

I was in the middle of possibly my third orgasm when the door came crashing open. Everything inside me said to stop. Run. I had no idea where I would run to, but instincts usually operate on the run principle.

Instead, I boldly met his eyes, my fingers slipping inside my pussy, daring him to respond in any way. I didn't care how. He could fuck me or beat me. Any touch, any response from him would be welcome. But he stood there, his black eyes penetrating me, refusing to give me even anger in a physical manifestation.

He slammed the door behind him, and I stopped and moved to the corner. My heart was beating practically out of my chest, as slow dread started to creep over me. I'd wanted a reaction but now I was terrified I'd gotten one. I didn't need him out of control and angry.

My desperation had made me stupid. Minutes ticked by like months, and then finally the door clicked open again. He brought in the things for me to bathe, and clothing. When he left it was the first time in longer than I could remember that I was relieved he hadn't touched me.

I bathed quickly and put on the clothes. As I picked up the shirt, a book fell out. I backed away from it like it was poison. Was it a trick? I knew I didn't get nice things in the cell. Or was it like the bandages? I didn't know which was the correct thing to do, ignore the book or read it.

I slipped the sweatpants on and buttoned up the white top while staring at the new variable. The fabric felt weird against my skin after walking around so many days without clothing. Clothes made me feel like a person, and as a

person I couldn't deal with what I'd become. If I remained a naked animal, it was better, easier. But he was finished making my life easy.

After circling the book a few more times, I picked it up and moved back to my corner. The corner was the only spot that held comfort because I knew if I was there, there was a chance he'd open the door and come for me.

I blushed, recognizing the book's title as something I'd read once in a much different time and place. I cracked the spine and started reading, knowing the contents would arouse me despite everything, but also knowing that if I didn't read, I might never achieve absolution from my captor.

It didn't take many pages before I noticed the first place a highlighter had been used over the text. The word *master* glared back at me in bright sunshine yellow. At the next instance of the word, it was highlighted again. I flipped through the book to see hundreds of bright yellow rectangles. He'd probably stayed up an entire night doing it. Or spent days on the project, hacking away at it chunks at a time.

It was a book I'd once read and gotten off on, and I still got off on it, only now, it was true. A true story about me. Reading it made me ache to touch myself again, but I didn't. I knew he must be watching, and I didn't want to be caught again. I'd been in the bad cell for two weeks. Much longer and I wasn't going to be able to hold onto any of my sanity.

The book was a slim volume, something that could be read in a few hours if you didn't dog-ear the pages and stop to masturbate. Within minutes of finishing it, I heard the key code being depressed on the other side and the door opening. He hadn't come with food, though I was hungry, and for a minute my pulse pounded at the idea that he might be there to take me back to the other room.

He approached me and stopped a few steps away from where I stood waiting in my corner. I moved my hands up to the buttons of the white artist's smock. He shook his head at me, and I let my hands fall to my sides.

He started to leave. What the hell did he want?

"Please . . . don't leave me here."

Normally he turned at least to look at me, but this time he didn't acknowledge my voice. Instead, he punched the numbers into the keypad. I wasn't ever getting out of there.

Then I knew what he wanted from me. It would be obvious to any thinking person.

There was a time when it would have been difficult, if not impossible for

me to say the words, but I was desperate and I hadn't lied when I'd said I would be anything he wanted me to be.

"Master, please."

He'd gotten as far as opening the door, and he stopped, letting it fall back and latch shut. Then he turned toward me, a slow smile spreading over his face. Yes. That was what he wanted. I was getting out.

Adrenaline hummed through my veins. Whatever it took, I was getting out.

He crossed the floor slowly, and then he was unbuttoning my shirt.

. . . She leaned into him as he removed her top and cupped her breasts, pinching her nipples painfully. In the time before, she would have cried out at the sensation. Now she was just glad to be getting sensation at all, even if it hurt. His mouth latched onto her breast, and her breathing deepened as he swirled his tongue over her flesh, soothing where he'd just hurt her.

She gripped his shoulders as he stripped the sweatpants from her body. She never wanted to wear these clothes again. He pushed her to her knees; she fumbled with the fly of his pants. Then she was sucking him, desperately seeking to please him enough that he would forgive her for her former sins.

He stroked his fingers through her hair, comforting her, urging her onward, and then he pulled out of her.

"Did I do something wrong?"

In response, he positioned her on the concrete floor on her hands and knees facing away from him, spreading her legs slightly. She could hear him rifling through his pants on the floor, and then he was on his knees behind her.

His fingers found her clit, and he stroked her. She moved back, trying to grind harder into him. It had been so long since he'd touched her like this. She was willing to do anything to make sure he never stopped for so long again. She panted, and a moan escaped her throat.

"Please . . . yes . . ." she whimpered.

He kept going until she came and screamed out her release, sobbing with relief that he was finally touching her again. Then she turned to see him squirting something out of a tube.

Lubricant.

She started to crawl away from him, back into her corner. "No, Master,

please.”

He shrugged, then stood and moved toward the door again. He refused to give her the peace of doing anything without her permission, no matter what a joke it was. She panicked.

“Don’t leave me here again. I can’t take it. I can’t take anymore of this. I’ve been here two weeks, please.”

He turned back to her and held up the lube, a question in his eyes.

She nodded and moved back into the position he’d placed her in. She still wasn’t sure this would earn her a ticket out of the cell, especially since she’d fought him.

She couldn’t help tensing when he approached her. He stroked her back over and over, his fingertips playing lightly over her skin. “Shhhh,” he soothed. “Shhhh.”

She began to calm. He’d refused for weeks to speak to her, and although this wasn’t exactly speech, it was communication. It was sound. She began to cry over the tiny crumb he gave her and relaxed further.

He prodded her entrance with one lubed finger, as he continued to stroke her back with his other hand. She didn’t resist. She cried out as the finger eased inside her, and he went more slowly, more gently.

She found she was grateful for that. It was small, but it was something. He continued with the one finger until her body got used to the sensation, and the burning pain ebbed away. Then he repeated the process with two fingers while her fear mounted higher.

“Shhhh,” he soothed again, when she started to cry, his free hand rubbing her back.

When her body had gotten used to fingers he withdrew them and slowly eased his cock into her. She let out a hiss, but soon the pain passed, and he urged her to start moving. Slowly, she fucked herself on him as he panted behind her. Then his fingers returned to her clit, and she began the climb toward her second orgasm.

When she came it felt like a shot of electricity zipping up her spine. He pulled out of her and cradled her in his arms, stroking his fingers through her hair and kissing the top of her head while she cried. More from relief than anything else . . .

SIX

He didn't take me to the good cell. Instead, he led me to another room, one I'd never been to. When he removed the blindfold, my mouth fell open.

Too many things to look at. There were chains on the wall and a metal table with cuffs on it. There were whips and canes and other various implements of pain that I didn't exactly know the names of. There was a giant, round bed with a red velvet comforter pressed against one wall, beside which another set of chains dangled. There was a black leather couch in the center of the room and a box overflowing with more sex toys than I'd ever seen outside a retail environment.

I realized what I'd done too late. I'd accepted. I'd called him *Master* and accepted he was in charge of me, not me. Before that moment had I still had freedom? I wasn't sure.

He would have left me in the cell probably forever. But which was worse? The cell? Or the new tortures waiting for me in this chamber?

It was a testament to how much of me he'd taken that I thought the bare cell was worse. He wouldn't leave me alone in this room. He would be there with me. It should have sickened me. It should have made me scream in terror, but all I could feel was relief.

I wasn't sure if I'd ever see the nice room again, but this was better than the past two weeks of nothing. I turned to see him gauging my reaction. The door to this new chamber, equipped with the same technology as the others, stood open.

He always gave me choices. Or maybe what he gave me was force

wrapped in the pretty package of pretend free will. I'd spent a lot of time analyzing him, and though I knew he was obviously in some sense crazy, there was always a logical basis for his decisions. He believed he was giving me options, in his own twisted way, and therefore he wasn't the bad guy.

Either he didn't recognize blackmail wasn't a choice or he didn't care. He hadn't used physical violence. Until now. Whips seemed pretty violent to me. But I knew him now, more intimately than he thought.

He believed he could hide his soul from me by never speaking, but his actions told me everything I needed to know. He wanted me to beg for the whip. And I would do it. I'd do anything he wanted. The door stood open, and he stepped aside, and we danced our little dance.

Would I run? Or would I stay and obey him? The choice was obvious. There was nowhere to run to. He'd already shown me this was true. He would never force me to do anything in that dungeon room. He would just put me back in the bad cell and ignore me like a crated, misbehaving puppy.

His eyes held challenge, and I stupidly still had enough defiance inside me that I wouldn't run from him because I couldn't face the shame and humiliation of going to that other cell again. The last incarceration had been two weeks, no time off for good behavior, no response to any of my demands or clever tricks. Next time would it be three?

Or would he tire of this constant disobedience and shut me away forever?

I didn't move toward the door. I held his gaze and said, "I'll do whatever you want."

I could see evidence of his arousal outlined through the pants he'd put back on. He was wearing only jeans, the muscles of his chest so beautiful I could hardly stand to look at him.

Still, he didn't move. I walked to the door and shut it, and then panicked because I'd just locked myself into a sadistic torture chamber with my captor. My captor who I trusted not to hurt me because he never had before, not physically anyway.

I'd made my choice. I turned and moved back toward him, still naked. He hadn't put the clothes back on me, and I was glad. I'd rather be naked than wear the clothing I'd come to associate with punishment.

I watched him, waiting for his next move. He studied me for a few minutes as if his brain were cataloging all my actions and reactions on a hard drive somewhere.

He held his hand out to me, and I stepped forward and took it, trying to

stop shaking. He smiled that soulless smile that made me feel warm and like I was dying all at the same time. A flush crept over my body from the predatory gleam in his eyes.

. . . He led her to the bed and arranged her on her knees facing away from him. The soft velvet was a warm caress against her skin. She heard his footsteps recede over the concrete floor, and she squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to see what he'd gone to get. She was unsure which would be worse, an instrument of pain, or pleasure.

When he returned, his hand was gentle on her chin, raising her face toward him, and she opened her eyes. She could see something soft and almost human in his gaze, and she wanted to latch onto it. He turned her face so she could see the riding crop dangling loosely from his hand.

Her eyes flew back to his as the same cold fear she'd had in the other cell came rushing back. His eyes held question. He'd only hit her if she agreed. The mockery of her free will made her angry, but her anger was dwarfed almost completely by the feel of his hand on her face.

He'd been gentle in the other cell. He'd taken something profoundly scary and been kind and reassuring. She was still reeling from the careful way he'd held and rocked her afterward and then watched her with something like concern as he'd put his pants back on.

Her eyes drifted to the riding crop again, and she nodded. Then he was behind her. She tensed as she heard the crop slice through the stillness of the room. It was deafening. And then the sharp, loud pain. She gasped, tears in her eyes.

“Please . . .”

He stopped.

“No, don't stop.” She wished she could take the words back, but any further begging died in her throat as she relaxed and let the crop fall on her.

How had she allowed him to turn her into something so ugly? Someone who craved any sensation at all, even if it was pain. A few moments passed, and she let the rhythm of the strikes wash over her. When she'd reached the threshold of complete surrender, the pain morphed into something tolerable and almost . . . pleasant?

Her body betrayed her, taking this new sensation and responding with arousal.

He stopped then, and she had a moment to catch her breath before he returned with a single-tailed whip. She'd thought it was ending, but he'd only been warming her up for more. She'd read enough to know this wouldn't be pleasant.

The whip cracked a few feet from her, and she jumped, finding her knees no longer wanting to support her weight. He allowed her to lie on her stomach and ran his hand over her back and the roundness of her ass. Then the strip of leather whipped across her skin, leaving a sting so sharp it brought tears to her eyes.

As he whipped her, she cried out but didn't beg him again. She let it happen, whatever he wanted, as long as he didn't take her back to the bad cell.

He continued, and she found herself floating while the endorphins flooded her system, and he pushed her higher still. Tears streamed uncontrollably down her face, but it wasn't the pain that made her cry.

It was release, absolution. The surrender, finally, of everything to him. The acceptance that she was now his creature, not her own, and the inexplicable peace that brought her.

Finally, it stopped and she could feel a warm wetness on her back. He'd made her bleed. She felt his tongue trailing over the opened flesh. He stepped away from her, and she worried he wasn't finished yet. Maybe he would take her beyond her ability to tolerate the pain to make her prove her new loyalty to him.

When he returned, he had a small basin of water, cloths, bandages, and ointment. He patched up her wounds, then turned her in his arms and kissed her softly on the mouth.

He retrieved the blindfold again and she scooted back.

Her voice cracked, "Are you taking me back to the cell?" If he took her back there and left her to rot after this . . .

He shook his head. She crawled back to him so he could tie the piece of fabric over her eyes . . .

WHEN THE BLINDFOLD CAME OFF, I was in the nice room again.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you."

I couldn't stop saying it. It was a mindless litany now. I turned in his arms and my mouth found the hollow of his throat, and I kissed him.

He left me then. When he returned, I was stretched out on the bed, the pillows propped underneath me, watching for the door to open again. He rolled in a cart laden with barbeque chicken, corn on the cob, fresh green beans, cole slaw, rolls, a salad, iced tea.

He sat across from me and fed me. It was the first time in a long time. I let him, leaning into his touch each time he stopped to stroke my breast. I no longer saw this as what I had to give him in order to eat. Now it was reward.

Anything that wasn't the bad cell was a reward. In less than six weeks he'd turned me into this. I hated the part of me that was so weak I couldn't hold out longer, that I'd sell my soul for him to touch me and not leave me alone.

Wouldn't any sane woman be grateful to just be left alone? What was wrong with me that being kept in that cell without his presence was the worst thing he could do to me? Far worse than being his fuck toy.

I'd convinced myself it would have been different if he'd been as ugly on the outside as he was on the inside, but he wasn't. He was cruel beauty, a sculpture, a god, and I couldn't tear my eyes from him. I'd seen his expression soften in the dungeon with the whip. I'd do anything to have him look at me like that again, no matter how insane he was.

It didn't matter anymore because we were both insane. How can the crazy judge the crazy? He was a sadist, and he'd trained me into the perfect masochist. Or maybe it had already been there, waiting for the right circumstances to present themselves.

I'd been thinking more about my first boyfriend and how I'd reacted to being forced to orgasm, how different I was from those around me.

He'd finished feeding me.

"Did you pick me because you knew I would respond this way?"

He just smiled.

"You've got money and looks, and you're obviously smart," I said. I left off the crazy part because I'd just promised myself I'd do whatever I had to do to stay in the good cell. I wasn't even sure this wouldn't buy me more isolated punishment. Still, I pressed on. "You could have anyone you wanted. You could have seduced me, and I would have willingly played your games."

He arched a brow at me, and immediately I realized how stupid that sounded. He *had* seduced me, after a fashion. He didn't want the illusion of control; he wanted *actual* control. That was something very different. No matter how women might fawn over him, what he wanted, what he needed,

was something he could only get in this way.

He pushed me down onto my back, and I stayed there. The thin gashes from the whip burned from the pressure, but I didn't move. He wasn't finished with me yet; he'd just taken a break to feed me. Now he wanted a fresh and unmarked canvas to play on.

He took the cart out of the room. I knew he was coming back for me, and whatever he was bringing with him, I would submit to it because I couldn't go back to that hollowed-out cell. I needed to be surrounded by things, distractions, amusements.

I needed to lose myself dancing in the studio, or reading, or taking hot bubble baths. I wanted to soak up every physical sensation I could, in case it was all ripped away. All of it was an extension of him, and therefore all of it was a way in which he touched me.

He returned moments later with a long red taper candle, matches, a vibrator, and two bowls. He filled one of the bowls with water, then returned, arranging everything carefully on the table.

. . . He placed one of the chairs at the foot of the bed and pulled her to the end so that her legs dangled over the edge. She held her breath as he lit the candle and tilted it inches above her stomach. A hiss of air escaped her lips as the hot wax landed a drop at a time. A sharp stinging burn, that ebbed as the circle of wax dried and hardened.

She jerked as if by the movement she could escape the pain, and the first few bits of wax dried in long slivers. He shook his head at her and peeled the strips of wax from her body, dropping them into the empty bowl. He rested his hand firmly on her stomach.

Her voice came out barely above a whisper, "You want me to be still?"

A nod.

He removed his hand and let another drop of wax fall from the candle. He held it close to her skin, and she felt the warmth from the flame before the burning wax hit her flesh. A tear rolled down her cheek, but she didn't move. The wax dried in a little round dot. She let out a shaky breath, and he repeated the action.

Over and over. She closed her eyes, focusing on breathing, crying, but not screaming because it might cause her to move. The little burning points of wax were being left close to one another, as if a pattern were forming on her

skin, but it was so gradual she couldn't make it out. There was a puff of breath as the candle was extinguished, and she let out a shaky sigh.

She heard a buzzing and then he'd shoved the vibrator inside her. Her muscles clenched as it pulsed through her. She remained still, afraid of disobeying him until he took her hips and coaxed her to move and respond to the vibrations.

The pain was forgotten, but then he lit another match and was dripping the wax over her nipples, continuing to encourage her to move. He'd worked her into a frenzy, but she wasn't so past rational thought she didn't know what he wanted from her.

He wanted her to come while he hurt her. The idea both repulsed and excited her as her body pushed around and reinterpreted the pain from the wax. She screamed as she came, her eyes shooting open. He snuffed out the candle and laid it on the little table, then pushed the vibrator deeper inside, holding it in place, forcing her to come for him again.

He pointed to her stomach and she looked down. Where he'd wanted her to remain very still, she saw he'd spelled out a word with wax. Mine.

She nodded, "Yes Master, I'm yours."

The verbal surrender was just one more piece of her that now belonged to him. He carefully flecked the pieces of wax off her body and dipped a washcloth into the bowl of water. The water was cool as he gently dragged it over her skin.

He wrung the cloth out over her belly and chased the trails of water with his tongue. She watched as he stood and retreated into the bathroom again. She lay there, her legs spread wide just as he'd positioned her, as the vibrator pushed her toward another orgasm.

He returned a few moments later and withdrew the toy.

"Please . . . no . . . I need . . ." She was babbling. She'd been so close. She shut her mouth and looked away from him. He'd already made her come several times that day. What was wrong with her that she needed more? She didn't care how she ached for it, she wouldn't beg again.

Her body jerked at a new sensation and she looked down to see him back in the chair, a razor and the bowl of water in hand, shaving her. She was so sensitive. It was maddening to have the razor gently brushing her skin so close to her clit.

When her pussy was bare, he ran the cloth over her sensitive flesh. She arched up to meet him, a small whimper leaving her mouth. He wrung the

cloth out again, letting the droplets of cool water trickle down her slit.

Then his wicked tongue was licking up the drops, dipping inside her, and lapping at her clit. He held her ass cheeks with his hands, pulling her up to him, as if she were a banquet he couldn't get enough of.

She came for him again, moaning "Master," because it was the only name she knew. He slid up her body and into her, pounding her into the mattress.

She screamed.

"Please," She didn't want to go back to the cell, but the way he fucked her, with her back still raw and hurt, was too much. "Please let me be on top." She was too afraid to say no.

He stopped, concern on his face, as if he'd gotten caught up and forgotten her back. "Shhhh," he whispered, and flipped them so she was on top.

"Thank you." She rode him, and he gently stroked her back until he came inside her . . .

HE WENT TO THE CLOSET, then he tossed me a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt that said *bite me* in bright red letters on it. I found I was disappointed that he hadn't. I dressed and sat on the edge of the bed, unsure of what I was supposed to say or do.

"Master?"

He looked up.

"When you whipped me back there . . . was that . . . punishment?"

He shook his head slowly, his eyes burning straight into me. I swallowed hard. I'd suspected as much. The cell was punishment; the whipping was because he enjoyed it. Got off on it.

"I'm sorry for what I did that day," I said quietly. I didn't have to elaborate.

How did one apologize for attempted murder? Or was it self-defense? I couldn't be sure anymore. I only knew that I'd tried to kill him and instead of doing to me what I'd attempted to do to him, he'd spared my life.

The only physical violence I'd experienced at his hands, I'd allowed him to do. A bargain, an exchange to keep me out of the cell and win his good favor. I was starting to feel safe with him. He'd gone from being just my tormentor to being my tormentor and protector, though I needed protection from nothing but him.

He simply nodded in response to my apology.

“Are you still angry with me?”

He looked confused, and it occurred to me he hadn't been angry. He'd probably expected I would lash out at some point. It was natural in my position to do so, a part of the dance of victim and victimizer, and I'd played my part predictably.

He'd probably looked forward to the moment he could show me the futility of my efforts to escape. To break me just a little more. No, there had been no reason for him to be angry. It was just one more success. The cell had been punishment for disobedience, plain and simple. Anything else I'd read into it was wrong.

He picked up a hairbrush off the vanity and I flinched, thinking for a moment he might beat me with it, not out of anger but out of some sadistic need he had that he was slowly beginning to let me see. But he sat behind me instead, his legs coming around on either side of mine, and he brushed my hair. Slow, gentle strokes. I closed my eyes and relaxed.

When he'd finished, he kissed me softly and left. He returned moments later, handed me a notebook, and was gone.

SEVEN

I didn't pick it up at first. If the last book he'd left for me was any indication, I wasn't sure I wanted to know its contents. Instead, I left it on the table and went into the ballet studio to stand in front of the mirror.

I lifted the T-shirt over my head and gingerly peeled back the medical tape. I couldn't stand not knowing how bad the whip marks were. I didn't know why it mattered. Even if it wasn't deep, he could just be getting started. And I didn't know whether he'd let me heal before he did it again. I waited until I'd gotten the bandages off before I dared to look at the damage. I pulled my hair up and peered over my shoulder at my reflection. It wasn't that bad. The bandages on the ground didn't have much blood on them, another good sign.

It looked like he'd stopped as soon as he'd broken the skin. He'd also been careful to only hit my upper back and shoulders, nowhere it would cause permanent damage.

I glanced up at where I knew the cameras were and wondered if I'd get in trouble for removing the bandages he'd spent so much time on. But if he was going to do it again, I thought it needed air, so the cuts would close more quickly. I tossed the bandages into a garbage can in the corner.

I looked back into the mirror, this time at my stomach, at the light red burns left by the candle wax. I traced my fingers over the letters of the word mine, the temporary brand that I never wanted to fade away. Then I slipped the top back over my head, wincing as it settled over my skin.

I'd accepted he was never letting me go. He'd invested too much time and money in all this. I couldn't begin to guess how many months he'd

stalked me to discover so much about my likes and dislikes. If he hadn't taken me in the way he had, I would almost think he was a regular guy trying to impress me with gifts. But I knew that was ridiculous.

He was a predator and I was his prey. No matter how much I came to depend on him and crave him, I wouldn't forget that. What he'd done and was continuing to do to me was wrong, but the constant struggle to fight it based on moral fortitude was too emotionally exhausting for me. Acceptance was easier.

If I wanted to keep any part of my mind intact, I had to obey. There were only so many trips to the bad cell I could handle before I lost it completely, before I became a shell instead of a person. The good cell told me everything I needed to know. He was offering a gift I was fortunate to be given. He was offering to let me keep enough sense of self to not fall into madness.

He didn't have to give me the nice room and the studio and bathroom and all the luxuries these rooms held. He didn't have to give me a window or the best southern food one could put in their mouth. He didn't have to ever give me any kind of pleasure. I tried to hold onto the reality that it didn't make any of it okay, but I was having a harder time seeing that because my reality had been narrowed to him and the things he could make me feel.

I hadn't looked through all the CDs or books yet. In the short time I'd been in the rooms before attempting to kill him, I'd spent most of my time in the studio or taking bubble baths and trying on clothes. I thumbed through the CDs finding a wide range of things I liked: classical, rock, jazz, some international music.

I wasn't a fan of international music and wondered if he was including his tastes as well. But I was curious, so I slipped a Middle Eastern CD into the player. The music was rich and earthy and alive in ways no other music I'd ever heard was. It pulsed through me, steady drumbeats, layers upon layers of rhythm and music.

The room contained no TV or DVD player, no computer. There were no movies, no news, no commercials, no Internet. Nothing to link me too closely to the outside world. No faces to see but his, not even on a screen. No voices but my own calling out in the silence.

I looked more closely at the books. I was familiar with the shelves at eye level. They held a lot of my favorites, but now I was looking more closely. On the lower left-hand row, closest to the dresser, almost as if it were hiding, was a complete section of erotica. Something like fifty titles. All of them

were the same theme. Kinky. Most of them Master/slave fiction. A few of them familiar.

Story of O, for example, was a classic that I would just as soon not read again, given my current circumstances. I didn't know how many things from these books we'd be acting out. And I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

It was one thing on paper, in a fictional world; it was quite another when it was real. Still, the books were there, calling to me, tempting me to read and be reawakened to their erotic secrets.

I was no longer the teenager giggling under the covers with a flashlight reading something naughty and bad. I was a grown woman living it, and some darker part of me was clawing to get out because what choice did I have left but to give in to the dark?

My eyes drifted back to the table and the plain black spiral notebook, like a college student might use. I knew it wasn't empty. It wasn't a blank book for me to write in. That I already had, and I'd been writing in it.

No, the notebook contained information. It was his first explicit communication to me, and I was terrified to find out what it contained. After weeks of existing in a state where I had to read nonverbal signals, I was afraid to get actual words from him.

I was scared to see how much of him I knew, and how much of him I didn't. But I couldn't ignore it anymore. Whatever was inside, I needed to read it, to prepare myself for what was coming next.

I picked up the notebook and took a bottle of water from the mini fridge before lying down on my stomach across the bed.

The book held no mention of why he'd taken me or for how long he intended to keep me. Though I knew the second answer: forever, or until he grew bored with me. I was afraid of what would happen once he did grow bored with me. Though I determined reasonably that could be a long way off, judging from his obsessive and meticulous behaviors so far. A man who plans for months before taking a slave doesn't grow bored with her in the same length of time.

Instead of explanations, the book contained rules and punishments. Much of it I'd figured out already with regards to punishment, but to see it in black and white only confirmed my suspicions and left me no excuses to disobey and then claim ignorance.

As I'd already known, obedience would keep me in his good favor and in the rooms I presently occupied. I had suspected as much . . . and yet there

was always the fear he might move me back to the bad cell on a whim. But he'd written on the crisp white-lined pages that he wouldn't as long as I tried to submit, and I trusted him to keep his word.

If I'd learned anything over the weeks of my captivity, it was that obedience equaled reward, and disobedience equaled punishment. He never lashed out in anger. He was always in control, both of me and of himself. It made me put faith in him that ultimately, if I followed the rules, he wouldn't harm or kill me.

Masturbation wasn't allowed for any reason. Sexual pleasure would come from him and him alone. He mentioned the erotica. He wanted me to read it, at least one book a week, but I wasn't allowed to touch myself. If I did, I would be punished.

Punishment was as I thought and as he'd confirmed earlier with only a look. I would be sent to the cell for any infractions. Each incarceration would be longer than the one before it. There was no sliding scale based on the level of disobedience.

I had expected the murder attempt would land me in the cell longer than if I'd just tried to escape. Or that trying to escape would offer me a longer punishment than if I'd refused to obey some small whim of his. But it was all the same.

Saying *no* offered the same level of punishment as trying to take his life. The next time would be three weeks and then four. Eventually I could end up withering away in that cell if I didn't obey him.

In some sense he offered me freedom if I wanted it. All I had to do was refuse him and he wouldn't touch me. I would have nothingness and food that no longer held flavor, but I would be free of his touch.

I knew I'd never take that offer because the freedom he offered me was the kind I'd always loathed. My mind was too full and in need of stimulation to be locked away in the cell forever.

The extremeness of the punishments ensured I wouldn't rebel. I'd already decided I would do anything he wanted without question because I didn't want the cell, and I never wanted to look at chicken noodle soup or crackers again.

I had no doubts he could follow through. If the wait became too long for him, he wouldn't shorten my punishment. He'd kill me or take another slave before he broke his own rules.

He could already have other slaves and I'd have no way of knowing it. It

would explain the ease with which he could resist me while I was being punished, despite his obviously strong sexual desire otherwise.

His entire fortress-like home could be a camp for slaves. The thought sent a white-hot bolt of jealousy through me.

I knew it was an inappropriate response. I shouldn't feel jealousy that someone else might call him master and spread their legs for him. I should feel pity for the others he might have taken.

Twenty pages of hand-written text was all it took to specifically lay out the rest of my life for me. There was no room given for interpretation. If he made me come, it was reward. If he whipped me, it was reward.

Any attention or physical contact was reward, no matter the nature of the contact. It was almost appalling to see it written out for me so plain and naked. But I'd already known it. I'd arched up toward him as the riding crop had bitten into my skin, and I'd been thankful to have something instead of nothingness. I'd gotten wet from his gentle ministrations as he'd cleaned and bandaged the wounds he'd inflicted on me.

I was his now beyond safe denial. Beyond right and wrong.

The rest of the notebook contained protocol, daily rituals and the words he wanted to fall from my lips. My training was about to begin in earnest.

He left one more meal for me that evening and brushed my cheek lightly with his fingertips. He lifted the back of my shirt to inspect my skin.

I tensed, wondering if removing the bandages was considered disobedience, if I would earn three weeks for something so simple and small. My body shook from fear that I wouldn't have the chance to prove I could obey him.

"Shhhhh." He left a gentle kiss on my back, and then he left me alone with my food. I cried with relief.

The next morning my alarm went off at seven-thirty. He would be there at nine. I went through the list, doing what he'd laid out in the notebook, preparing myself for his arrival. I didn't leave anything out because I knew he'd be watching from the dark room with all the monitors.

I bathed in the bath oil he wanted, wore the makeup he wanted, fixed my hair the way he wanted. At nine o'clock I was in place, exactly as he'd instructed, smelling of jasmine and waiting.

. . . The door opened and he walked into the room, already undressed, his

erection swaying as he moved. She was naked on her knees with her legs spread wide. Her hands rested on the floor on either side, her palms facing up in supplication.

The lines in the sand had been drawn, and it was real now. Before, she'd had the small comfort of not accepting. Holding onto some tiny internal piece of her own identity, some vague hope of escape or rescue.

For weeks in her mind she'd thought only of appeasing him for survival, to hold onto herself, so she could think of getting away. Now she was his. The smile on his face said he knew it too. His patience had paid off.

He stood in front of her and her hands went around to grip his ass, pulling him toward her, as if all she wanted was for him to fill some part of her. She wrapped her lips around his cock and greedily sucked him as he ran his fingers through her hair.

He pulled out of her suddenly, and she whimpered.

“Did I do something wrong?”

In reply, he pulled out the blindfold. For a moment, she couldn't breathe. All she could think was that she'd missed something. She'd said or done something wrong. Maybe she'd bitten him without meaning to.

“No . . . please . . .” She scooted away from him until her back hit the bed. He arched a brow at her, standing like a Greek statue, the scrap of black fabric draped over his hand. Reluctantly she crawled back to him, the tears sliding down her cheeks, and then everything was darkness as he secured the blindfold and led her from the room.

She nearly fainted as her bare feet touched hard concrete floor. He removed the blindfold, and she collapsed to the ground. It wasn't the bad cell. It was the dungeon.

“Thank you, Master,” she whispered.

He crossed the floor to the mini fridge and returned with a cold bottle of water. He twisted off the cap and handed it to her. She drank and didn't stop until it was half empty. He sat on the ground and held her.

She wasn't sure if she imagined the concern in his eyes. Maybe she saw what she wanted to see. She acknowledged she was his, but it didn't mean she wasn't aware he was a monster. He couldn't feel anything. He seemed to be waiting on something, an explanation.

She was sure in his mind he felt he'd been magnanimous. In some ways it was true. And yet she couldn't imagine being more afraid of him if he'd beaten her on a daily basis and cut strips of flesh from her body with a razor

blade. He must know how completely he'd broken her.

"I was afraid I had done something wrong and you were taking me back to the bad cell," she said quietly.

His eyes hardened, and once again she was looking into the emptiness she'd seen on her first day with him, all softness erased. He hadn't been about to take her back there, and she'd opened her stupid mouth and perhaps given him reason to put her there now. All she could think was: three weeks.

She'd nearly lost her mind after one week, and thought she would die after two. She couldn't do three. She'd find some way to end her life if he took her back there.

"No, Master, please. I'm sorry. If I've upset you . . . please please don't take me back there." She stroked his cock . . . placating. She bent to replace her hand with her mouth, but he pushed her off him and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

He returned several minutes later and threw the notebook down on the ground in front of her, his finger jabbing at the page. In furious pen scribblings he'd circled a passage and underlined the words within it. It was a page about punishment:

You will be punished only when you willfully disobey me. As long as you try to submit to my wishes, you'll be safe.

The words *willfully disobey*, and *try* had been heavily underlined. She swiped at the tears on her face and looked up to see his outstretched hand. She took it and followed him to the bed. He placed her on her knees away from him, pushing her down so her forearms rested on the dark velvet, her ass raised in the air.

She tensed when she saw the lubricant. The last time he'd been gentle and made it exquisitely pleasurable. This time, however, he didn't seem intent on starting small. He lubed his cock and then, as if there could be any doubt, he washed his hands in a little sink beside the row of whipping implements.

He nudged her opening, and she fought to relax. Slowly, inch by painful inch, he filled her, and she cried out. He waited and allowed her to adjust to him before moving in and out of her.

He pulled her body up so she was arched impossibly back and cupped a breast with one hand while the other dipped between her legs, pumping in and out of her in rhythm with his thrusts inside her ass.

When his fingers were slick with her juices, he removed them and pressed them into her mouth. In a wild frenzy, she sucked, and lapped up what he

offered her before his fingers returned to pumping inside her, and then to her mouth again. Over and over he repeated the action, feeding her as she moaned around his fingers.

He slammed into her as he came and then let her fall back down onto the bed, her legs quivering jelly. She lay there, shaking and waiting, knowing he wasn't finished with her.

His fingers thrusting into her, combined with his cock in her ass had taken her to the very edge of release. But she didn't come.

He pulled out of her, grabbed her ankles and flipped her onto her back. When she looked at him, he pointed behind her. The chains on the wall. She bit her lip and nodded. She'd never liked being restrained, but he wasn't asking her permission. He was asking if she'd learned her place, if she would accept it and let him chain her with no fuss or if he'd have to put her back in her cell for awhile longer so she could think about it.

The metal locked against her wrists, then around her ankles. She hadn't noticed the ankle chains before. They were bolted into the floor and had been under the bed out of sight until now. The chains spread her legs wide.

He pushed a long, thick vibrator up inside her and set the vibrations to the lowest setting, enough to make her throb and whimper but not enough to bring her release. He crossed the room and rummaged through a small closet until he found what he was looking for, a professional-grade camera.

He circled the bed, taking photographs of her, but she didn't care. She couldn't care. She was too far gone and desperate to come. In the back of her mind she feared he'd send the pictures to people she knew or post them on the Internet, and yet still she mindlessly thrust her pussy up at him, trying to buck against the vibrator as if by doing so she could make the pleasure come faster or harder.

He used a roll of film and then placed the camera on the ground. His hand wrapped around the end of the vibrator and fucked her with it so hard she was breathless. With his free hand he gripped her throat, his cold eyes meeting hers.

"Master . . ." Her voice was pleading, but not pleading to be let go. Pleading to come.

He released her throat and for a moment she believed he thought she was begging him to stop.

"Please, don't stop. I want to come . . . please."

Her cries were unnecessary; he wasn't unchaining her and letting her go.

He moved the vibrator to the highest speed and unchained one of her wrists, placing her hand on her breast, encouraging her to rub herself. Then he loaded another roll of film into the camera and the shutter began to click again.

She came, screaming and bucking as the camera flashed. He walked over and kissed her on the forehead and then left her alone in the room. He hadn't bothered to remove the vibrator. It still pulsed inside her at the highest speed, causing another orgasm to build.

When he finally returned, she'd climaxed five more times and was so wet, the vibrator would have slipped out if not for her free hand holding it in place.

He removed the toy and shut it off. It was dripping with her cum. He held it in front of her face, and she obediently opened her mouth and sucked it as he slid it in and out, until it was clean of her spendings . . .

WHEN HE RETURNED me to my room I knew why he'd been gone so long. He left me to go prepare my breakfast as I stared at the walls. He must have had his own dark room because there were large blown-up photographs on the walls. Photographs he'd just taken.

I tried not to look at them, but I couldn't seem to tear my eyes away. I went to one wall and ran my fingertips over the picture. My legs were spread so wide, straining against the chains, the tip of the vibrator sticking out, my wetness glistening against my legs, and my face a cross between pleasure and torment.

EIGHT

Days bled into weeks and then into months, and then it was fall. The leaves were falling off the trees ushering us into winter as I continued marking off the days on the calendar.

Five months.

The first day forever ago when I'd been waiting for him on my knees was the turning point. Everything changed for me after that. I could still form coherent thoughts but all of them circled around how to please him. To make him smile at me. To get his eyes to soften when they looked into mine. The photographs on the walls taunted me. Over the months, a few more were added, some replacing Degas prints in the studio. Something about me changed in those photos. The first series he took still upset me sometimes because there was such a mixture of pleasure and pain.

He wouldn't let me forget what I had been and what I'd become at his hands. He wanted me to see it like he saw it.

By July, the photos had changed, like they weren't even me. Pain was dwarfed by pleasure, even when there were lash marks on my back, even on the occasions when there was blood. Whatever he did, it didn't matter. I wanted it all.

I should have been repulsed by him. Intellectually I knew that was the proper response. It was the victim response. It was the response that would say to the world I wasn't broken, even though I would have been in more pain that way. It was a mercy to be broken, to be his to the point that it was what I wanted.

If I hadn't been reshaped and reformed into the docile little pet he wanted,

I would have cowered and cringed away from him and screamed and cried. Sometimes I screamed and cried anyway, but only when the orgasm overtook me so strongly I could do nothing but empty my soul onto him.

I'd been out of the bad cell for months. I never went back there again. A few times I came close when he'd introduce something new and scary, but ultimately I obeyed whatever he wanted.

After awhile it stopped being about the cell and that perceived punishment. It became instead about him being disappointed in me. I only cared about his eyes and how they reflected me.

In the good cell the warm throbbing between my legs was almost constant. It didn't matter what I was doing. Dancing, bathing, painting my fingernails. Because whatever I was doing, my thoughts rarely strayed far from him and memories of the last time he'd touched me. If I had been his obsession, he had become mine just as strongly.

Sometimes I imagined that when he left me in my rooms, when he was finished playing with me for the day, he went out with his friends and laughed and talked. Maybe he didn't think about me at all. Or he watched television and wasn't troubled with thoughts of me until some small mention, no doubt getting shorter and farther apart, would come up about my disappearance.

I had this image of him as some sort of almost Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho*. That he lived a double life. One side all privilege and creamy soft-white business cards with perfect fonts, the other blood and darkness. Monster and man.

I found myself wanting the monster because it was honest, a level of honesty most go their entire lives without confronting, always content to hide behind their social masks and business cards.

It was October. By now everything was about him, but at the same time I missed Halloween. The costumes, the parties, going out with my friends. Friends I'd forgotten, as if they'd died. I couldn't see their faces anymore when I closed my eyes; I only saw him. That intense beauty that was almost painful to look at.

My fear had become so entwined with my arousal that I craved everything he did now. I could stay here forever. I wanted to. My family and friends, my career and colleagues, they were all shadows to me now.

I had the barest notion there had been police investigations, frantic searches, tearful panic over my going missing. I'd been a blurb on the

national news, a tragic case of a young woman with a bright future and loyal fans. The speculation that a crazed fan had taken me, or someone who hated me.

Which category did my master fall into? Either? Neither? I'd never know. I'd long given up the hope he would ever speak to me.

But he didn't have to use speech. Every touch, every caress, every lash of the whip, crop, or cane. It was all communication, a private conversation that no one else could intrude upon. Before, my life had only been words, shallow, meaningless words dripping from my mouth with no real content. Words for the sake of words to make me feel less alone in the world. But I had been alone.

Completely.

Then he took me and filled my world so much that even without words, I wasn't alone. We were connected now so deeply that to lose him was to lose life itself. He was everything. We communicated on the primal level of touch. Dominance and submission. Master and slave. Nothing else was required.

I woke on the morning of Halloween with a vague sense of loss. I thought it was because of all I'd missed this year. Or because we were approaching the holidays, and suddenly time would have more form as I lost my first Halloween, my first Thanksgiving, my first Christmas and New Years, but that wasn't it.

My alarm went off at 7:30 as it always did. I happened to glance over to find the door standing open.

I can't describe in any rational way the panic that surged through me. What the hell was this? I hadn't felt this way since the first day of my imprisonment when the blindfold had covered my eyes in that still silence, before I'd seen his face or felt his hands on my body.

Normally, he left me instructions with my last meal of the day for what he wanted the following day. I should have known something was wrong when he didn't. Maybe I had. Maybe that was the gnawing feeling that had crept inside me.

I bathed in jasmine oil and got ready. At nine o'clock I was on my knees a few feet from the door, waiting for him. That's when I looked up and noticed the keys. On a little table next to the door were a set of car keys.

If I took them, would the garage door be opened? Would I press the little button and hear the beeps to indicate which car? Could I leave?

That should have been my thought process. My thought process instead

went: *Is this a test? Does he not want me anymore? Is he abandoning me? How can he abandon me? I did everything he wanted. How can I mean nothing to him after he's trained me like this?*

I didn't love him; he didn't love me. But I was his. I belonged to him. That had to count for something. I was addicted to the way he touched me, the contrast between pleasure and pain he always delivered to me. Violence and gentleness. I couldn't get enough.

I didn't care how I'd arrived at this point. The only thing that mattered was that I was there, and I never wanted to leave. I was his willing slave, evidenced by the fact that I only looked at the keys briefly before my eyes went back to the floor, and I waited.

Nine-thirty came and then ten. Ten-thirty and I hadn't moved from the spot. I was getting hungry. There were snacks and water in the mini fridge, but I didn't move. I didn't want to. I didn't want him to find me not where I was supposed to be.

Finally, just before noon he stepped into the room. I didn't look up at him. I kept my eyes on the ground as he'd trained me, despite my desperate desire to look into his eyes to find what was there.

Then he was standing in front of me, his feet in my line of sight. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but I refrained. I wanted to beg his forgiveness for whatever I'd done to upset him, but I didn't. I just stayed where I was, my breath coming out in heavy pants, anticipation thrumming through me for his touch, any touch.

I didn't have to wait long. He gripped my chin and forced my eyes up to meet his. He was angry, and I didn't know why. Finally, I spoke.

"Master, please, whatever I did to upset you, you know I didn't mean it."

Had I ever seen him angry before? Truly angry? No, I couldn't remember a single time over the past months that I had. He'd been so restrained. Everything so calm and orchestrated. Everything following his plans, even my lame attempts at disobedience.

Now seeing him angry unhinged me, and I found that old fear creeping back again. Not the fear mixed with the arousal until I writhed and panted beneath him. This was more uncertain fear.

Had he snapped? Was he broken too? What the hell was going on? He turned away from me, standing stiffly, his breath suddenly matching my own previously heavy panting.

He wore only jeans, and I could see the tension of his shoulder muscles as

he forcibly restrained himself. From what? Killing me? Beating me?

He'd whipped me many times. I had a few scars which I knew would stay with me forever or as long as he let me live, but he'd never whipped me out of anger. It had all been out of desire.

Finally, he seemed in control of himself. He crossed to the closet and after a few moments returned, tossing a pair of blue jeans and a pale pink T-shirt at me . . . and the silver wedge sandals where the ribbons tied around my ankles.

I put them on. Had there ever been a day when he hadn't come to me in some way? Was he tired of me now? Early on I had feared this day, waking in cold sweats over it. The day he got bored with me. The day he killed me. Now I couldn't work up the emotion for it. I just didn't want it to end.

How was it possible, given our circumstances, that he could tire of me before I tired of him? He tossed me the car keys and left the room. He was serious. A thousand thoughts ran through my mind, all whirring through my head at the same time, so I couldn't separate one of them out.

I sat dumbly still as if it were some kind of trick, that last tiny hope that it was a test I could still pass. My mind refused to accept just yet that passing meant leaving him.

Moments later he appeared in the doorway again, an annoyed look on his face. He came back into the room and wrapped his hand around my arm, jerking me through the door, pulling me through the house.

The blindfold was no longer covering my eyes, no longer segmenting the rooms into disembodied pieces of a larger whole. Now, seeing it all at once, the house was even more impressive inside than I'd always imagined it to be. And yet . . . it was only him.

No servants. Had he given them the day off so he could get rid of me? Did they just come in on alternate days? For a moment, I had this crazy thought we were the only two people left alive on the planet.

Perhaps the servants were keeping to the shadows. Did they know what he'd done? Did they care? I held onto the wild hope that he didn't want to be rid of me. No, some servant suspected, and he was making me leave so they wouldn't find me. But that didn't make any sense. Why would he set me free on the world? To hide the evidence, wouldn't he have to kill me first?

I stumbled a bit, and my ankle twisted under my foot. Stupid wedge sandals. These weren't the shoes for women with tiny ankles. I cried out and he turned, the smallest shadow of concern on his face before he masked it

again and was back to the business of expelling me from his house.

We were in the entry hall, the front door just feet away. He seemed to have every intention of throwing me out onto the lawn and leaving me to my fate with the elements if I was too stupid to use the car keys to leave. The keys now clutched in my hand. I couldn't remember how they'd gotten there.

When we reached the door, I panicked and jabbed him in the ribs hard with my elbow. I'm sure it hurt some, but it wasn't what caused him to let me go. It was simply shock that I still had enough fire left to in any way seek to go against his wishes.

I moved away from him, but he latched onto my arm with one hand. I didn't hesitate. The keys were in my other hand, and I drove them into his skin. I expected him to cry out, but he didn't. Instead, he let go of me and cradled his hand like a wounded animal.

I felt the smallest amount of pity well up inside me and an almost compulsive urge to bandage him up, despite the fact that I hadn't drawn blood.

He gave me a look of shocked betrayal as if he had any right to it after everything. I was the one that was being betrayed. I was the one being thrown out without explanation. I turned and ran down the hallway.

It did remind me of a castle. The stonework, the extreme ornateness, the woven tapestries on the walls. I ran to the end of the hallway until I came to an open door. To call it a living room or den would have been to understate it. It was more of a home movie theater. A giant screen played CNN on one end of the room.

I stopped to watch for a minute, wondering if I was old news or if they would mention me. I wondered if they would flash my picture across the screen, back when I'd been another person. They didn't. My momentary distraction allowed him to catch up to me.

Strong arms wrapped around me like a vice, and for one insane moment I sagged back against him, soaking up the feeling of being in his embrace, even if it wasn't really an embrace. I could feel his hot breath on my ear as he bent down.

"Please don't make me leave. Whatever I did wrong I won't do it again. Just don't throw me out."

I know how this sounded, how completely pathetic, but I couldn't make my mouth not form the words. I think there was something left of me that knew this was all wrong and that I should take the opportunity for freedom

that he handed me, but I didn't want that choice anymore.

He continued to hold me, everything pausing, the universe just stopping while he decided to keep me or make me go.

"Please . . ." I whispered.

He turned me to face him, his eyes locking with mine. And I couldn't read him. After months of his eyes and his body being my only signs of anything, I couldn't read him. He shoved me away onto the couch and left the room.

I sat there, numb, the keys and my freedom finally in my hands. I was afraid of him again. Actually afraid. I hadn't been actually afraid in months. Obedience had always brought reward. I learned my lessons from the cell and never repeated the mistakes.

One would think that in itself would set up a constant fear, but it didn't. After the day he'd made absolutely plain that all he expected was effort, after he proved that time and time again over months, I came to trust him more than I'd ever trusted anyone. Because even if he was a monster, he followed his own rules. And he was my monster.

He was stable in his way, dependable, predictable, and in complete control. But as I sat on the couch on the verge of a panic attack, I knew this wasn't the case any longer. He was finally behaving in the manner in which one expects a psychotic to behave, and that was truly frightening.

In this state it wouldn't take much for him to kill me, and I wasn't so far gone I would rather die than be free. Was I?

I laughed, a hollow little sound against the droning backdrop of CNN. What kind of a complete mental case has to weigh whether they would rather die or be free? Die or be a slave? Yes, that's logical. Die or be free, no.

Still I didn't move. I wondered if I was in shock. It was as if I was just beginning to realize the danger I was in.

That wasn't true.

I'd realized early on, but he'd made me forget. I'd forgotten because I'd fallen into that fathomless gaze of his and the way he made me feel everything so strongly.

He returned a few minutes later, and I tensed. He stood in the doorway, a red leather book in his hands. My journal. I didn't want to read that now. I'd just kept writing straight through without going back to reread.

In the beginning it had been a way to salvage sanity after a fashion, or else a way to document so someday when I was free I could remember all

he'd done to me and make him pay. Now I couldn't go back and read it all. I wanted to keep moving forward, writing new diary entries, never looking back to what had gone on before.

He watched me. He was so conflicted I could feel it rolling off him. It was as if he didn't want to let me go but for some reason was almost compelled to do so. Was he sorry?

No, don't be sorry.

Why wouldn't he just talk to me now? If he was letting me go anyway, what purpose did these mind games serve?

Finally, he tossed the journal at me and sat in a nearby chair. Was this why he was throwing me away? Had I written something between these pages that was so unforgivable that rather than keep me in the bad cell, he'd throw me away completely? I held the soft, thick leather book in my hands and opened it.

But it wasn't my journal. It was his.

NINE

August 26th:

TODAY I FOUND something beautiful and decided to break it. I wanted to see it shatter in my hand and crumble at my feet. Her name is Emily Vargas. She's bright and educated and stunning. Articulate. She'll want someone to talk to her.

I was at a convention in Nashville, one of those boring meetings where we judge the health of the company and all the stockholders bitch and whine. I really couldn't give two shits about the business, but it was my father's. I'm a fucking household name but no one knows my face, which is fine by me. I'd rather have my privacy.

Even the servants are only here once a week. They already know I'm idiosyncratic. I'm a hermit, so even as the plan was forming, I knew I could get away with it. I hate being around so many people because I have to have an interpreter like some sort of foreign person. I generally just sit in these meetings like a statue, waiting for them to be over with.

Walter does all the talking. In fact, most people believe he owns the company because he's always the one speaking for it. Most of them don't know about my handicap. I think some of the people in the meetings think I'm his bodyguard. If I was some pale scrawny kid I'm not sure how exactly we would explain my presence.

Whatever explanations would have to be done, Walter would have to do

them. He's about the only person I trust not to screw me over and to keep my secrets; though my new secret is too sensitive even for him.

After the meeting was over, I wandered the hotel and sat at the bar. A woman came up and started speaking to me. She was attractive in her way, legs that ran on for a few miles at least, and cleavage I wanted to bury my face in. She smiled. I smiled. And that was about as far as the interaction could go.

“Hi, what's your name? I'm Veronica.”

God, even her name dripped sex. Here was the moment. I used to just smile pathetically. Instead, I turned back to the bar.

The bartender knew me and knew what I liked, so I found a whiskey straight sitting in front of me. I threw the shot back and slammed it down on the counter. The barkeep filled it again. I knew I'd be happiest if he just kept them coming.

“God, you are such an asshole!” she said, and then she flounced off, her ass swaying delectably as she retreated. That's when I had the fantasy I always have. I'd chase her, grab her and slam her against the wall, and just fucking take her. Forget all this social bullshit. And it is bullshit when you can't participate.

Then I saw her, Emily. She came up to the bar. “Sam, can I get a martini?”

The bartender smiled and made her drink. She put a stack of brochures next to her, and when she looked away for a moment, I took one and slipped it into my jacket. The brochure contained her tour schedule. She drank her martini and never spoke to me.

I didn't know if I was glad about that or not. I'm not sure why she should have spoken to me. I could have been some stalker fan, and it was obvious she just needed space.

For the next twenty minutes, I listened to her lyrical voice as she flirted with the bartender, and he bantered back. It was a sexual dance that was socially acceptable to perform out in the open, the modern repressed equivalent of a Roman orgy.

When she left, I studied the brochure. I think I just snapped, but I've decided to take her. I'm so fucking tired of being alone, of paying whores or seeking out women who know sign language. In the end, they all feel sorry for me, even the whores. I've got all this money, and it doesn't mean a goddamned thing because I can't carry on a relationship with anyone without

them treating me like I'm slow because of my inability to speak.

I'd rather have fear than pity.

I FELT NUMB. I could vaguely remember that bar and the bartender. I *had* thought the man beside me might be a stalker fan, or more likely someone whose wife had left him and for whatever reason he blamed me for it.

Sometimes women in less than stellar relationships were moved by something in one of my books, developed self-esteem, and left their boyfriends or husbands or whatever. Often I got blamed for it.

I looked at him, wanting to say something. Maybe he didn't know as much about me as he thought, because surely he would have communicated with me if he did. I knew sign language because of my sister.

Of course, I could understand why he might not know that. When Katie died, mom and dad were so upset that after a few months they just erased her. Like she didn't exist. It was too hard on them.

I thought it was cruel at the time, but thinking about her just hurt too much. I considered telling him, but he was pointing at the book and the pages he'd dog-eared. The ones that held all the explanations I'd waited months for and finally had stopped believing I would get.

I wasn't sure sign language would help me now anyway because I *did* feel sorry for him. Maybe it would get me killed. He'd been in charge for so long, and now that he was showing vulnerability, surely his self-control wouldn't hold out. The edges of it seemed frayed already. Things were unraveling. So instead I went back to the journal and flipped to the next dog-eared page.

JANUARY 30TH:

I KNOW I'm fucking crazy. I've left Walter to run things for awhile. I'm never home. I've been following her tour schedule.

I understand there's something wrong with this. And I know what's wrong with it isn't so much that I'm doing it, as that I don't care it's wrong.

When you're a part of society there are certain behaviors that aren't okay.

If you do these behaviors and then feel nothing, that's worse. But I've been trying to determine when I've ever been a part of society.

Even before I had a house built on what feels like the edge of the known universe, even when I mingled, I wasn't a part. I was always on the outside looking in. There was one small group of people who I could speak with through sign language, rather than just looking at them dumbly.

And now I'm fucking feeling sorry for myself. Or maybe I'm justifying. No, because I intellectually know it's wrong. I'm not an idiot. I had the best schooling that could be bought. I just don't care. And I know I'll get away with it.

During my time at home, I've converted some rooms for use when I get her. I've sound-proofed them because I'm not sure how much she'll scream. The servants are rarely there anyway, but just to be on the safe side. I set the rooms up to look like labs, except the room with the monitors. That seems normal. And I've got the doors labeled as such.

The staff knows I used to work on product research, and they'll think it's a good sign I'm starting it again. I hear them talk amongst themselves. Sometimes I catch snippets about how I don't go out much anymore and don't do anything. Well, what the fuck is there to do?

As soon as the electrical people get the security system in place for the rooms, I can start getting rid of all the lab stuff and moving in what needs to go in. Except one room I'll keep bare.

That's probably the best way. I thought about using drugs to make her comply, but that leaves more of a potential paper trail. And something could go wrong, some unforeseen side effect or allergic reaction, and then I'm left with either letting her die or risk getting caught. Plus having a druggie on my hands isn't overly appealing.

Although I have no moral problem with the course I've chosen, I don't believe I would be so cavalier about taking a life. I'm just not an overly violent person, except for the occasional sexual fantasy. I don't want to physically harm her; I just want her.

I suppose I could always do one of those pathetic attempts at a relationship again. But then we're back to me being pitied. For once I want a goddamned woman to know I'm not helpless just because I can't talk to her. I really don't think I'll have to hurt her, though. I know her weakness.

I've never seen anyone drink up social interaction in quite the starved way she does. If I deprive her of everything, she'll comply.

I watch her at these conferences she does, careful to keep to the shadows so she doesn't notice me and realize that one face is always there amidst the ever-changing sea of them. She flits around, and one can see where the term social butterfly comes from. She has the most musical laugh, and once or twice I almost felt guilty.

But then I close my eyes, and I see her naked beneath me, knowing that for once in my fucking life, I have absolute power with a woman. Someone who can't reject me and wouldn't know how to pity me, and the twinge is gone again.

I COULDN'T STOP the tears tracking down my face at how casual he was about the whole thing. How he talked about breaking me like one might mention what they were having for dinner. The extreme arrogance, the lack of remorse.

I looked up again to see if now that his secret was out, he felt anything at all. All I could see was the coldness and the new restlessness that came with today. The day he was releasing me. I knew he wouldn't allow me to stay because he'd let me too far into his world now.

I still didn't know why he was doing it, but if he was letting me see the man behind the curtain, it was because he was finished with me for good.

MAY 3RD:

IT'S ONLY a couple of weeks til she'll be in Atlanta again. I can't believe I'm really going to do this. For a few months I think I believed I wasn't going to. It was just a fantasy, like the others. I was just making it more real.

But I've spent an outrageous sum on her; by God I'm taking her. I know there is extreme hubris in taking her in her hometown, but it's the most logical for me because it's the closest to where we're going. The shorter the distance I have to transport her, the better.

I've been researching various drugs and have found one that will keep her out about four hours. The drive home, barring any problems, is only two. With my luck I'll hit traffic, though. I don't want her to wake tied up in the

car. It completely ruins the effect and gives her at least a small chance of escape.

I want her to know from the beginning there is no chance of escape. Although once I move her to the luxury suite, I fully expect her to lash out somehow. It'll be best, I think, to get the rebellion out of the way early and let her see the pointlessness of her actions.

I haven't seen her since March. Instead, I've been looking into her background, learning what I can. I want her suite to have everything she likes.

On the one hand, I want to break her so completely she'll do anything I want without question. But on the other, I want her to choose me. I want her grateful and willing. I want control, but I don't want her screaming when I fuck her.

I know the world would class me a monster, but control is what turns me on, not a woman screaming or begging me not to rape them. I don't mind a little fear, I just want her to choose. If she doesn't choose me, I'll just leave her in the cell until she changes her mind. I've waited a long goddamned time for this. If she thinks she can outlast my patience, she's insane.

MAY 15TH:

IT COULDN'T HAVE GONE MORE PERFECTLY. When she started to feel unsteady, I helped her outside. I don't think she even saw me. Then she collapsed in my arms. I had her in the car before anyone noticed she'd left. I didn't stop to secure her for a good ten minutes until I'd gotten off the main drag.

Then I pulled off on a deserted exit. I tied her hands and feet, blindfolded her, then laid her in the backseat and covered her with a blanket. I knew it was safer to put her in the trunk, but dying of carbon monoxide poisoning was a possibility, especially with drugs already running through her veins.

I had her in the cell before she woke and decided not to be in the room with her to start with, but to just watch her on the monitor. I was a bit concerned when she didn't wake exactly when she was supposed to. It took me awhile to realize she was awake. She just wasn't screaming or struggling.

She was smart, saving her energy, waiting for her one moment of escape,

possibly retracing her steps and trying to remember what had brought her to me. I hadn't planned to touch her the first day, and I know I'll have to be more disciplined or else I'm going to end up having to hurt her.

If I don't want to hurt her, I have to do better. I have to make myself do better. But I can't completely regret it. I sat on the ground beside her, and I reached out and stroked the smoothness of her cheek. I've never felt skin so soft.

I know she was terrified. She probably thought I'd hurt her, and suddenly that bit of caring came through because it was an actual person. I'd thought of her for months as a piece of property I was acquiring, but I couldn't deny the warmth of her ragged breath, or the softness of her cheek, or the way she was already leaning into me, even if she didn't realize it.

I managed finally to pull my hand away and fed her a bite of the soup. I was surprised she hadn't started reacting yet. I found my hand reaching out to cup her breast, and she jerked away. It made me angry. Not so much that she pulled away but that I'd expected anything else. I started to leave, and her voice stopped me. Soft, desperate begging that made my pants tighten.

I returned and decided I would test her to see how far she could be pushed to eat. I knew she was still a little drugged, hungry, tired, scared. I could test her now and then wait a week like I'd planned.

By the end of the bowl of soup she was arching into my hand, letting out soft little moans that I'm pretty sure she didn't know she was making. I had the idea I could have her right then. Fuck the plan, just move her to the luxury suite, shower her with everything. But it wasn't what I wanted now.

Having her so afraid, so willing to please me if I'd feed her . . . I can't deny the effect it had on me. It's going to be a difficult seven days. I'm willing to admit what I want. I don't just want her. I don't even just want her not to pity me. I want her fear, desperation, complete and total obedience. And I am willing to wait for it.

She asked me why I was doing this to her, and for once I was glad I couldn't speak. My silence will help mold her, my hands will become my voice, and eventually she won't know the difference and won't care. Breaking her will be the best thing I've ever done.

MAY 18TH:

SHE ACTED out much like I expected, throwing her soup like a child. I believe she still thought I was planning to kill her and wanted me to lose control and do it quickly. It's the only explanation I can think of for the behavior.

I've scoured every behavioral psych book I could get my hands on for months. Although I'm quite sure the authors didn't intend for it to be used this way.

At first I studied it to try to understand her better, since she'd gotten her degree in psychology. Then I decided to use it to condition her because there's nothing quite so insidious as torturing someone in a way so they know exactly what you're doing but know they can't escape it.

No, I'm not really physically violent, but I guess I am sadistic. I cleaned up the mess she made and then left her. She ruined her food; she isn't getting more. Once she learns the tantrums are useless and don't affect me, she'll stop doing it.

IT WAS STRANGE AND UNSETTLING, seeing these events through his eyes. It was even weirder to see a confirmation that we'd understood one another from the beginning. I hadn't suspected he was mute, of course. I should have, probably, but he was so calculating with everything else he did, why would I assume a handicap of some sort? Especially one so rare?

Muteness often comes with deafness, as with my sister. And he clearly wasn't deaf. He'd turned at the sound of my voice many times. He hadn't just been reading my lips.

Aside from that, I'd been right about everything, and he'd been right about me. Communicating without words had taken us both to a place where we had to just instinctively get each other. I swiped at another tear as it trailed down my cheek and looked up at him.

"Please don't make me go," I said. I'd just put the journal down so I could sign as I spoke.

His eyes widened. He genuinely hadn't known I could sign. What are the odds right? Life is strange, but there it is. I should have guessed the mute thing at least considering my family history.

Why hadn't that been one of my questions on the few days I'd been brave enough to ask them? In hindsight, it was probably best I didn't think of it.

We'd both existed in a world where people spoke with their hands, and yet neither of us had suspected the other.

I'd come to see him as omnipotent and all-knowing. In my mind he knew every detail of my life, but he wouldn't be able to get every detail practically. I realized most of them he'd probably gotten from going to my seminars. I talked a lot about my personal life at the conferences. Probably more than I should have. But I'd never talked about my sister.

He stared at me for a long while before he finally signed back.

Read.

I skipped to the next dog-eared section. I thought if I did what he said without fighting him, maybe he'd realize I was worth keeping.

That thought unhinged me. The only thing keeping me from having a complete meltdown was the idea that he was letting me go because he was trying to do the right thing. So I kept reading.

JUNE 16TH:

AS THRILLING as it was to see her submit, to give me her body like a wrapped-up present, I knew it wasn't real. Not yet. She still wanted out. Once she saw the rooms I'd given her, she knew what she was.

When you give someone your body in exchange for anything, you're a whore, and nothing drives that home like ridiculous levels of luxury. As I watched her on the monitor last night I could see the wheels in her head turning as she planned to attack me, the way she studied objects in her rooms that she'd never looked at so closely before.

The attempt was weak. It's not that she didn't try, she just never had a chance since I could see her waiting by the door with her weapons before I came into the room. The moment it all backfired, she was once again the scared little rabbit I'd first taken, cowering away from me.

I'm not sure I was able to keep off my face how much it affected me now to see her like that. I love the submission, but the fear drives me as well. I stretched my hand toward her and was surprised by how fast she took it. The resignation and acceptance in her eyes. And I knew I'd only have to put her back in the cell once more, and after that she'd be mine forever.

I took her outside and showed her around the grounds, then figured I'd let her try to run. I'm sure if I were an average, merely frustrated man, that by this point her tears would affect me in a way besides making me hard. The helpless obedience would turn my stomach or make me feel the twinges of guilt, and yet it doesn't. Whatever little feeling from before must have been leftover from what I'd always been taught was right and wrong.

I'm sure if I had a voice, I would still have done it. I didn't realize that until I saw her walking away from me, knowing she couldn't get far. She was prey, and it brought out a predatory instinct I'd suppressed for far too long.

When she'd gotten far enough away, I got up and began to chase her. It was as if an invisible thread tied us together because I think she sensed me behind her long before she could have heard me running. She started to run, and it felt like a game to me. To her it was survival and escape, but to me it was just fun.

Then when I knew she could hear me, she tensed, and only moments before I could have reached her and tackled her to the ground, she stopped and turned to me, her hands held out in surrender. If I have this dark need to have complete power over her, she has an equal almost pathological need to give it to me.

I would never have expected her to react like that. Fear of pain drives her in such an extreme way that she won't fight. In some ways her fear of pain seems greater than her fear of anything else, even death. Because I hadn't hurt her yet, she already trusted that if she obeys me, I won't start. I'm not about to disabuse her of that notion.

I've been working to communicate it from the beginning. She's safe if she obeys me. I just didn't expect such dramatic obedience in a moment when freedom at least felt real and possible, if for no other reason than she was outside the house in the open air.

I wanted to throw her down and fuck her right there in the grass, but I've been training her to see fucking as a reward, and so to do that would erase everything I've done so far. I gritted my teeth and turned to lead her back to the house. I've already decided it will be two weeks this time, and I'm not sure how I'm going to manage to abstain from touching her.

JUNE 30TH:

I CONSIDERED MAKING her wait until July 4th to get back to the nice rooms. I was tempted. I'm probably a bit too amused with irony. Move her back there on the day of independence. I'm sure she equates that room with freedom at this point.

While she was locked up this last time, I realized I do want to hurt her. I just don't want to hurt her out of anger. And I want her to want me to hurt her. I had a lot of time to think about all this while I was waiting. I ended up getting another room outfitted as a dungeon.

I hadn't thought I would go this route, but the more I fantasize about her, the more I see myself whipping her. And really, what else was I going to do for the two weeks of torturous waiting? A project was what I needed.

I guess it started out wanting to punish her. I wouldn't give her tampons or pads, so she ended up going about the cell naked, and who could blame her? I suppose bleeding on herself naked was better if I wasn't going to give her anything to stop her from making a mess. But I kept seeing her body on the screen, and I wanted to punish her because I had to wait. I couldn't take her without fucking up all my progress.

One day she talked to me. She got pretty panicked over the idea that she might get pregnant and I'd kill her. I have no idea why she'd think that, but she's a smart girl and figured out just by my facial expressions that I can't have kids. Just never wanted them, and the vasectomy made the problem go away. All she knows, of course, is that I'm sterile, and she doesn't have to fear that.

She asked me to talk to her again, said she'd do anything I wanted if I would. It pissed me off. I believed she would have. But I need her to submit knowing I might never speak to her. Because I can't. I'm not here to please her; she's here to please me. Even if I could speak, I don't think I would. There are no compromises here.

She will obey or she will be punished. If I'm extreme enough in the beginning with the deprivation, her fear will drive her to please me, and I won't have to worry about correcting bad behavior later or traumatizing her worse than is absolutely necessary.

As I started to leave that day, she begged me to take her out of there and not leave her alone. I jerked off for the next week to the memory of the desperation in her voice and the way her lip quivered when she spoke to me.

Then, of course, once she stopped bleeding, she still went around naked.

By this time she was trying to tempt me, and I was glad she had another week left in there. I wanted to get rid of all the variations of rebellion that she had.

One day she got so brazen as to lie on the floor and masturbate, knowing I was watching. I jerked off watching her on the monitor and managed to finish before she did so I could catch her and still be in control of myself. Because she did have an effect, but that doesn't matter. She will not lead me by my dick like other women have. She's mine. She'll learn it and she won't forget it.

I stared her down until she stopped and then left the room. It was time for the book. I wanted her to understand I was her master, and I couldn't think of any way to convey this information. If I left her a note, she'd know of my handicap or at least suspect it. So I figured I'd be as fucking creepy about it as possible.

During her imprisonment, while working on the dungeon, I'd started highlighting the word master every time it appeared in an erotic novel from her room. I watched, fascinated as she walked around the book several times before finally picking it up. She thought it was a trick. I could see on the monitors how afraid she was of making the wrong choice, not knowing what I wanted from her.

She really is more than I ever could have hoped for. When I first decided to take her, it was because she was just so goddamned beautiful. And now I know she is completely surprising.

Even studying conditioning methods, I don't think I could have hoped for a better slave. When I came back into the cell, I waited. I was a bit disappointed at first when she didn't address me. I turned to leave, and that's when she said it.

“Master, please.”

Those words, coming out of her mouth. That was her ticket out, lesson over. I'd decided to fuck her ass, and if she submitted to that without a fuss, I'd move her back to the suite.

I was as careful as possible. I didn't want to rip her. I just knew this was possibly the most vulnerable I could make her, even after everything else, and if she would give this to me she was completely mine.

It was better than I'd thought it would be, and afterward I just held her. I needed her to know that if she obeyed, I would touch her, I'd let her come, I'd hold her. All she had to do was give me her will completely and accept her position. There is no escape and she knows that now. She can die in the

cell or she can submit.

I STOPPED READING. There was more, but I couldn't read anymore, not from that day.

I couldn't stand to read his reaction to whipping me, his arousal at my fear and helplessness. I skimmed through the rest of the dog-eared pages looking for one thing, why he was letting me go.

But it wasn't there. Even the last entry had only talked about our most recent time together. There was no indication he was tired of me, nor was there any hint he was sorry. I looked up then. I half expected him to insist I keep reading, but I didn't want to see anymore. I'd seen enough.

"Are you sorry you did this to me?"

He shrugged.

"Why are you letting me go? Are you letting me go?"

Yes. You're free to go. I'm releasing you because I'm finished with you.

Just like that. He was finished with me. He'd taken me and considered me a toy, property, and now like any toy the owner was bored with, I was being thrown in the trash.

I wanted to fall to my knees and beg him not to do it, but the bored expression in his eyes told me it would do no good. He put the keys back in my hand.

The garage door is open, and if you press the button you'll see which car it is. The headlights will flash. You should be able to find your way easily enough.

"This doesn't make any sense. Yeah, maybe you're done with me, but why just let me go with something that can be tied to you? Aren't you concerned I'll go to the police?"

Maybe I shouldn't have said that. After all, bringing up the police could buy me a hole in the ground instead of my freedom.

He shrugged again. *I don't care one way or the other. Go take back your life, Emily.*

It took him longer to spell out my name, a word that had become so disconnected from my being. I couldn't believe I didn't want to go. I'd thought there would be something in the journal that would explain something, but every explanation was one I'd expected.

"Did I not please you? Did I do something wrong?"

I knew even as I said the words that a normal person would take their freedom and not ask questions, but I'd been with him so long I'd come to depend on him. He'd offered me a kind of security I'd never experienced, even if it was somewhat warped in its nature.

You pleased me. You did nothing wrong. You exceeded my expectations. But now you need to leave.

“Can I take a few things?” Mementos. How fucked up was that? I wanted reminders of my imprisonment.

He nodded.

I didn't take much. A few Middle Eastern CD's—the drumbeats would calm me—some candles, a few favorite outfits, and my journal, the pages all written in. Full. It was a strange sort of poetry.

I had always thought when I got to the end of the journal that he would buy me a new one, not release me.

I didn't think it was anything more than coincidence that the two events coincided, but it was as if I'd written a book, and I'd run out of space, so I had run out of captivity as well. I took the things out to the garage and loaded them into the car.

I don't know why I didn't try to beg more. I guess there was a part of me that knew I really couldn't stay. He was giving me my life back and to refuse that gift was unthinkable.

I'd obeyed him so very long now that to receive an order, the instinct was to obey, no matter how much I didn't want to. Not out of fear of punishment, but out of a desire to please him and gain and keep his favor.

Of all the things he'd wanted from me, this was the hardest to obey. I really had lost my mind. No sane person would be so horrified by the idea of freedom. But surely when I saw my family and friends again, things would be different, and I could put all of this behind me.

TEN

He didn't have to forcibly remove me from the house because I knew he would and having a breakdown at this point wasn't going to help. I had belonged to him, and now he was showing me how absolute that was by disposing of me like any other piece of property that had become of little interest.

The car he'd given me was a silver Mercedes, and truly it was a gift because what was the likelihood I'd bring it back? I dumped everything but the CDs into the trunk on top of a car emergency kit. A small shovel clattered when the journal hit it.

It took forever to get out of the driveway. It really did seem to go on forever. Part of me wondered if it was all an elaborate test to make me come back, but then I'd seen the absoluteness in his eyes, and there was no reason to show me my helplessness. I knew it; I'd taken it into the deepest part of my being, and I'd accepted it. No further object lessons were needed.

The car didn't have a global positioning system, something I found odd. I ripped the *this journal belongs to* page out of the red leather book and started writing reverse directions, like a trail of bread crumbs, recording where I went so I wouldn't get lost.

After a couple of lucky and arbitrary turns, I came to a busier road. At least I'd found civilization again and

could ask for help if I needed it. Though I wasn't sure I wanted to deal with the possibility of being recognized as *that self-help guru that had gone missing*. So I kept going until I found the interstate.

When I finally got there, I discovered I was about thirty miles from home.

Not starting from the interstate but including the bumble where I'd been. I'd assumed I was thousands of miles away from home in some remote location. To learn I'd been just thirty miles away from my house the whole damn time made me crave the freedom I'd thought I'd given up.

I'd been listening to one of the Middle Eastern CDs. The music hadn't calmed me so much as made me want to turn the car around, but I didn't. There was some tiny screaming sliver of me that still wanted to be free. Finally, I couldn't stand the drums any longer.

I took the disc out but resisted the urge to break it, some part of my mind still convinced I might want to listen to it again someday in the future when the wounds weren't as fresh. I turned on the radio and remembered it was Halloween.

I expected the date to make me feel giddy. Instead, driving through suburbia I found myself disconcerted by all the sensory input. The decorations. The kids running around in costumes at afternoon parties. I found myself bizarrely frightened of the imaginary creatures which within hours would be going bump in the night.

I couldn't go to my house first. It was a rental, and somehow I doubted anyone would have kept up the rent for the almost six months I'd been missing. As I drove down the Magnolia-lined street my parents lived on, the radio ceased being background noise.

"A memorial service was held yesterday for self-help guru, Emily Vargas, as police still have found no leads to her mysterious disappearance. When contacted for comment, the family expressed a need for closure and would offer no more . . ."

I nearly swerved off the road. They'd erased me. Just like my sister. What kind of family waits only six months before burying an empty box to just get on with it?

Surely most would wait a year, maybe even two. I understood how hard it had to be considering losing Katie like they had, but it felt like rejection, as if I had no place left in the world to go to.

I drove past the house and went to the cemetery. I searched the family plots until I found mine. It was surreal and more upsetting than I expected it to be, and I couldn't help but feel completely betrayed by my family for acting so selfishly, for not thinking about how this might make me feel after what I'd experienced. How did they expect to explain it to me if I was ever found?

There were still-blooming flowers all around the grave, the dirt fresh and piled high. Some crazy part of me wanted to dig the coffin out, if in fact there was one. If there wasn't, I couldn't imagine what it was they'd seen fit to bury.

I tried to picture my family and friends wearing black, sobbing over my supposed death based on the fact that my parents couldn't carry the torch just a little bit longer, and I was disgusted.

I stared at the gravestone. *Emily Vargas: devoted friend, loving daughter, inspiring leader.* My death was marked as the day before, the day of the funeral.

Goddammit!

I kicked at and scattered the pile of dirt. What the hell gave them the right to just kill me off? It was inconvenient for me to exist and be missing?

I don't know if it was what they'd done, or if it was because of the inability to act out for so long, but the rage flipped in me like a switch. It was something I'd forgotten I had. I didn't know I could feel anger like that; I hadn't felt it in so long.

I threw flowers and arrangements as far as I could and fell to my knees digging into the dirt, clawing at it, as if clawing to get inside. It was the reverse of being buried alive. Maybe I should be in there and not out here under the open sky with the birds chirping and everything so innocent and bright.

I'd once seen a movie about someone buried alive that somehow escaped their coffin and clawed to the surface. They were buried in a pine box, but even so, one would think the weight of the dirt would make escape impossible. If the work of digging to a box was this difficult, I couldn't imagine the reality of digging out of one.

Even though my progress was insignificant, I continued to dig. I didn't care how impossible it was, I had to get in there. I remembered the emergency kit and retrieved the shovel from the trunk of the car, thankful for a master who was compulsively prepared for any traveling contingency.

As I continued to dig with the small shovel, I worried the police would show up. Surely they kept a closer eye on cemeteries on Halloween. But it was early afternoon, and the troublemakers wouldn't be out until after the sun had gone down. I thought about kids out making mischief stumbling upon my dug-out grave and having a ghost story to pass around.

I finally got to the coffin. I had the momentary fear I would open it and

see my body in there, that I really was gone and somehow didn't know it yet. But when I opened the lid there was no body, only things of mine. Old ballet shoes, journals, photographs. Things that became me in the absence of a body to put in the earth.

Now, out in the fresh air, looking at what was meant as evidence of my passing, I couldn't let myself think the word *master*. But I had nothing else to call him, except *the monster who had taken me*. In the end the most monstrous thing he did was let me go. Especially in light of the fact that everyone else had let me go, too.

I wanted to get in the car and go back to him, throw myself on his mercy and hope that at least one person in the world still wanted me. But I knew I wouldn't. He'd broken me, but he'd been so strangely gentle about it that somehow I was still me inside.

I wasn't a shell, a hollowed-out zombie of a human being, though at this moment, with graveyard dirt covering me virtually head to toe, I looked like it. For whatever reason, he wanted me to be free, and I'd been trained to obey. I could keep going if I thought of it as obedience.

I gathered my stuff from the coffin and took it to the car. I'd found a twenty-dollar bill in my pocket, so I stopped at a drive-through for some food. My master must have slipped money into the jeans before he'd tossed them to me that morning.

Thinking of how well he took care of me ripped me apart inside, and I had to hold back the floodgates because I was in public. The girl at the drive through looked at me oddly as I paid for my cheeseburger meal.

"I'm a zombie," I said dully. I almost laughed at my own joke.

The light bulb went off over her head as she looked down at her clothes and remembered it was Halloween. She was about seventeen with blonde hair that had pink streaks in it and going for a slutty Punky Brewster effect with her clothing. Probably she was passing it off as a costume because she didn't have the nerve to wear it any other day.

"Oh, right. Clever," she said. "The dirt makeup looks real."

I smiled, biting back the urge to say it was real dirt. I ate in the parking lot, then started the car again. I needed to get cleaned up, but I knew I didn't have a house to go to except for my parents' place, and I wasn't ready to see them just yet.

I hadn't been in the house for long when I'd been taken, and still had my storage unit. It had held all the things in my house before they went into my

house, and I'd paid a year in advance because you never know when you might need a storage facility.

I hadn't been sure the new place would work out. I blame my mother for this insane level of over-planning. I have no other excuses.

My storage unit, like all of them at the ultra-modern facility, worked by a combination keypad, and I was the only one who knew the code.

My fingers trembled as I punched it in, then drove the car into it like a garage and turned off the ignition. I'd known from the moment I got out the door I wouldn't call the police. I would never tell them anything that had happened, or lead them down the winding roads to the house that had been my prison.

I sat in the car, going through the things that had been buried in the coffin, reading the journals, looking at who I'd been, or who they'd simplified me down to in order to fit me into a box, and it struck me how much they didn't really know anything about me. Whether it was by my own omissions or their lack of observation I would never know.

My house was fifteen miles away from that of my parents, and it was that way because it was the opposite end of town, as far as I could get and still be in the same place. The storage facility was only five miles from their house, which made walking much easier.

Once the car was taken care of and I was walking down the streets through the residential neighborhood, the enormity of my situation hit me.

Kids were running down the streets beside me all dressed up like pumpkins and pirates and ghosts, shrieking and laughing, their candy pails swinging from their arms as exhausted parents tried to keep up with them.

It was too much. Everything was too loud. Even the drive-through had been difficult. To have a human being speak to me. To have any set of eyes on me but his . . . it was unnerving, an invasion. It made me feel naked and exposed.

Over months of being with him, my prison had become my sanctuary, and now that I was free, the world was my prison. There was nowhere left to run.

No one paid much attention to me as I walked. I'm sure part of it was that the sun was setting behind the trees, and the stark afternoon brightness of a few hours before was long gone. I wasn't recognizable as Emily. Anyone who saw me didn't look horrified or shocked. I was just wearing a costume like everybody else.

It was full dark when I reached my parents' house. Their porch was lit with the typical Halloween array, a giant lit-up pumpkin, bats hanging from the porch, a bloody scarecrow lying over a bale of hay in the front yard.

They really had just erased me, had some kind of psychotic fit that allowed them to shut that door and open another one. To lay me to rest and the next day give out candy to neighborhood kids and do the normal Halloween things without it necessary to give me a second thought. It was obscene.

I'd seen them when Katie had died. I knew it was because the only way they could survive was to behave like this. Still. To not openly grieve and mourn, to instead hide and bury and erase. It wasn't the way normal human beings behaved toward those they were supposed to love. Even if those they loved were only a memory now.

When I knocked, my mother shouted from behind the door, "Ted, get that!"

I heard something fall and break, a stream of curses, and then the door flew open. My mother's irritation turned to shock.

"Ted!" she screamed, as if her shouts could protect her from the daughter who wouldn't die and be gone forever like a good little girl.

My father came to stand behind her in the doorway, "Donna, what is it?" His face went pale when he saw me, looking morbidly as if I'd crawled out of my grave.

I wanted to say it served them right for burying someone who wasn't dead in the first place, but it wasn't my dad's fault, not really. He just went along with whatever my mother said to do.

Finally, I found my voice. "Mom . . ."

"You're not real," she said. It wasn't said like someone who actually missed their daughter and was thrilled to have her home. It was said as if my appearance on her doorstep screwed up her 12-step plan to deny I'd ever existed. Such was the way of the Vargas clan.

Perhaps I should have gone somewhere else. But it was a perverse revenge, and I was unwilling to play this morbid scene out with anyone who didn't deserve it.

"I'm real, mom."

"But we didn't bury you. You're covered in dirt."

My father stood behind my mom, his hands on her shoulders, steadying her as if he controlled anything in that house.

“No, you didn’t bury me. Did you not think that maybe I wasn’t dead, or was that not convenient for you?”

I understood they must have suffered when they’d thought they’d lost me. The sleepless nights, the fear for my safety. But it didn’t change the fact that they’d buried me to make their lives easier, so they could go on when I hadn’t had that luxury.

Then the tears started. Not mine. I was fairly certain I didn’t have tears left to cry. I’d used up my lifetime supply, and from now on my sobs would be verbal rather than wet. No, it was my mother crying. I was hurting her feelings.

“How could you say such a vile thing to me? We were worried sick. Where were you? What happened to you?”

Now it was time to accuse me. I’d not yet been invited into the house. I was still standing on the porch next to a giant plastic illuminated jack-o-lantern with a goofy grin on his face. A trail of trick-or-treaters stopped me from speaking.

“Trick-or-treat!” they caroled out, their treat bags held out like little beggars. One of the girls was dressed up like a witch. She’d managed to wipe off some of her green face make-up, and the wart was about to fall right off her nose.

My mother grabbed me by the arm and pulled me inside before giving the kids candy and sending them on their way. She shut the door and whirled on me.

She looked ridiculous wearing a pink bathrobe and slippers because Halloween was the one day of the year she could get away with being a slob. She had the bowl clutched in her hands so tightly I thought the glass would shatter and the candy would go flying onto the floor like a pinata. Her hands had gone white from gripping, and her face matched her hands. And yet . . . she was angry, not afraid.

“Where have you been?” She said it as if I’d been out playing hooky or something. Like I would disappear for months without a word on a joy ride and then come back looking like I did just for the hell of it.

I opened my mouth and then shut it again. Now that I was back, everyone would want to know. The police would want a statement, as would the media and all my friends and family. They felt they were entitled to know. I’d been gone, throwing their lives into a tailspin, and now I owed it to them to tell them, at least something. At least the barest, most TV movie-of-the-week

version.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. To be forced to tell what had happened felt like rape, another violation and another choice that wasn't free. I'd exposed every inch of my body and soul to one man for months, until force became voluntary. I wasn't doing it again just in a different form.

Besides, I thought it was reasonable to think that once you bury someone, you give up rights to hearing their story. I wasn't going to forgive them easily.

"I can't talk about it," I said. My voice quivered. I'm sure they thought it was trauma, but it was anger.

My mother nodded in understanding; my father still hadn't said a word to me. Oh he loved me, in his way. He just wasn't good at expressing it.

"I need to get cleaned up," I said. After hours of dirt caked on me, I was becoming less and less appealing.

"You can use the guest room and bathroom, and wear some of my clothes. I'll make you something to eat," my mother said.

I wished I'd brought the clothes from the Mercedes, but I didn't want any evidence that would help the police find my captor. It was irrational. I should want him locked up forever for what he'd done, but I didn't. The thought of him locked in some cage turned my stomach.

I stopped off at my mother's closet and got a T-shirt and some jeans in my size, which was six sizes ago for my mother. But like most women, she kept the hope alive that someday she'd get back into her skinny jeans.

The guest bedroom had previously been my bedroom. I wondered how long it had taken after my disappearance for them to start the erasing process? Packing my stuff up and redecorating the room.

The last time I'd been in this room had been a little more than a year ago. At that time it had remained untouched from my childhood, as if my parents expected that one day I would age backwards and they'd need it again.

There had been Barbie dolls and toys, as well as nail polish and posters of then-current rock stars, items from a room gone from childhood to teen. It had stood as some sort of unnatural shrine to keep me there, even after I'd freed myself from my cage and gone to college and then created a life of my own.

Now it was all gone. I wondered if they'd had a massive yard sale, or if it was all in storage somewhere, or up in the attic, out of sight out of mind. Now it looked like a country bed and breakfast. White wicker furniture and

soft pale lavender carpet.

There was a delicate white crocheted bedspread and a border on the wall of wisteria, then the bottom half more pale lavender, stripes on white. An antique lamp and an old-fashioned alarm clock stood on the nightstand. There was not one shred of evidence I'd ever been there, as if it were my parents who had a crime to cover up.

I'd taken my shoes off at the door, so as not to track dirt into the bedroom. The bathroom had that same hollow *guest* feeling. Like the bedroom, it was warm and cozy but it looked like it belonged in a magazine, not that anyone could actually live in there. If I couldn't find a friend to stay with until I got my stuff back and figured out, then I'd be stuck staying here in this warm sterility.

There was no trace of the bathroom of my childhood. It was a hunter green with lots of houseplants and ivy wallpaper that looked like it was randomly crawling over the walls. The linoleum had been taken up and new tile put down. The shower curtain was transparent.

I stepped out of the dirty clothes and turned on the water. After the first day he'd shaved me, it had been spelled out that any stubble would send me back to the bad cell. The promise of three weeks loomed over me as threatening in my mind as a sentence to death row.

One night I had stubble. He almost took me to the cell, but I begged him to watch the video so he'd know I'd obeyed him. He must have done so because when he returned, he'd nodded as if everything were okay.

Standing in the shower now, with the water pouring over me, I could feel the stubble. It would be normal, expected even, for me to leave it alone and let it grow, like some arcane and hidden secret proof of my freedom, but I couldn't do it. Instead, I grabbed a razor and shaved, knowing I'd never let that hair grow out again even if no one ever knew about it either way, or why I did it.

After I was clean, shaven, and my hair was washed with mango-scented shampoo, I leaned my forehead against the wall and cried. Yes, I still could.

Out in the entryway I'd held it together. I'd had to keep myself from flinching when I'd heard my mother's voice grating like fingernails on a chalkboard. And for once, my father's silence had been appreciated.

I wondered if I would ever get used to hearing human speech besides my own again. I'd heard human voices on CDs I'd been given, but they were singing. Singing always seemed disconnected from reality, since aside from

musicals, people don't just randomly burst into song.

I got out of the shower, dressed, and then went to sit on the foreign bed. Probably the same mattress that had always been there, but who knew? Despite being hungry, I stayed there until my mother knocked on the door.

"Honey, I've fixed you something to eat. Come on into the kitchen."

She'd shifted gears, and now she was prepared to deal with my existence again. When I got to the kitchen, I had to stop the scream from coming out of my mouth. I'm sure she thought it was the logical thing to do, that it would somehow comfort me. She couldn't have known it would never comfort me again.

"Emmie?" My childhood nickname. "Honey, I made you some chicken noodle soup. It always made you feel better before."

Before. Not now. And never again. How exactly did one explain an inexplicable phobic reaction to chicken soup?

"I'm sorry, I can't eat this," I said. It was as if his punishment followed me, and I wondered what I'd done to displease him.

Rationally, I knew my mother was just doing what made sense to her, what she'd always done. The one food Band-aid that had always worked before. Unfortunately this food was now a knife, not a bandage, and cutting on me more wouldn't make it better.

"Why the hell not?"

I knew she was trying to believe I was being difficult. She was still holding onto the diminishing hope that I hadn't been horribly tortured, that instead I'd gone off irresponsibly on a trip or had a late quarter-life crisis.

"I can't talk about it," I said, "I just can't eat that."

She started to open her mouth again, but my father stepped in, in one of those rare and miraculous instances where he doesn't let her get away with just anything.

"Donna, I think if Emmie doesn't want chicken noodle soup, she can have something else. We've got some leftover spaghetti."

"That'd be fine, Dad." I was relieved.

The last thing I needed was a shouting match with my mother because I couldn't fit either the image of someone desperately grateful for chicken noodle soup, or that of some rebellious teenager. My mother lit a cigarette and sat in front of the television.

Soup was her entire repertoire. I guess being in the cell I'd overly romanticized it. When you're someone's prisoner, the idea of mom is

idealized. All neurotic and annoying behavior is swept under the rug in light of that need to just be safe.

I followed my dad into the kitchen, unwilling to deal with her. I wasn't about to explain to them about the soup. For one thing, I had no idea how to edit it down into some parent-safe version of the events. And for another, even if I could, they would suspect what had gone on, and I couldn't handle the idea that my parents might suspect, even in the most vague way, the things that had gone on between my master and myself. That was private.

My dad busied himself in the kitchen, taking the spaghetti out of the fridge and loading up a plate for me. "You want garlic bread?"

"Yeah."

I helped myself to some tea out of the fridge.

"You okay?" he asked. He didn't look at me. I could hear the catch in his voice. If he cried, there was no hope for any of us.

"I'm fine," I said. It wasn't true, and I couldn't exactly express that the largest reason it was a lie was because I was free. I didn't think he had the proper wiring to understand that one.

He just nodded. "Your mother was worried. We both were. She may be acting a little funny, but she just doesn't know how to process some things."

"I know."

And I did know. The tragedy of both my parents was that neither of them was a bad person. They had always loved me and my sister. They just couldn't always cope with things. Although I suspected that the not coping came largely from my mother's side of the camp.

When the microwave dinged, I took the plate and plowed through it like a starving woman. It was my first real food of the day. I didn't count fast food, and I hadn't had breakfast.

My father stood in the kitchen for a few minutes more, watching me. It was obvious he wanted to say something else, and I knew what it was. He wanted to know which version of reality was true. Had I been someone's prisoner, so he could be distraught? Or had I just run off, so he could be angry? But he remained stoic as ever.

With the dirt that had covered me, one might assume something at least resembling what had happened. But if I'd had a mental breakdown and run off somewhere, only to come back and discover a fresh grave with my name on it, the results would have been the same. They were better off not knowing. They'd be better off angry.

The doorbell rang again. More kids. I put the empty plate in the sink and headed for the door. I wanted to do something normal. Even if my heart wasn't in it, I wanted to participate in some inane activity like giving candy to random neighborhood kids in costumes.

My mother had been halfway to the entryway when I stopped her and took the bowl of candy from her hand and opened the door. But it wasn't cherub-faced little princesses and miniature goblins that greeted me. I had believed I'd been discreet, that no one had recognized me, but I'd been wrong.

The glass bowl shattered on the porch and the candy went flying.

A crowd of journalists had assembled on my lawn with bright lights and cameras and microphones. Some of them with little squares of paper that they were furiously jotting notes down on. Perhaps noting my state of dress, my facial expressions, whether or not I looked abused or if I'd lost or gained any weight.

I squinted out into the sea of eager faces, people for whom my trauma equaled their paycheck. I could hear camera shutters clicking, could see the video cameras trained on me, and I wondered if he would be watching the news back in his fortress. Just another piece of video surveillance. Just another way he could spy on me.

"Miss Vargas." It wasn't one voice, it was several, all bleeding together, running on a loop.

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Were you kidnapped? Is the perpetrator still at large?"

"Emily . . ."

"Miss Vargas, were you held against your will?"

"What happened?"

"Can we get a statement?"

"Miss Vargas . . ."

I shut the door and locked it. The nightmare had begun.

ELEVEN

I left my family to handle the media and the random people who kept popping by insisting we were the closest of friends and they needed to see how I was, when really, most of them had the most fleeting and peripheral impact on my life.

They just wanted to rubberneck. These people built up our association so they could watch with morbid fascination the undoing of one Emily Vargas.

I had no choice but to talk to the police. I'd already decided I wouldn't turn him in. The idea of the man I'd called master being locked up was more distressing to me than anything else I'd experienced.

I would have loved to have refused to talk, but then I'd be obstructing justice. Justice. As if anyone but me had any horse in that race. It was a crime against me, not the police, or the state, or the country. To force me to comply was just one more type of enslavement. So I did what I had to do. I lied.

I told them I never knew exactly where I was, but that one day he tied me up and blindfolded me, drove for what seemed like several hours, and then dropped me off on the side of a highway. By the time I got through the ropes and blindfold, he was long gone. I told them I'd found out, through hitchhiking, that I was in Nebraska and took rides from several people until I got home.

Of course, this was announced on the evening news along with a plea for anyone who'd picked up someone meeting my description on the route I'd described, to please call in with any additional information. A few people called.

Whether they were crank callers trying to get fifteen minutes of fame, or

people who had picked up a hitchhiker and thought it was me, it was enough to cause the investigation to grind to a halt. There just wasn't enough information to find anything.

I'd burned the clothing and shoes I was wearing, feigning naiveté and talking about how it was just too much, and I needed to get rid of the memories. No one knew about the storage facility.

The year lease was coming up, and I'd have to pay another year or switch to monthly soon. I wondered how long I was prepared to pay to shield my tormentor from punishment and if this wasn't just another way for him to hurt me.

Once the business with the police was finished, I fell into a listless pattern of television watching. A few friends came by, but I didn't have the energy or will to ask to stay with any of them. That felt too much like moving on with my life. My life had ended with him.

Everything was still too loud. Too much stimuli from too many sources. I longed for that nice, quiet room with the soft Middle Eastern drumbeats that thrummed through my body as the whip came down. To feel his weight covering me, his mouth on mine.

I'd forgotten how frantic the world was, how desperately quick everything moved, each person racing against their own clock. I was letting myself go, not taking care of my appearance.

I knew my career was over permanently. How could I ever *motivate* or *empower* anyone ever again? What else was left for me?

Strangely, though I didn't care about my hair or makeup and wore a grungy T-shirt and shorts most days, I continued to compulsively shave my pussy bare every time I took a shower. It was my last remaining connection to my master.

At night, my hand would drift between my legs to stroke myself off. I don't know whether I was trying to go back to him or whether I was just using an old insomnia cure, pleasure to induce sleep.

When I did sleep, he was always there. Even dreams of the bad cell most would consider nightmares held an odd sort of comfort because I knew he was watching and not far away. He'd come for me.

I'd wake around nine in the morning and then force myself to go back to sleep until I was getting up at two and three in the afternoon, all in the effort to stay unconscious as long as possible so I didn't have to face the cold reality freedom had turned out to be. Three weeks went by like this until my

mother took matters into her own hands.

“I’ve made an appointment with Doctor Blake,” she said one morning, “You know how much she helped me after your sister died.”

I stared at the television, watching an afternoon rerun of a trashy talk show. I didn’t take my eyes from the screen because I knew I wouldn’t be able to hide my contempt.

Sure Dr. Blake had helped her, which was why she hadn’t once mentioned I’d even had a sister since she died. Until just this moment.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard you,” I said.

“Well, are you going?”

“Oh, so you’re asking me now?”

She sighed loudly and tapped her foot on the floor. I rolled my eyes. I didn’t want more drama.

I’d been hoping to just curl up and die, but since that wasn’t happening, I was going to have to do something. If Dr. Blake couldn’t help, maybe she could keep me doped up. That was the next best thing.

“Sure, Mom. I’ll go.”

THE SHRINK’S office was exactly as I’d remembered it. It was in the city, in a high-rise building on the fifth floor. Elevator music straight out of the fifties played nonstop, the same few songs over and over.

It was like a psychotic Prozac-addled pastiche. If you weren’t crazy going in, you were almost certain to be crazy coming out. I sat in one of the dark navy leather chairs and flipped through a magazine.

I’d had to convince my mother to let me drive. If I were suicidal I would have done it already. I didn’t have some pressing need to swerve into oncoming traffic. I wasn’t sure anyway how one could kill themselves if they were already dead.

I read the same article featured in every issue of trendy women’s magazines about shocking sex secrets. Maybe I was jaded, but every one of these articles shared the same tips in just a different order. And far from being shocking, or even a little naughty, they were tame and seemed the product of a stunted sexuality rather than the type of things written by a sexually vibrant and liberated woman.

There was one other person in the room, a middle-aged balding man

waiting to see the other doctor in the office. He kept muttering to himself, and when I listened closely I could hear he was counting. I had no idea what he was counting, but I knew he was going to have some kind of fit if the rug remained crooked. He'd stared at it nonstop since my arrival.

Occasionally, he'd reach out his hand as if tempted to straighten it. Then he'd pull it back quickly. I wondered if he was wearing a discreet shock collar for behavioral modification.

Before I could observe more obsessive-compulsive behavior, my name was called, and I left elevator music hell to join Doctor Blake in her office.

She was even older than I remembered from when my sister had died. I guessed she didn't plan on retiring. She'd go straight from this office to her grave, and God help the poor soul who tried to make it otherwise.

"It's good to see you again, Emily." She said it without it seeming to click in her mind what she was saying. Seeing me again almost guaranteed I was going in some way off the beam.

It amazed me someone so highly trained in human behavior couldn't see her own. But I smiled politely and took a seat. The smile took more energy than I expected, and I was grateful to have a couch to collapse onto.

"I understand you're having a hard time dealing with what's happened to you."

I stared blankly at her. Was this the part where I was supposed to pour my soul out to her? Just because it was expected?

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked, pulling a tape recorder from her desk drawer.

"I would prefer it if you didn't record our sessions."

I was uneasy about it for several reasons. Partly my semi-celebrity status. Recordings were more damning than notes. And also because it made it all too real.

She looked as if she might protest, but then her lips met in a firm line and she nodded, placing it back in the desk before retrieving a yellow legal pad.

"Very well then."

She arched a brow at me as if questioning whether I would now take issue with her making notes.

I had intended to sit on the couch, but I laid down on it instead, pulling my feet up with me. On the outside I'm sure this behavior indicated some willingness on my part to surrender to the therapy process, but it was really a way to hide. Lying down, I could look up at the ceiling and not meet her

eyes.

“Shall we begin?” she asked.

“Actually, I just thought maybe you could give me something; write me a prescription. Valium, Zoloft, Prozac, anything.” I wanted something to numb me out, make things blur around the edges a bit, but I didn’t say that.

“Emily, now you know that’s not how I operate.”

Then I was going to have to find someone who did. With all the outcry at shrinks who doled out prescriptions like legal and politically-correct drug dealers, surely I could find someone to give me my fix of normal.

She sat patiently waiting, her pen poised, her attention rapt. I laid there for several minutes, the silence stretching between us. I kept waiting for her to say something. She kept waiting for me to say something. It was a battle of wills. I glanced occasionally at the clock on the wall as the minutes dragged on much more slowly than they ever had, even in the bad cell.

I wondered if I could use up my entire session like this. A complete hour of blissful silence. There was a time the prospect would have been deeply uncomfortable to me. I wouldn’t have been able to resist the urge, the need, to fill the silent spaces with words.

Finally I did speak, but it wasn’t because of discomfort with silence. I don’t know what it was. It was the office, her patience, the comfortable couch, and the almost hypnotic lulling of the ticking of the wall clock. It was as if a trance had come over me, some sort of psychological possession that made me intent to spill, if not my secrets, then my feelings about them.

“I don’t fit anymore,” I began. “I don’t know where to go from here. There is my life before, and my life now, and there’s no bridge between the two. There is no way for me to go back to who I was.”

“What about your life when you were where you were?” She avoided words like *captive* and *imprisoned*.

I stared up at the ceiling. I’m sure another five minutes passed before I spoke. “I can’t tell you about that. It’s private.”

“What can you tell me about?”

I shrugged.

She decided to switch to a more direct question and answer approach, something easier and requiring less explanation on my part.

“How many people had you?”

“One.”

“Male or female?”

“Male.”

“You want to go back to him.”

It wasn't a question. I bolted up from the couch and stared at her. Despite understandings of the victim/tormentor relationship, most people refused to accept someone wanting to go back after they were free.

“Yes,” I said.

“Emily, you've got your masters in psychology. You know what this is. You know it's not real.”

Was that true? It was one thing to pontificate about nameless strangers, it was another to experience it. It was difficult to imagine that in my position Dr. Blake would see things in the same way she saw them right now.

Of what use was it to struggle to keep everything the same? People changed. Did the catalyst matter? I shrugged again.

“Can you tell me anything of what happened while you were with him?”

I shook my head. No, I couldn't talk about that. It felt like betrayal. And I hated she knew that was why I couldn't talk about it. I could feel her pity from across the room.

Poor confused Emily.

“I'd really like some drugs,” I said.

It was nearing the end of the session, and no progress had been made. For a brief moment, I imagined myself lying in a tub full of warm water while a peaceful buzz flowed over me, the bathwater going pink like Valentine's Day from my blood. Her voice cut off the fantasy.

“I'll tell you what. I'm going to give you some homework. I would like for you to keep a journal this next week of as much as you feel you can share, and we'll discuss it during next week's session. If you can do that for me, then we'll talk about prescribing something.”

Blackmail.

It was the socially-approved equivalent of *blow me, and I'll get you some of the good stuff*. But I only nodded.

She was scribbling furiously on the yellow legal pad as I got up to leave. I had no idea what brilliant insights she felt she'd gleaned from my psyche in such a short period. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Since I had the car, I drove to the bookstore and picked out a journal. What the hell? I would go through my journal back in the Mercedes and copy the least revealing and private entries. I was sure enough emotion and trauma had gone into writing them.

I'd immediately rejected the notion of giving her the original journal. Besides being too personal, she might hand it over to the police as evidence. It was more violation than I could accept. I didn't need more strangers trying to peer into the most private parts of me.

By the time I got to the storage facility, the sun was going down. I sat in the Mercedes crying as I copied journal entries while listening to the music I'd missed having for weeks.

I'm not sure how much time passed sitting in the car. Although the storage facility wasn't on the main drag, I knew I took some measure of risk sitting there with the garage-style door open and the car running to play the music.

I copied several sections into the journal I'd just bought. It was heavily censored, but compared to today's session I was pouring my heart out. It would be enough to get me medicated, then I'd switch doctors.

I didn't need someone prying into my head, taking me apart bit by bit so they could put me back together again the way they felt I was supposed to be.

When I got home, I slipped the censored journal under the mattress of the bed in the guest room. Dinner was on the table, and my mother didn't say a word to me as she dipped food out onto my plate.

No, *Where have you been? Why didn't you call? I thought you'd driven into a lake or something.* She was gritting her teeth, but she was holding it in.

"Why the hell didn't you call? Your appointment was for an hour. You didn't think maybe I might need the car for something?"

Or not.

I didn't say anything. Instead, I picked up my plate and took it to the guest room and shut the door. I clicked on the TV with the remote and scooted back up on the bed leaning against the wicker headboard.

I knew I was behaving like a twelve-year-old, but I'd learned from experience it was better to steer clear of my mother when she was in this mode.

I pulled the journal out from under the bed again. It was light brown with Celtic knotwork. I traced a finger over the delicate design with one hand, as I absently shoveled chicken casserole into my mouth with the other. I'd filled about thirty pages of the book, surely enough for homework and drugs.

I Love Lucy was playing on low in the background. The canned laughter filtered over to me on the bed.

For a moment I thought about turning him in. What if? I was still angry

with him for throwing me away. Shouldn't he be punished for that? Even if it seemed like he was being punished for something quite different? He'd know the real reason.

I tried to imagine the look on his face when the squad cars pulled into his driveway. Would he be remorseful? Ashamed? Shocked? Accepting? Would he adjust to imprisonment as well as I had?

I wondered again if he believed freeing me had been a cruelty or a kindness, if he thought he'd done something wrong in taking me. I wondered if he regretted letting me go, and if he ever thought of me or dreamed of me as I did him. Surely my obsession couldn't now be greater than his.

Would I be in trouble for lying and obstructing justice? Would someone lock me in a cell no matter how brief the time, thinking it was okay because I hadn't told the truth to the all-powerful police arm of the government?

Or could I play the fear card? *He terrorized me too much to speak. I was afraid he'd come for me again.* I didn't know.

But although the revenge fantasy was appealing for a moment, it quickly faded, replaced with the same feeling I always got when thinking of him as anything but omnipotent. Anxiety.

The next day was different. I don't know if it was seeing Dr. Blake or if the reality of my freedom had finally sunk in, but I started to get things together. I looked for an apartment, a small one. I had enough in the bank to see me through a year maybe while I tried to figure out what to do with the rest of my life.

I would adjust and be okay. I'd find my place in the world again, and this would just be something I'd experienced, but not something that had changed the core of who I was. I could be cured. I'd go through all the standard trauma responses, and then at the end of it I would be a *survivor*.

I could be unbrainwashed. It would require new conditioning, but it could be done. I could be free of him forever, mentally as well as physically.

It wasn't minor fame that gave me the money to take care of myself now, but extreme responsibility with my finances. I'd always been a saver instead of a spender. It was part of why this step scared me.

But I had to act. Otherwise, I was going to wither away and die in my parents' house in the creepy room with the white wicker furniture and the paper border wisteria dripping down from the edges of the ceiling.

I was too cowardly to kill myself, though I'd had fleeting fantasies. My master had thrown me out with finality, and my life with him was over. The

only thing left to do was act.

To anyone observing this tragedy, I was a brave little soldier. Emily Vargas, the inspiration to kidnapped women everywhere. Such strength to so quickly begin putting the pieces of her life back together after all the horrors she must have suffered spending months at the hands of a madman.

I'd been invited already on a few talk shows to share my story, but I'd declined. No one was getting an exclusive. No one was getting the story period.

Everything seemed normal on the outside. But no one was there to hear me wake up crying in the middle of the night, reaching out for the comfort of a man's body that wasn't there. I dreamed only of him. Nothing else. There seemed to be nothing I could do to purge him from the darkest corners of my mind.

Thanksgiving came. Almost four weeks away from him and I couldn't even begin to not want him. I went to my parents' house for the obligatory turkey dinner. It was always a big deal. My cousins and uncles and aunts, my parents. My remaining set of grandparents on my dad's side. And of course friends, including Bobby White, the guy who'd grown up two houses down from me and had always had a crush.

Before being taken, I'd finally consented to one date with him. *Just to see*, as he'd said. He was seated at the main table directly across from me, staring at me over the large shiny basted turkey that looked like it should be in a food magazine.

I looked down at my plate. I couldn't stand to see the mixture of pity and self-absorbed disappointment that his one shot with me was probably gone for good.

My mom, as always, was the spokesperson for Thanksgiving. Granddad was the patriarch, but both he and Dad were men of few words, and mom had never had that problem. Like me. Or like I'd once been. I stared at my plate, tracing the filigree pattern around the edges with my finger, trying not to hear her as she said what she was thankful for, my safe return.

Various family members exclaimed their agreement, and I never felt so distant from them. Who were these people? I was a stranger here. We shared blood but not much else, and I wondered why we continued to get together every year like this. Like some bizarre mockery of the family unit.

Dinner went quickly and then there was pumpkin pie. I took my pie on a paper plate and went to sit on the couch in the living room. Several family

members attempted polite conversation that skirted delicately around the facts of my absence. It was as if I'd been away at Summer Camp.

Four weeks before, every one of these people had been wearing black and attending my funeral, and now, here we were as if none of it had happened. The denial seemed to stretch out to all my family, to all I knew. Or thought I knew.

I sat with the paper plate propped on my knees as their voices turned into one big white noise machine. I felt the couch dip beside me but kept my focus on the pie. If I didn't acknowledge whoever it was, maybe they would go away.

Or at least just be fucking quiet.

"You've got more whipped cream than pie," Bobby said.

I glanced over to see him sitting beside me, his paper plate propped carefully on his lap mirroring mine, except for the modest amount of whipped cream, as if indulging in more would be a mortal sin.

"Yeah," I said and looked back at it.

I'd tried begging out of Thanksgiving dinner, telling my mother it was too much, too soon. It was partly true. It was too much, but I didn't think a timetable made a difference in the grand scheme of things. It would still be too much five years from now. I'd been irrevocably changed, and no one wanted to accept it, not even me.

They all wanted to believe with enough therapy and enough time, my world would be lovely again. I'd be their golden girl again, but despite my brief forays into fantasy land, I knew it wasn't true.

Mom had insisted I come. Everybody would feel bad if I wasn't there. And we wouldn't want that. I'd been avoiding them all for weeks. They missed me. Etc. etc. I'd caved because you always caved with my mother if you knew what was good for you. She wouldn't leave you alone to make a decision. She'd just harp until she got the answer she wanted. I regretted giving it now.

Most of the family was crowded in the other room around the new giant screen plasma television watching football. None of them were football fans, and most of them knew nothing about the game. They sat and watched football because it was what families did on Thanksgiving, or what they thought they were supposed to do.

We were all doing what we were supposed to do, and I wondered if even one of us was doing what he wanted to do. I glanced up to see Bobby staring

at me intently. Well, one person was doing what they wanted to do.

Good for Bobby.

“Are you going to be okay?” he said.

“Yeah,” I lied.

Part of me hated him right then. Either he was too clueless to understand the nature of my captivity made it completely inappropriate for him to bring it up, or worse, he was hoping to score points as the knight in shining armor who comforted me. I couldn't deal with being a pawn in his fantasy right then.

He reached out and put his hand over mine. I jerked away and scooted to the far end of the couch. I couldn't stand for anyone to touch me. Or at least I couldn't stand for anyone but one person to touch me.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “Jeez Emmie, that fucking bastard fucked you up good, didn't he?”

“Don't say that!” I was shocked by the vehemence of my voice.

“Aw, hell. You know I didn't mean anything against you. I just wish I could get him alone in a room, you know?”

I couldn't meet his eyes because I knew he'd see the anger boiling just beneath the surface. There was a chance he'd think the anger was directed at my captor. But there was a chance, however small, that he wouldn't.

“Emmie?”

“Yeah,” I said, acknowledging his empty threat toward my master.

I don't know why I was angry. Bobby wouldn't have a shot in a room alone with him. I knew I hadn't just built my captor up in my mind as physically stronger than he was because of how helpless he'd made me.

I'd seen his well-muscled body many times, felt his weight on me, the strength of his grip. I knew. He'd rip Bobby to pieces, and I couldn't decide whether that idea upset me or not. It upset me a lot less than the idea of Bobby hurting *him*.

“Alright, well, um . . . I need to really get going. But if you ever need somebody to talk to, you know where I am, yeah?” He was edging toward the door.

“Yeah.”

He looked at me another long moment before turning and walking off with his empty paper plate. His shoulders slumped. I had been right. He'd had a picture in his head about how his love would heal me or some other similar romantic bullshit. He'd be my rescuer. But what if I no longer wanted

to be rescued?

One by one family members and friends trickled into the room to have a word with me, to tell me how much they'd missed me, how glad they were I was safe. If I needed anything . . . By the time they'd all paraded through, I was crying and couldn't stop. I waited until they left, and then I got in my car and went home.

My mother had seen me upset and seemed to regret persuading me to come. I'm not sure if it was because some perfect, mythic Thanksgiving was ruined or she really felt bad. We never spoke of it.

That week I put in resumes at several places. My publisher called, but I had no intention to continue writing, at least not self-help books. "Maybe a memoir," they said. I said, "Maybe," but didn't mean it. I was done. It was time to move on to something else.

The day of my next appointment with Dr. Blake, I sat in my apartment looking at all my stuff. The bookshelves with my books lining them, a couple bags of fan mail that had piled up while I'd been away. This was freedom. This was what I wanted, what I'd yearned for, for months. Or at least until I knew it wasn't possible and I'd given up the hope.

I didn't think I could ever do public speaking again. I wasn't sure if I could write, at least not that sort of book anymore, the kind that changed people's lives for the better and made them go after their goals and believe in themselves. All of it now seemed like pat phrases and cheap pop psychology. How had I taken my knowledge and boiled it down to such black-and-white simplicity?

Maybe I would go into research like I'd originally planned. Don a lab coat and stay out of the spotlight. As I rode the elevator up to the fifth floor for my session, I held out the fragile hope everything hadn't ended for me.

"You look a bit better this week. I take it the journaling was helpful? Cathartic maybe?"

I nodded, a nonverbal lie. I looked better because I was employing the *fake it til you make it* technique, acting as if I were fine in the vain hope it would make it so.

I handed her the journal and stretched out on the couch while she flipped through it.

"This is more than I expected. I'm very pleased." She said it as if I were a dog eager for a biscuit.

I didn't care one way or the other about her approval, but I smiled

anyway. It was easier to just go along.

If I went along and cooperated, she'd write me a prescription at the end of the session, and hopefully a combination of drugs and life itself would make me free of him. Happy.

I waited while she read and felt suddenly self-conscious. Though I hadn't revealed everything, or even the most graphic things that had happened during my enslavement, it was enough. It was far more intimate a portrait of those days than I would share with anyone who wasn't offering drugs to numb it all down to a pleasant fuzziness.

Finally, she closed the journal and looked up. "Thank you for sharing this with me. Would you like to tell me why it's all written in third person, though?"

I don't know why I said it, I just blurted the first thing that came into my head. "It's not about me. It's just a story."

I was less shocked at having said it, and more shocked that it was true.

I had dissociated. Every sexual encounter I'd written as if it had happened to someone else.

I closed my eyes and went back, remembering, seeing his eyes, his hands on my body, not someone else's. I expected to feel revulsion, fear, panic, disgust, but what I felt instead was much more disturbing. I felt the heat surge between my legs, the wetness of my panties, and full-on arousal.

I was barely there through the rest of the session, on autopilot, responding as the doctor expected, until the session was over and it was time to write a prescription. She scribbled something on the prescription pad and handed me the journal, telling me to keep up the good work and she'd see me next week.

I stopped off at the bathroom on the way out, ashamed of my physical reaction in the doctor's office and what I was about to do, but I needed release. I locked the door behind me and unzipped my pants, letting them fall in a whisper to the floor. I leaned forward against the door, one hand pressed against the cold metal, anchoring me as I brought myself to orgasm with the other.

His face was in my mind as I came, stifling a moan. I pulled my pants back up, my fingers trembling as I buttoned them. I washed my hands in the sink. The soap smelled like the soap from my elementary school. I didn't look at my face in the mirror. I didn't want to see my eyes.

After getting my prescription filled, I wandered through the city. I left my car in the parking garage and took a cab. Before I knew where I'd asked the

driver to take me, I was sitting in front of the Atlanta Zoo.

I paid the fare and shoved the prescription bottle into my bag. I'd expressed, not primarily depression, but anxiety in Dr. Blake's office, a skittish jumpiness around loud noises, too many people, social situations.

And the truth was, I'd so often stayed in the house watching television because going out made me nervous. I'd managed to have a burst of courage for about a week to get out of my parents' house, but it was coming quickly to an end.

And so I had a bottle containing a two-week supply of Xanax. Not quite Valium, but who's complaining? My hand gripped the bottle nestled in my purse for comfort, and I went to the zoo.

I stopped off at one of the little cafeterias and had lunch, fattening greasy fried food. Chicken, potato salad, baked beans. Staples of the south. Comfort food. I wandered, observing the animals in their cages.

I hadn't been to the zoo as an adult. It had always bothered me watching animals in cages like a creepy voyeur while acting like it was good clean fun. But I could identify with their plight now, and I didn't feel nearly as bad for them as I would have at one time.

None of them seemed distressed. I couldn't quite believe they didn't know what was going on, but at the same time, they seemed okay with it. Safe. Secure. Knowing they were taken care of, that they didn't have to face the big bad world and participate in the cruel dance for survival as others of their kind did.

Some of them were lying around; some of them were playing and doing goofy antics for the crowds that had gathered, especially the bears and monkeys. They always tended to perform.

A large group of children on a school field trip rushed to the monkey cage near where I stood looking on. I jumped and moved out of the way, unable to deal with the sudden noise and flutter of activity. Each of the children had a brightly-colored balloon tied around his or her wrist. A woman about my age shouted to quiet them.

"Blue balloons need to go with Miss Patti to *The Wild Planet Cafe* for lunch. Red and yellow balloons stay where you are."

More children ran up then with green balloons and a haggard Miss Patti for the shift change. I slipped into a man-made cave nearby that was air-conditioned and had videos. My pulse raced as my anxiety crept higher. They were only children, but it felt like a close brush with death.

I focused on one of the screens to distract myself, my hand skimming over the surface to find a knob to turn up the volume. The video showed a crowd of angry PETA members protesting the cruelty of keeping animals in cages at the zoo. Painted signs and morally outraged faces filled the screen.

A voice-over began to play. "In our modern age, some are concerned about the practice of keeping animals caged. Although this is a valid concern, unfortunately once an animal has lived in captivity for so long, it's more cruel to release them back into the wild. They no longer have the survival skills. This is more true for those born into captivity, but is also true for adult animals who haven't always been with us."

I glanced back over at the monkey cages, and one of the chimpanzees showed his teeth to me. It looked like a smile, and I wasn't sure if I was trying to give him human characteristics or if it really was an expression of happiness. Then he screeched a couple of times and went off to play with the others.

I waited for the children to move on to the next exhibit, and when there was a clear path I went to a less crowded area. I stood on a bridge with dozens of dispensers of duck food you could get at a quarter a pop. I gripped the railing and gazed into the dark water, taking slow, measured breaths.

Was this how it would always be? Such anxiety and agitation out in the open air? Would I add agoraphobia to the ever-growing list? I dug through my purse for the pill bottle. My body shook as I deposited a pill into my hand. I was about to pop it into my mouth when I stopped and stared at it.

Then for no reason I can explain, I dropped the little oval lie into the lake. A duck went for it but then swam away. My hand tilted slowly until the rest of the lies tumbled out and then dropped like tiny pebbles into the water. A crowd of ducks swam over, pecking at the pills, then left them swirling, squawking and upset they'd been tricked. I knew the feeling.

I dug in my pocket for a quarter and cranked the machine where the duck food was. The ducks deserved to have what they wanted and so did I. It no longer mattered to me what anyone else expected. Like my master, I had become separated from society.

I wasn't a part anymore, and the old rules no longer applied. They only applied if I wanted to be a part, and I found that I didn't. Of what use would a life based on a past reality be? I wasn't the same woman anymore, and I no longer wanted to be free.

I regretted now digging up the coffin the month before. Emily Vargas

should have stayed buried. I sprinkled the duck food into the water and went to get the Mercedes.

TWELVE

I knew now why I'd written reverse directions. I'd never believed I would get lost. I'd always known I was going back. I just wanted a final taste of the freedom on the other side, like a bride intent on one last hoorah before her wedding day.

I wrote and mailed a letter to my parents knowing they'd never understand, but wishing somehow they could.

I felt a sense of smugness knowing the feds would be picking apart Nebraska looking for me, if they even made the attempt. Hopefully, crazy-induced or not, my letter would be seen as an insistence that they just let me be. It had been wrong to go back and give them false hope.

In my defense, I hadn't done it on purpose. I'd believed for small moments at a time that there was hope. But the only thing I longed for was to be back in his arms again, and I knew that would never change.

Maybe the doctor could cure me. I could be doped up on drugs and reconditioned in an office where I was told over and over again it wasn't my fault. That was the thing of it though, while I'd been stupid in leaving my drink unattended, I'd never believed I deserved it. I knew being captured wasn't my fault.

I hadn't thought I was bad. It could have been because he didn't have words at his disposal to break me down in that way. Maybe if he'd had speech and told me over and over it was my fault, I would have believed it. But that hadn't happened. I just craved that silent strength and power. I couldn't stop myself.

I didn't care how I'd gotten to this desire, only that I was here. He was

the one thing in my life that made any kind of sense, and I didn't know his name. I knew even if he took me back, I would probably never know his name. Only *Master*.

I pulled up to the house and turned off the ignition. I was wearing clothes he'd given me, the journal and CD's clutched tightly in my hands. I knocked on the door and waited.

Was he even home? I'd persisted in the odd belief that he sat around all the time watching me on the video monitors, as if in doing so he was equally enslaved to me.

It was a beautiful day, one of those rare unseasonably warm days the south sometimes gets in December.

The sun was shining, the birds chirping, a light warm breeze blowing, and yet it felt stifling. Too open. Unsafe. Finally, the door opened.

Somehow I'd imagined he'd fall apart without me. He'd regret releasing me and be glad to have me back. But there was nothing disheveled or unkempt about his appearance. No hair out of place, and he was well-dressed. As always.

He regarded me with that arrogant coldness that somehow hadn't seemed so cold when I'd been on the other side of that door. And suddenly I wasn't so sure I had a place here anymore.

"Master, please . . ."

He shut the door and locked it. I banged on the door for at least twenty minutes but nothing came of it. I slid to the ground on the massive porch and leaned against the heavy dark-stained wood. Had he really gotten bored with me?

He was just done? It was over because he said it was? I knew I should have gotten back in the car and gone home. I could intercept the letter when it arrived at my parents' house and burn it. No one ever had to know any of this. I could go back to my therapy appointments and resume their plans for me. To get better. To recover. To survive.

I was angry he would turn me away like this. I should turn him in if he wouldn't take me back, but I still couldn't do it.

My knuckles were bleeding. The last time they'd bled, I'd been begging to be set free. I let out a hysterical peal of laughter. A few minutes passed, and the door opened a few inches. Before I could get up, it was shut and locked again. I looked down. A water bottle, soft washcloth, ointment, and bandages for my hands.

Now I knew the game. I could see no reason he would help me if he really had lost interest. He'd never been that cruel. As with everything, the choice was up to me.

However sick, twisted, or perverse it was, this was the most free choice I'd ever been given. I'd been completely safe, not in any way dependent upon him, and yet, here I was a month later, begging on his doorstep like some stray to be taken in.

A month out in the world and all I had to show for it was a lot of mindless television and a few visits to the shrink's office. I carefully poured half the bottle of water onto the cloth. I gritted my teeth as I cleaned the torn skin on my knuckles. Then came the soothing aloe gel and the bandages. I drank the rest of the water and waited.

I reread my journal, the original. The other one, the sanitized copy, was still in the car. Here it was, every single thing he'd done to me and every single thing I'd submitted to so he wouldn't put me back in the bad cell. Emotions, feelings, degrading sexual acts.

I knew how I was supposed to react, but I couldn't call forth those feelings. Reading each scene described in vivid detail like erotica, I could feel the wetness pooling between my legs.

A couple of hours passed. I thought about knocking again, but my hands hurt too much. Besides, I had no doubt he knew I was out here still. If I kept banging, he might keep me locked out longer.

I carried on with the persistent belief that he'd open the door and let me back in, that this was the final test. I just had to prove my worthiness.

Finally the door opened, and he slipped a bowl of chicken noodle soup, crackers, and another bottled water outside before closing the door and locking me out again. I couldn't stop the smile that spread over my face. God, I'd completely lost my mind. I crumbled the crackers into the soup and ate. Everything was turning around on me. The soup was comforting again because it meant hope. He was engaging with me.

That night clouds rolled in, and it started to rain. Thunder rumbled, and lightning flashed across the sky. The winds picked up and started to blow rainwater onto the porch.

The night and the rain brought a dip in temperature; it wasn't quite cold, but it wasn't comfortable anymore. I shivered and huddled into the corner of the porch, farthest from the path of the blowing rain.

I stared longingly at the Mercedes sitting a few feet away, unlocked. I

could get inside and turn on the heater and lie curled on the back seat until the gas tank ran dry. But I didn't want to be farther away from him, in case he let me in.

Around midnight the door opened again, and pillows and heavy blankets were tossed out.

I moved back to the corner of the porch and huddled in the blankets until I fell asleep. When morning came, there was a new chill on the air, weather much more befitting of December. I snuggled deeper into the wool fabric, wondering if he'd let me freeze to death on his porch.

Soon, strong arms scooped me up and carried me into the house. He sat me down on the couch in the room we'd been in that last day, and left. He returned several minutes later with fresh clothes from the closet of the good cell.

I held them uncertainly.

He crossed his arms over his chest and raised a brow at me. I hesitated for just a moment. Being free for weeks had caused bits of my modesty to come back, but my desire to stay with him, whatever the cost, overcame that false wall I'd re-erected around myself.

I peeled the old, still slightly damp, clothing from my body. I was aware of the consuming way he stared at me, as if assessing whether I was worth keeping, as if I were a slave up at auction. If he let me stay, it might be a long-term investment.

I was oddly proud of myself for maintaining the shaving and how it displayed my obedience to him even from a distance. I put the other clothes on and then sat on the couch, looking up at him expectantly.

Finally, he signed. *Why are you here? I told you to go. I released you.*

"I don't want to be released. I want to stay."

It's wrong to keep you here.

"It's more wrong to set me free! Don't you see what you've done to me?"

He shook his head and crossed the room to take my arm. His grip was punishing, much more rough than he normally handled me, unless we were in the dungeon and he was whipping me for his sexual gratification.

He led me to the door, and I knew he was throwing me out for good. If he managed to get me outside, that was it. I knew he'd let me die on the porch from exposure or starvation before he'd ever open the door to me again.

I tried to pull away from him, tears streaming down my cheeks. "Master, please don't do this."

He dragged me down the hallway, ignoring my pleas. Finally, I got angry. Rage like I'd felt at the cemetery as I'd dug down through six feet of earth as if I could bring back something that was long gone.

"NO!" I jerked free of him. It wasn't that I was stronger or had suddenly developed superpowers. It was that the vehemence and determination had surprised him enough to cause him to loosen his grip.

I backed further into the house, grabbing a candlestick that was sitting on a table in the entryway. An antique candlestick that probably cost more than I'd made in a month back when I'd been *Emily Vargas, self-help guru*.

He smiled at me, his eyes alight with genuine amusement. We both knew I couldn't overpower him, even with a weapon. He could easily disarm me and throw me outside. Still, he stood back, his arms crossed again over his chest, waiting to see what I'd do. I'd just become interesting to him again.

Good for me.

"Just fucking listen to me!" My voice was stronger than it had ever been with him. I had nothing left to lose.

I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I was only afraid of being without him.

I kept the candlestick raised. "Don't you see how fucked up this is? You think it's wrong to keep me? Well you should have thought about that shit before you took me! I'm your responsibility now. You created me. You made me this way. This is your fucking mess. If you suddenly care about morality, then don't make me go. Let me stay. I'll be your slave. I'll be your whore. I'll never fight you. I won't disobey. Whatever you want, just don't make me go back. Please. I can't live in that world anymore. You know it's true. I just want to be yours."

Are you finished?

I nodded, deflated. He left me standing in the entryway, and when he returned he held the highest object of fear. A knife. He advanced, but I didn't back away.

He gripped me by the throat and held me against the wall, the knife poised to strike. The cool blade was pressed underneath my chin. His eyes were hard and unrelenting.

"I don't care. Do it. Kill me or keep me, but don't you fucking dare throw me away again." Then I added, "Please."

I didn't flinch or look away from his eyes. Finally, he flung the knife away and kissed me. His hands gripped my wrists tightly as he held them against the wall. His tongue delved deeper into my mouth, and I opened to

him and submitted everything.

Then he stepped back from me and unzipped his pants before pushing me to my knees in front of him. I took his cock into my mouth without hesitation, sucking him until he came, and I swallowed.

Adrenaline buzzed through me like a living thing. I stayed on my knees at his feet looking up at him, waiting for his next order.

You're going to be punished.

“For what?” For leaving him when he'd forced me to? For staying away so long? For coming back and making him face himself? The monster he was and the pitiable creature he'd turned me into.

For the disrespectful way you just spoke to me. If you stay, the rules aren't changing.

I nodded, a hard lump forming in my throat. “Three weeks?” I asked. My voice was so small again.

It was almost as long as I'd been free. Three weeks was an unthinkable amount of time to spend in the bad cell.

You could leave.

I shook my head. It was only three weeks out of my entire life. I could make it.

“Do you still want me?”

If I didn't, you wouldn't have made it through the door.

I took his outstretched hand and followed him.

When we reached the cell, something passed between us. Perhaps it was the close bond we'd formed over the months coming back in full force, but it was like a telepathic link between us, and as I looked into his eyes, I could see the truth.

He'd never been sorry for taking me. He still wasn't sorry. Not for one thing he'd done. It had been for his own sadistic pleasure that he'd made me make the choice.

Just as he'd forced me to choose to let him rape me or leave me in the cell forever. Just like he'd forced me to accept the riding crop, the whip, the cane, and everything else he'd ever introduced.

I'd just turned my back on any chance at freedom because he was never letting me go now. He smiled when he saw the realization on my face, and he turned to leave, the door sealing shut with deafening finality.

I had been free and I'd walked right back into my cage. I'd begged and fought to be let in, and the entire time I'd been playing his game exactly the

way he wanted it played. I hadn't convinced him to keep me. He'd always intended on me coming back to him. Just one more damning choice.

What the hell had I done? Was I truly this far gone? No textbook in existence could have prepared me for what I'd experienced.

I sat in the empty cell trying to think if the truth of it made a difference. Would I have come back if I'd been sure this was what he was doing?

The answer remained the same. Yes. No matter how desperately I wanted to, I couldn't bring myself to hate him.

But it wasn't love either. What we shared was deeper than love. It was a mad and unyielding obsession, and it was mutual. And the flames from it would likely kill one of us some day. Probably me. I couldn't bring myself to care. I'd rather have this intensity with him than a hundred years of mediocrity with another.

I moved to my corner and waited. Minutes later the door opened as I knew it would, as if I'd called out to him with my mind to tell him I was sitting where I was supposed to be. But I knew the truth. His eyes had probably been glued to the video monitors from the moment he'd locked me back in here. He brought in my bathing supplies and fresh clothes.

"I'm on my period."

I thought he might give me something, instead of making me go around naked, but he smiled and took the vile plain clothing away.

There was a time I would have questioned his smile, but our minds had worked to move in sync, thinking each other's thoughts before the other had them. It was fitting that I should be reduced to this animalistic state once again. I'd been away too long in freedom, the ability to come and go as I pleased, to have privacy, to have modesty.

Now it was being stripped away from me all at once. But I don't think he fully understood. He may have believed he knew, but he couldn't possibly know what he'd unleashed within me. I was only free with him. He was the first person who'd seen me in every state imaginable and still wanted me. I'd never been so bare with anyone else.

I bathed and left my clothing by the door and went to sleep in my corner. It was still daylight I knew, early in the day in fact, but I needed a nap.

As I drifted off, I tried not to think about how time would all bleed together, the unsettling lack of knowledge about what day it was or what time it was, not knowing if the sun was in the sky or if it was the dead of night.

I dreamed of the good cell and the scented candles, the studio and old

ballet records, the incense and rows upon rows of books. I dreamed of his face, his hands on my skin, his cock buried deep inside me while my unresisting body accepted each inch of him.

When my period was over, he brought me fresh clothes again. I didn't try to fight or tempt him. I put them on and waited out my time. I didn't want to make it four weeks.

Slowly the days were marked off. The chicken noodle soup came three times a day until I couldn't stand the sight of it, until once again it was the vile punishment it had been intended as.

Finally, the three weeks were up, and he stepped into my cell. My heart thrummed with anticipation. I had sworn to myself I'd never give him any reason to lock me in the cell for three weeks, and I had broken that vow. Now I swore I would never be in the cell for four. I would never disobey or disrespect him again.

Even as I thought it, I knew it wasn't true. I wondered how long it would be before I did something to send me back. I wondered if one day I'd be in the cell so long I'd lose my mind or forget what his face looked like. And I found that the second would be the worse punishment. I could handle being crazy if I could still look at him.

He held the blindfold out, and I stepped forward, allowing him to cover my eyes with the soft black fabric. I wondered if he'd ever let me roam the house freely, if it was something I could eventually earn. I would work up the nerve to ask him that someday, but not today.

Today, I allowed him to lead me out of the cell. My heart rate quickened as I heard the key code being punched in, first at the bad cell, and then at the door he'd brought me to. When he removed the blindfold, I knew this was where I'd find myself today.

The dungeon.

He approached me, but then backed away. Normally he'd done what he wanted, no communication but touch passing between us. He held my gaze, and then he signed.

Strip, slowly.

I'd been his willing toy for so many months, allowing him to play with me however he saw fit. I hadn't seen myself as an active participant, not until now, when language finally broached our world together.

My fingers shook as I reached for the buttons of my top and undid them, slowly swaying to music I heard only in my head. Music he'd given me that

I'd never heard until him. I stood naked, watching, waiting for his next command.

Do you want to be whipped?

The throbbing between my legs intensified as if he'd pushed a button. "Yes, Master."

I looked down, suddenly shy and unsure. The fucked-up thing was that I did want him to whip me. I wanted him to do with me whatever would please him.

In two quick strides, he was in front of me. He gripped my chin painfully and forced me to meet his eyes. They were so stormy I couldn't read the emotion in them. I felt for once the communication that had always flowed between us in silence had been shut down, broken through a more lazy form of speech.

You know I can't talk to you if you don't look at me.

"I'm sorry. It's just so . . . strange. I . . . I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

He must have seen the fear in my eyes, that I was going back to be punished again for such a small offense.

I'm not putting you back in the cell, as long as you try to obey. You know that. I know you didn't do it on purpose. It is strange.

I smiled and he smiled back. It was the smile that didn't scare me, the one that made me feel inexplicably safe despite everything. He led me to the velvet bed and positioned me on my knees, locking the chains around my ankles. My stomach tightened as he scanned the row of whips and floggers before settling on one.

He was behind me now and everything felt normal again without words in the way. The whip cracked across my back, the pain searing deeper than I remembered, but it felt like something, and it was immeasurably better than the nothingness I'd felt when I was free and when I'd been in the bad cell.

He stopped when he drew blood, then his cock was inside me, pounding into me so hard I could barely catch my breath. I felt my muscles contract around him, and then wave after wave of mindless pleasure crested over me as I let the tears flow freely down my face.

His hands skimmed across my flesh, cupping my breasts, stroking my back where the blood was slowly pooling. His touch was like heroin in my veins, and I was a grateful addict.

EPILOGUE

Doctor Blake sat in her office with the worn and well-read letter clutched tightly in her aging hand. Donna Vargas sat across from her, blissfully calm in a drug-induced haze. The letter had arrived that morning. Mrs. Vargas had used up her old prescription and was there for more.

If not for the strong effects of the still-potent drugs, Mrs. Vargas would no doubt have blamed Doctor Blake, and Doctor Blake would have felt it well-deserved. She'd known the state the daughter, Emily, had been in, how precarious it was.

She stared at the words scrawled on the paper, not really seeing them. The script in Emily's handwriting was obviously rushed, written in those last moments before she became just another statistic of one sort or another.

Like many doctors, she blamed herself. Knowing what she'd known, why hadn't she just broken her own damned rule and given the poor girl drugs the first week when she'd asked for them? Anything that would make her stable enough not to do this. If only she'd had more time with her; they'd barely begun her therapy.

She read the letter again. It was probably the fifth time she'd read it, but she knew even if she'd read it a hundred times, Mrs. Vargas would have read it more:

I KNOW this letter will come as a shock, but please try to understand. I should have stayed buried. The moment I saw my name on the tombstone, I should

have understood it was true.

I'm dead to you, and you were right to bury me. At first I was angry about it, but now I understand. I understand the need to erase me, and that's okay.

My only regret is that I came home. I don't think there is any way I can explain this to make it easier on you, but I'll try. You see, I've never been free. Not one day of my life. I've always given in to the wants and needs of those around me. My confidence has always been a social mask and my success as a motivational speaker was because my mask was just so damn convincing. At times, even to me.

But I've never followed my own will. What I wanted. It was always what you guys wanted. Or what society wanted. Or what college wanted. Or what anyone else who wasn't me and came into my life wanted. I had almost fallen for it again. I almost did what you all wanted.

I almost took my pills like a good little girl, had my cathartic trauma moment, and put the pieces of my world back together so everyone could say how brave and good I was. Almost. But I couldn't.

As I write this letter I can't decide whether I'm acting from strength or weakness, but I know that I'm acting for the first time from my own will. Yes, I know that's hard to accept. It wouldn't be my will if that monster hadn't taken me like he had, right?

You likely believe he's bent and twisted me to his liking, and now I can't get out of that mold. Perhaps. But I've been free for a month, and it sure as fuck doesn't feel like freedom, just a larger cage.

I don't see how pretending I'm free solves anything. I didn't want to leave him. I know. Stockholm Syndrome. Blah blah blah. I know. I know it's true, but I wasn't prepared for what it would mean for me. You see, I don't feel crazy. So I wonder who came up with these arbitrary labels. Who gets to decide?

Am I to be sane and miserable in a world of somebody else's creation or am I to be crazy, and in my own strange way, free?

He made me leave him. I cried and begged not to go, but ultimately I went because it was what he wanted. But this is the one order from him I just can't obey.

I suppose I could have done what I plan to do now, stayed and waited however long it took until he accepted me back. Until whatever guilt complex he may have developed, abated. Or until I passed whatever test he was

giving.

But I was weak and came home to say my goodbyes. I know that probably didn't feel like goodbye. I was in denial for awhile that it was. And I'm sure that seeing the ghost of your daughter one more time wasn't as satisfying as anyone thought it might have been. But that's all that's left. A ghost of your daughter.

Even if you somehow miraculously found me, that hollowed-out empty shell would be all that would be left. I can't be that girl anymore. Still, I don't want you to worry, and at the same time I know it's ridiculous to expect you not to.

As for the man who has me, he's never put me in any physical harm. He's never done anything in all the months I've been with him that made me feel like my life was about to end or that I'd need hospitalization. It's never been like that between us.

I know it's impossible to comprehend or believe, but I feel safe with him. By the end of the second month, I think I was happy. I understand it's not love, and that's the part of me that thinks maybe I'm not crazy, if I can know that much.

But I know I need him. And I hope he needs me. What we have is fucked up and twisted, but it serves a need. I know I've always been wired differently. He only brought to the surface what was already there.

I'm not saying I'm glad it happened the way it did or that I believe it's somehow morally okay. But he's not cruel as you might imagine, and he's never lost control with me in all the time he's had me.

I'm sorry I couldn't play the role you needed me to play. I'm sorry I couldn't go to therapy and have the approved victim response and recover. I know you'll never be able to understand me making this choice. I know you'll all believe it was a sick mind that led me to it, that no person in their right mind would do what I've done. Maybe that's the truth of it.

Or maybe I'm just stronger than you.

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THE MAGIAME MAKER

KITTY THOMAS



Burlesque Press

The Game Maker
Kitty Thomas
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THE GAME MAKER

ONE

The phone in my pocket has stopped ringing by the time I manage to unlock the door and stumble into my apartment, kicking the door shut behind me. In my arms are my last bags of groceries. I sit them on the floor and dig out my phone.

One new voicemail.

I recognize the number of the missed call. It's Carolyn, my landlady. A pile of eviction notices in an array of neon colors is stacked neatly on my kitchen countertop. I should have thrown them away, but I'm a masochist like that.

I press the speakerphone button and dial in to my voicemail where the robotic voice helpfully announces that I have *one. new. message.* I love how each word is its own sentence. I take a deep breath and press one to listen.

“Kate, I need you out of the apartment by the end of the week. I've already got someone who wants to move in. I'm very sorry about your situation, but you have to find other arrangements. I don't want to have you forcibly removed; please don't make me the bad guy here.”

I slide to the floor and break down and cry. How did this happen to me? I once heard that nobody ends up truly homeless unless they have a drug problem or a mental illness. Well, let me just say, that is a big fat lie. I have no addictions and am the most put-together person I know. And yet, here I am.

It's hard to explain how someone becomes this isolated. Especially in a city of millions. A few years ago, fresh out of college and mourning the death of my parents—car crash—I decided to move to the city and put my

advertising degree to good use. I have a few friends back home, but they're casual acquaintances—not the kind of people I can ask for help.

And here in the city? I'm a workaholic. I was working in an agency with far more men than women. What few friendships I have, again, are shallow and not a *hey, can I crash at your place* sort of situation. And I'm the best goddamned advertising exec in a sixty mile radius. I didn't lose my job because I was irresponsible or bad at it.

I lost my job because of Andrew, my boss. Because I made the mistake of dating him and then breaking up with him. The sex was fucking awful. I would rather be single for the rest of my life than suffer through shitty sex with a man who doesn't know which end of his dick does what. Or where my clit is.

You learn so many useless things in school, but where to find the clit is probably the most useful knowledge many men could gain for practical life use. Followed by how to stroke it, tease it, lick it. Alas, Andrew missed that nonexistent day of class at Shit-you'll-actually-use school.

When he fired me, I told him to go fuck himself, if he could figure out how, and flounced off in a huff. I thought it would be easy with my reputation to find a new job, but Andrew beat me to it. I'm pretty much blacklisted in this city. I thought, no problem, I can move. I have no attachments here. But the economy isn't the greatest, and I can't give Andrew as a reference, so all that hard work and reputation I built? Gone.

And now I'm out of time. Out of savings. I'm going to be out on the street in five days if I don't figure something out.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hands and struggle to stand. I am not that girl—the one who crumples and cries at every little struggle—the one who needs other people to fix her problems. I will figure something out. But I've tried. I've tried jobs outside of my industry. I've tried jobs that are “beneath me”. Nobody is hiring, and the few places that are I'm overqualified for, or the pay is so low I'd still be homeless with the cost of living here.

I put the groceries away, get dressed up in a little black dress, and go out. Even though I only have five more days in this apartment I have to get out. Half an hour later, I find myself sitting at a bar. Such a stereotype. Except I'm sitting at the bar of an extremely nice restaurant. To be honest, I'm surprised they even let me in here. You have to have a reservation, but they do have a bar, and I guess I just looked like I knew where I was going, and nobody stopped me.

I'm not sure why I'm here. Is this some last ditch effort to somehow land a man who can keep me off the street? Is this the level of pathetic desperation I've reached?

I'm on my third gin and tonic when I spot a woman at the other end of the bar who I am nearly a hundred percent sure is an escort. I don't know why I'm so sure about this, but there's something about her that screams *regularly paid for sex*. Hey, I'm not judging.

An escort.

I roll that thought around in my mind for a moment. It's the one industry I haven't sought work in. But wouldn't it be better than homelessness? I can't get pregnant at least. When I first learned that at sixteen I was devastated. And maybe it's why I've thrown myself so much into my work because I knew children weren't in my future, so I'd better build something else to be proud of.

This escort thought continues to roll around in my mind. I'm not blind to my own attributes. I have long, wavy, naturally blonde-streaked hair. Women pay hundreds of dollars for highlights like these that I have naturally. Blue eyes. Long dancer legs. Pouty lips. Natural, not injections. Not sure about the boobs though. I mean *I* like them. I might be the only woman on the planet who likes her breasts just as they are. I'm a B-cup, which I've always thought was the perfect size. Outside of work, I almost never wear a bra, and they stay where they're supposed to. But lots of men like bigger. Probably most of the men paying for it.

And being an escort is likely to be far worse than being with Andrew because then instead of having bad sex with one person I'd be having it with hundreds. The reality of the fantasy I've just spent the past several minutes exploring loses its luster as quickly as it came on. It's like most fantasies that way. The vast majority of them I would never act out because I know the real thing isn't anything like what's in my head. When it's in my head, I'm the one in control, and my imaginary partners fuck like gods.

I scroll through the depressingly short contact list on my phone. Andrew is still in there. And maybe it's because I've had three pretty strong drinks, but I can't stop myself from pressing the call button.

"Hello," he answers brusquely on the third ring. He has a posh British accent that fools people into thinking he has decency or class.

"Hey, it's me," I say.

"What do you want?"

I don't know how I imagined this conversation would go down, and my head isn't clear enough to navigate it in any kind of intelligent way. I'm aware that I'm making an absolute fool of myself. I know how pathetic this is. There isn't enough alcohol in the world for me to not realize that.

I feel the tears coming, and I can't hold them back. I know I sound weak. I don't think I've ever appeared weak to my former boss, not once until now.

"I didn't have anyone else to call," I say.

"Call about what?" His voice is guarded and threaded with more malice than I expected. Even after firing me and ruining my life, even after two months since the day I walked out of the agency, he's still angry.

"I'm being kicked out of my apartment this week. I can't pay rent. I need..." I trail off.

"I already filled your job," he says.

"O-okay," I whisper. I can't ask him to take me back. It's just not in me. I can't beg a man I can't stand to take me back. The thought of his hands on me makes the bile rise in my throat, even as I know if I could only get past my pride and beg, I might be sleeping in his extremely nice apartment with all my needs met indefinitely.

He saves me from this groveling.

"I don't have a job at the agency, but you could be my whore."

The cruelty in his tone makes me want to lash out and spew a string of curses at him. But I bite my tongue just in time. Of course I can't be his girlfriend again. Only his whore. Fuck this guy. I want to slit his motherfucking throat so badly I can barely think straight.

"Kate? Are you still there? I will take care of you. I will shelter you and feed you and clothe you and take you out to nice places. And you will service me whenever and however I like in return. Deal?"

The tears are streaming down my face now, and people are starting to stare. I hate this man so much. It wasn't just that he was bad in bed. It's that he's a first-class asshole. He treated me like shit when I was his girlfriend. How much worse will he treat me now? But I truly see no other options, no other escape. My life has fallen apart so fast I have whiplash from it. I remind myself that I don't have to do this forever, just until I can find another way forward.

I glance over at the woman across the bar, contemplating once again trying to get a job as an escort. I mean, I'll be a whore anyway, so what difference does it make? Would it be easier with strangers or with a man I

already know is a piece of shit?

The man she's supposed to go with has arrived. It's clear they've never met before, and he's taking her out of the bar and out of the restaurant. She's got large, perky fake tits, and his eyes are drawn right to them, reconfirming that I could never compete in that industry.

“Kate, tell me where you are, and I will come get you,” Andrew says on the other end of the phone.

Defeated, I give him the address and name of the restaurant I'm in.

“I'll be there in thirty minutes,” he says. He disconnects the call before I can change my mind.

I have a fourth drink because I'll need a fourth drink for this. Then I step outside into the crisp fall air to wait. But the fourth drink was a mistake. I feel woozy all of a sudden and go down like a pile of bricks.

TWO

My head is pounding when I regain consciousness. I can't bring myself to open my eyes. I'm lying on a hard surface, which seems weird to me. At first I think I'm lying on the ground outside where I passed out, but there are no city noises. Instead, I hear classical music being piped in from a speaker above me.

And I smell... roses. One of those highly fragrant varieties. I must be at Andrew's place. But why the fuck did he leave me on the ground? It's at this point that I realize I'm naked. Also, Andrew doesn't listen to classical music.

Instinctively, I want to bolt upright and cover myself, but I don't have that kind of reaction time. And it's a real struggle to open my eyes. When I do, I'm momentarily grateful to be in a dimly lit room.

"A-Andrew?" I croak out. I want to scream at him for dumping me on the ground in his apartment, but I can barely choke his name out. I wait for my eyes to adjust. Everything around me is dark gray, and there's no furniture in this room.

Cell, my mind hisses at me. I am in a cell.

I push myself off the ground into a sitting position and wait for my vision to go back to normal so I can get a sense of where I am. Did Andrew put me in here? He's a bigger bastard than I thought. This is when I finally realize I'm not alone.

There's a large, dark figure sitting on the ground against the far wall.

"Andrew, you piece of shit. What are you doing?"

I probably shouldn't speak to the person who rescued me from homelessness this way, but I don't care. He needs to grow the fuck up. I

expect him to yell at me or threaten to kick me out, but what I hear instead chills me.

“Who's Andrew?”

This is definitely not Andrew's voice. No accent. Plus it's deeper and more frightening. Suddenly the adrenaline hits me, and I have a sudden burst of speed. I back as far from him as I can until I meet the opposite wall. I shield my breasts from his gaze and shift to a sitting position where he can't see other private parts—even though I know he's already seen everything. And possibly done more. I *was* unconscious after all.

As my vision clears further, it seems that the light in the room gets a little brighter. He's wearing a white T-shirt and jeans, no shoes. His dark hair looks a bit disheveled. He's very attractive. Heart-stoppingly beautiful, actually. It's the kind of unearthly beauty that makes me feel relieved for a moment because I know I'm still passed out. This is a weird dream. I just know it is.

It's not a dream, whispers the same evil internal voice that decided to tell me I was in a cell.

It takes several minutes before my mind is willing to accept what has happened. I don't know if someone put something in my drink or if I was just that drunk. I don't know how long this man stalked me before he took me, but I know I'm looking at the man who kidnapped me.

And now the tears come. It takes every ounce of willpower not to break down into hysterical sobs. This reaction is making a lie out of everything I thought I knew about myself. The strength and control I thought I had in my life. Even up to very recently, I thought I was handling things.

But this is the last straw. It's the last tiny push I needed to find myself in a free fall.

Another dark thought pushes its way into my mind. No one is going to be looking for me. Does the man who took me know that? Andrew sure as shit won't look or file a police report.

My landlady might not realize why I didn't pack my things up first, but as nice as Carolyn is, she'll just be glad she doesn't have to have me forcibly removed. She isn't going to report my disappearance to the police. What disappearance? I've been evicted. I'm not supposed to be there.

There is no reality now but me and my captor. I'm trying desperately not to think about the reasons this man took me. To rape me? To kill me? To torture me? He sure as shit isn't going to let me go when he's done with whatever's on his nefarious agenda. I know you can't appeal to a sociopath,

and nobody normal does something like this.

Still, I can't help begging. "P-please don't hurt me."

"I won't," he says.

Huh?

"You can let me go," I say. "I won't say anything."

"I can't let you go. I didn't put you in here."

"What?" For a moment, my confusion overtakes my fear. What does he mean he didn't put me in here? Of course he did. Who the fuck can he blame? The invisible demon perched on his shoulder?

He shakes his head slowly. "I'm in the same boat as you, sweetheart."

I glance back and forth between us. He has clothes on, and they don't look like he's worn them for days. Meanwhile, I'm naked. We are *not* in the same boat.

"I don't believe you," I say. "You're playing with me somehow."

He shrugs. "Believe what you want, but I'm not going to hurt you. You're safe with me."

I know it's some kind of trick. He wants me to trust him so he can turn the tables on me. Sick bastard. But for the moment, he isn't lunging toward me; he isn't getting up from his spot on the ground.

So I take this time to get a better sense of where I am. It's a plain gray cell, not really much to see. And actually there is one thing in here—a large mattress. It actually looks nice, like it recently came out of some upscale mattress warehouse. It isn't dirty or dingy, and it looks like it's comfortable. It's larger than a full-sized, but probably not a king. There are no pillows, sheets, or blankets, though.

The mattress is on the floor next to the guy, like he's guarding it. Behind him and to one side are heavy long chains bolted into the wall. I look behind me to find there are also heavy chains bolted into the wall behind me. I bite back the urge to scream or cry again. It won't do me any good. I have to try to keep it together.

There's a slot in the wall that looks big enough to pass food through but not much else. And there's a door that looks like it has a lot of security on it. But it's not the only door.

To my right, there's another doorway. There's no actual door on it but, instead, a bamboo beaded curtain that almost reaches the ground. Light streams out from it into the cell, and I realize suddenly that this other room is the only source of light.

“What's in there?” I ask, pointing in the direction of the mystery room.

“Bathroom,” he says.

I still don't believe this guy is another innocent victim. He seems way too large and in charge, and strong, to ever be in this kind of situation. But as long as he's going to pretend, I'll pretend with him.

“What's your name?” I ask.

He opens his mouth to speak, and suddenly the music shuts off and a dark, menacing voice enters the room through the speaker.

“No names!” he growls. “You will address him as Master.”

That's not Andrew, either.

The man's eyes widen at the same time mine do. He seems both shocked and disgusted by this suggestion from our mysterious captor of what I should call him. But neither of us addresses this. We sit uncomfortably, pretending these words weren't spoken.

But then my co-captive speaks. “Let us out of here, you sick son of a bitch! I will fucking kill you!”

The only response is a chuckle. “Yes, put on a brave show for the girl, but in the end, you will both dance for me, my little monkeys.”

There's a part of me that wants to go to the other guy in the cell, as if he can protect me from all of this.

The voice crackles over the speaker again. “I will feed you when you've fucked her.”

Suddenly I'm glad I stayed where I am—as far away from the stranger on the other side of the cell as I can get. Not that that makes a real difference.

“Fuck you,” the man says. “I'm not going to rape her.”

“Okay. Starve then. But she'll starve, too. She's quite a little thing. I bet the hunger will get to her first. So you'll get to watch her die. Enjoy.”

It's no longer some great mystery why I'm naked and my co-captive isn't. I'm bait for the evil game of our captor. The music comes back on.

We both sit in stunned silence for a minute, staring up at the speaker in the ceiling, as if expecting the voice to return, but it doesn't.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I say to the man in the cell with me. Even though I know he's seen me naked, I don't want to just get up and walk in front of him to the bathroom.

He nods, stands, and turns around. “Tell me when you're in there.”

I hesitate for a moment but then get up and cross to the doorway. When I push back the beaded curtain, I let out a gasp. I expected the bathroom to be

just like the cell. Plain gray walls, maybe a metal toilet, a sink, and if we were incredibly lucky, a drain in the floor and a shower head.

But this is a *real* bathroom. A *luxury* bathroom. This is the kind of bathroom only the very rich can afford. This room is probably twice the size of the cell, and the cell isn't tiny. I notice there is a speaker in here as well piping in the same classical music.

“Okay,” I say to the man in the other room.

I wonder why my co-captive isn't hanging out in here. I don't know what to look at first, but I settle on the roses. There's a large bouquet of white roses in a vase on the marble countertop. The colors of the room are warm gold and cream. There's a giant rain shower that can easily accommodate two people as well as an oversized jacuzzi tub. The actual toilet is at the back of the room in another sort of smaller room. There's no door, just a curtain, but it does allow another layer of privacy.

I feel weirdly comfortable about peeing now because I realize with the distance, the extra enclosed toilet space, and the music, the man in the cell won't hear me. It's such a stupid thing to be concerned with right now, but still, it makes me feel marginally better inside the horror of this situation.

After I use the bathroom and wash my hands, I look through the cabinets. There are soaps and lotions and bath oils and bubble baths. No real help for escape here unless we can somehow MacGyver a bubble bath bomb.

There's a full first aid kit. Bandages of all sizes, medical tape, salves, ointments, Hydrogen peroxide, and alcohol. I find this discovery more than a little disturbing. Why is our captor providing us with this stuff, and what will happen that requires it?

In another cabinet are stacks of neatly folded wash cloths and hand towels and bath mats and giant bath towels. I pull out one of the enormous towels and wrap it around myself then walk back out into the main cell, covered now at least.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey. What do we do now?”

We both know what we're supposed to do now, but of course we aren't going to do that. I'm not sure what he'll do if he gets hungry enough. I move back to the place across the room and gingerly sit back down.

“We wait,” he says.

“How long have you been here?”

“A couple of days. I've already looked for escape options. There are

none.” He points up at the ceiling. “In the corners, do you see those shiny black things?”

I squint. I hadn't noticed them before. “Yes.”

“Cameras,” he says. “There aren't any in the bathroom, though. Though there are probably listening devices in there.”

I allow this piece of information to settle in my brain.

“W-when was the last time you ate?”

He winces at this. “Don't worry. I ate half an hour before he brought you in.”

“Have you used the shower or the tub?”

“The shower.”

“So he's not going to come in here and hurt us if I...”

The man shakes his head. “He won't come in until I eat. He drugs the food. So if you want to take a bath or a shower, you'll be safe.”

“You won't come in?”

He shakes his head. “I promise.”

“Do you think he'll starve us if we don't do what he says?”

He sighs. “Yes.”

I look away. I don't know what to say to this. It's not as though it would be any great tragedy to sleep with this beautiful man, but I don't think I can do it with someone else watching. I might feel differently about this when I get hungry enough.

Since I'm in no exact immediate danger, I don't cry again. I feel stupidly safer with this other man here even though I know obviously something bad is going to happen, things we'll both be forced to do together to survive. And in the end, we probably won't anyway.

“I'm going to take a bath,”

He nods. He doesn't turn away this time because I'm covered in a bath towel. It takes a while for the tub to fill up. I put in some raspberry bath oil and take one of the roses from the vase and sprinkle the petals in. I'm trying to feel normal. Inside this bathroom, I can pretend that things are somehow normal.

I sink beneath the steaming hot water and lean back against the rim of the tub, closing my eyes and listening to the classical music.

I stay like this until the water goes cool. But no matter what I do, I can't convince myself that I'm having a normal bath on a normal day.

As I'm getting out of the tub and drying off, it occurs to me, my co-

captive knew about this bathroom. He knew about the towels. He could have covered me so I didn't wake up like that. He would have had to have been unconscious when I was brought in, of course. Maybe he'd woken up just before me and didn't have time. Maybe I was already stirring, and he didn't want to startle me. Or maybe... he liked the view and isn't *that* honorable.

I find myself unsettled by these possibilities as I return to the cell.

Hours pass. I try not to look at him, but I fail. There isn't much to look at or occupy my time. The music is becoming a little obnoxious, and to be honest, I would rather have the silence. It's like Chinese water torture.

I mean sure, it's not *drip drip drip drip drip*. But without the ability to turn the music off, it has that same maddening quality.

Whenever I catch myself looking at my co-captive, he's already looking at me, watching in that silent way he does. Despite our shared situation, I can't help feeling like his prey. How hungry is he? Is he thinking about fucking me to get fed? Is he thinking about how easy it would be to just take me? Is he calculating how quickly his conscience might shut up if he just does what has been asked of him?

"You should try to get some sleep," he finally says. His gaze shifts to the mattress beside him. An invitation?

"I-I'm fine."

"I'd bring the mattress over to you, but it's somehow bolted to the floor. I'd switch places with you, but I need to be facing the door."

The wall he sits against is directly opposite from the door to the outside world. My wall, the one I've been sitting against, is the same wall that door is on. The bathroom door is a third wall to my right and his left.

He moves a few feet over, so that he's more in direct alignment with the door he watches when he isn't watching me, but it isn't nearly enough space.

"Come lie down. I won't touch you."

I shake my head and stay where I am.

THREE

I don't know how much time has passed, but I'm hungry, *really* hungry. I've been drinking water straight out of the bathroom sink, but it doesn't stop the hunger pangs.

He sits across the room, watching me, the same way he watched me when I first woke in the cell. I've slept a few times—on the floor—but I don't think that correlates with how many days I've been here. I think it's only been a couple of days.

I don't know. There's no way to measure time.

We haven't really talked much. I'm not sure what one is supposed to talk about in this situation, and I think both of us are afraid that anything we say will give our captor additional ammunition to use against us.

Even though the mattress is only a few feet from him, he's chosen to sleep on the floor. He refuses to sleep on the mattress if I won't sleep on it, like he can't stand the idea of me sleeping naked on the cold, hard floor and him having some measure of comfort—like it offends his sensibilities somehow to the point that he's willing to be just as uncomfortable as me. And I've continually refused the offer.

Even if he'd move far away, I don't want to sleep on it while he sleeps on the floor, either, and if we both sleep on the mattress, I know what will happen next. It's impossible that with our hunger and that kind of proximity that his hands won't wander over my body, that he won't get on top of me and...

“Come here,” he says.

I swallow hard, but I don't move. Has he hit his limit with this? We both

know what has to happen. Our captor hasn't spoken to us again. Who knows if he got bored and just decided to leave us here to die? Who knows if we'll get food even if we obey at this late stage?

He doesn't repeat his request, just continues to watch me. After a few minutes, he stands and walks across the cell. This is the first time he's been this close. I flinch when he reaches me.

He ignores my reaction and sits on the ground beside me, but he doesn't make any attempt to touch me. Instead, he sighs and says, "Starvation is a bad way to die."

"I know," I say.

"I don't think you do."

I start to cry. It's the first time I've broken down since those first moments in the cell. Supposedly, if we have sex, we'll get food. And I want food, but then what happens? The longer I can delay this, the longer I delay the next steps in whatever sick game our captor is playing with us.

"You know what has to happen," he says, echoing my exact thought of only minutes ago. "What's the point of letting yourself get sicker and weaker than you need to be? You need your strength. You need to eat."

"You mean *you* need to eat," I say, unable to hide the bitterness seeping into my voice. So the nice guy act is finally ending? The gallant chivalry finally coming to an end. Everyone has a limit. And now I know his.

"I'll be fine," he says. "I'll be fine a lot longer than you will. Are you going to let yourself starve to death?"

I chance a look into his eyes. "What do you think would happen to you if I did?"

He shrugs. "He'd probably take another girl, bring more bait to tempt me. He wants to turn me into a monster and you...or whoever... into a whore. That's my running theory, anyway."

He stands and holds a hand out to me.

"What are you doing?"

"Remember what I said about the cameras and the bathroom?"

I nod.

He's still holding his hand out. I try to ignore it.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he says.

I am so hungry. Finally, I take his hand and let him lead me into the bathroom. He guides me to sit on the edge of the tub and turns the shower on. Then he starts to undress. I tense, part of me wanting to run back into the cell.

“We're going to take a shower, you and I,” he says calmly. “I won't touch you in any way you don't want. And no one will see.”

I know what he's doing. He's trying to make this easier for me. In the end, I'll have to fuck him in the cell in front of the cameras so our sick mystery captor can watch. My co-captive is trying to give us some privacy and the illusion of choice at least to start, at least to let me get used to his body.

“Come on, drop the towel and get in the shower with me.”

He steps into the shower and closes the door behind him. I know he won't hurt me. He hasn't yet. I think I'm safe with this man, and there's only one way to get food. I take a few slow deep breaths, wipe the stray tears off my cheeks, and take off the towel.

When I open the door, he pulls me in under the rain shower with him. His mouth moves close to my ear. His words are quiet, almost dwarfed by the sound of the water.

“I don't know if there are listening devices in the bathroom, but if there are, the shower may give us some cover. What's your name?”

I pull back from him and look into his eyes—really look at them. I've avoided his gaze so much in my time here. They're hazel, but they seem far lighter than they are because of his tanned skin and dark hair. He's growing the beginnings of a beard.

“Kate,” I finally say.

“Kate. That's a pretty name. I'm Seven.”

At first I think I don't hear him right. “Seven? Like the number?”

He chuckles. “Yes, like the number.”

“Are you from a big family? Are your siblings all named One through Six?”

“No siblings. Only child. I can be grateful they didn't name me One, I guess.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

I like his name though. The strangeness of it makes me feel somehow more comfortable with him. But still I flinch again when he moves a strand of wet hair behind my ear, the touch too intimate. I'm suddenly so aware of just how naked I am with this man I don't know.

“You can touch me, Kate. However you want. I'm yours to explore. I want to make this easy for you because we both know you aren't going to starve yourself. And I really don't want to watch you...” He trails off.

He doesn't want to watch me die. Our captor is right; Seven will make it

longer than me. And on a certain level, if we don't do what we've been ordered to do, it makes it look like I'd rather die than fuck this man. And that is definitely not true. His body is a work of art. There is no part of me repulsed by any part of him.

It's just the situation.

Even if he'd survive longer than me, I know he must be hungry. And our captor didn't say I had to consent. He just said Seven had to fuck me. All he had to do was take me in that cell, my will be damned, and we would both be fed—at least if our captor plans to honor his own terms. There's no way to know if we'll really be allowed to eat if Seven fucks me.

Suddenly out of nowhere, I'm sobbing, the weight of everything becoming too much. Seven pulls me against his chest. My first instinct is to pull away, but he's so warm and solid, and the way he cradles my head against him makes me feel stupidly safe in the midst of this nightmare.

“Shhh, Kate. I'm so sorry this is happening to you.”

I let him hold me as the warm water rains down over us. Finally, after several minutes, when I'm able to stop my crying, I pull away from him.

I reach out tentatively and run my hands over his chest, sliding down the smooth rippling muscles of his abs. He's got that gorgeous 'V' that only the most dedicated men can achieve. He's tall, maybe six foot three, and broad, but his muscles aren't bulky like a body builder. They are compact, tightly coiled strength. These are not muscles built for looks; they're built for action. Though they are undeniably beautiful.

There's a sharp intake of breath from him as my finger trails along one side of the line of that 'V', then I drag my tongue long it. His cock rises to attention. He is large and thick and hard. Seven has the most beautiful dick I think I've ever seen in my life.

I experimentally lick one of his nipples before biting gently. He groans at this. I look up at him, and he takes the opportunity to put his hand behind my neck and pull me up and into him for a consuming kiss that ignites a whole swarm of butterflies inside my stomach that shouldn't be there but are.

I expect him to fuck me now, but he doesn't. We just make out in the shower for several minutes like a couple of teenagers who haven't crossed that bridge before. I'm panting when I finally pull away from him. He lets me go, his intense hungry gaze never leaving mine.

“No names outside of the shower,” he says. “We don't want to piss him off.”

I nod my agreement. For a moment, I wonder if he's going to push for more or take me up against the shower wall, but although I know he wants to, instead, he turns the water off and gets out.

When we go back into the cell, I'm wrapped in a bath towel again, and he's dressed in the clothing he was allowed. I go to my side, and after a moment of hesitation, Seven goes to his. He sits in that way he does, watching me. I'm not sure why I went to the opposite side of the cell after what just happened in the shower. Surely we are beyond this necessary distance now.

The voice finally speaks again, the first time in days. "Were you two in there practicing? Well, come on then, entertain me. I'm sure you're ready to eat by now. A steaming hot meal can be yours for the low, low price of your soul and self-respect."

I can see the muscle tick in Seven's jaw. I know he wants to kill this man.

"This is the last time food will be offered. Fuck now and take the food or starve, and I'll start over with two new toys more willing to play my games. Tell me, Pretty Toy, are you ready to fuck him for your dinner because apparently he's just too noble to take what he wants for the greater good. I guess he would rather you die than watch you cry while he takes you. He's got the wrong priorities if you ask me, so it's up to you to save yourself."

I feel the tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I look down at the ground. What else can I do? I don't want to starve to death in here.

"Yes," I finally whisper.

"Yes, Master," he corrects. "I am your Master, and you will address me properly."

"You son of a bitch!" Seven says.

The voice sighs. "Okay, I can see I'm going to have to get new toys to play with. You two are boring."

"Y-yes, Master," I say quickly.

"Good. I can see our girl is at least ready to play, but is our boy?"

I look up to find Seven glaring malevolent holes into the shiny black camera domes above us. I feel the anger radiating off him, and it scares me even though it isn't aimed at me. Just knowing he has that kind of anger while I'm caged with him activates a survival response where I want to become as small and invisible as possible so he doesn't notice me while in this state.

"Pretty Toy," the voice says, once again addressing me, "I think our boy needs convincing to let you eat. Drop the towel and crawl over to him. When

you get there, I want you to beg him to fuck you.”

I'm crying again. I truly could have sex with Seven without it unraveling my world, but not with this sinister evil psychopath watching and giving orders, intent on making it the most degrading experience possible. But I'm so hungry.

My limbs are trembling as I take off the towel and crawl across the cold, hard floor to Seven. He's looking away from me. I don't blame him.

“Please fuck me,” I beg. I want to use his name, but I know this will only get us into trouble so I refrain.

“What did I say three days ago?” the voice says. “You will call him Master. You will address us both as Master.”

I think somehow it breaks Seven more to be put in this position being shaped and molded into a monster against his will, baited with the promise of food and survival. And not just his own, mine too.

“Please, Master, fuck me.” I can barely get the words out.

The muscle in Seven's jaw tightens again, and his face is still turned away from mine. His hands clench and unclench at his sides. He doesn't make a move toward me. It's as though this decision is much harder for him than it was for me.

“Please, just do what he wants. I don't want to die.”

Despite Seven's choice to take me into the shower with him, the enormity of *this* seems almost too much for him.

The voice speaks again. “This isn't fair play. She's willing to play my games. If you aren't, maybe I should come into the cell and fuck her myself. Then she can eat, and you can learn a lesson. How would that be?”

“Don't you dare touch her!” Seven shouts.

There is laughter over the speaker. “I can do whatever I want with her. She's mine. She belongs to me. And I'm generously offering to share her with you, to allow you to have a piece of her. But strictly speaking, we don't really need you. So if you want to starve and leave her all to me, I won't complain.”

Seven flinches when I reach out and touch his arm. “Please... just give him what he wants.”

“Please, Master,” the voice patiently corrects.

“Please, Master,” I say.

I swear every time I say that word to Seven I think he will completely lose it. There's a pause. He takes a long, slow breath, then finally, he stands

and without a word, peels his T-shirt off. The jeans go next. He isn't wearing underwear.

“Lie down on the mattress,” Seven says.

I crawl onto the mattress and lie down. It's even nicer and more comfortable than it seemed just looking at it, and I now regret not taking his offer to sleep here instead of on the hard floor.

My gaze drifts to his impressive erection. Whatever moral issues he may have with this situation, it doesn't affect what his body wants right now. He lies down beside me on the mattress and begins to gently stroke me.

I'm sure the voice will interrupt and stop him. I'm sure the voice wants Seven to be hard and rough and mean about it, but there's no interruption. There's no commentary. The touches start innocent and sweet. He brushes my hair away from my face, and runs his fingertips through it several times. He strokes my cheek, then drags his thumb gently over my lip as he unconsciously licks his own.

His hand trails down my neck. Hands graze down and then back up my arms. Gentle strokes down and back up my legs.

“What a pretty bare cunt. I like it,” the voice says over the speaker. I flinch at this.

I don't wax for the visual or tactile pleasure of men. I do it for myself. I like the way clothes feel when they brush against that bare intimate flesh. I like the way it feels when my fingers drift over and play with it.

I had a salon appointment a few days ago. I know I shouldn't have. I couldn't afford it. But the cost of rent was so much higher than the cost of waxing, and I just wanted something normal and routine to make me feel like everything in my world wasn't falling apart. That seems so long ago now. The specter of homelessness that had loomed over me now feels so trivial in light of everything.

Seven's eyes are filled with lust, and I know he agrees with our captor about the lack of hair between my legs.

“We'll have to keep her waxed,” the voice says. “When the time comes, do you want to wax her, or should I?”

We both know our captor is just trying to upset us. But it's working. Seven goes back to touching me, determined to block out our seedy voyeur. He rubs soothing gentle circles over my belly, and then those same movements happen again with each breast.

I let out an involuntary gasp as his mouth latches onto my nipple and

sucks it into a hard point. The arousal that was lacking from my own body suddenly awakens at his mouth on my breast. Then he moves lower.

“Spread your legs,” he says, his voice going more guttural. The command is a command by every understanding of that word. It’s as though he’s crossed some imaginary bridge in his mind, and he’s now ready to play the role of my owner.

I spread my legs, wordlessly inviting him to touch me, to lick me, to fuck me. I'm starting to care less about the cameras because I'm beginning to *need* Seven inside me. Like Seven, my body doesn't care about the actual situation. It wants what it wants. It’s a primal dance with music we may not consciously know, but our bodies know, and they want to play this erotic symphony together.

The more he touches me, the less guilt he seems to feel about touching me, the more he treats me as a lover he has every right to possess.

I arch up against his mouth, my fingers desperately clawing at the mattress for purchase, anything to anchor me and hold me to this plane of existence. I moan as he sucks on my clit. His fingers dig into my hips as he greedily devours me.

“Stop,” the voice says.

Seven stops, irritated now by this new command. He doesn't want to stop.

“Pretty Toy, look into his eyes and beg him to let you come.”

When I look into Seven's eyes this time, a real shift has occurred inside him. Gone is any hesitation to take me. His body and mind are in accord, and I know he will soon fuck me breathless.

“Master, please let me come.”

This time when I say that word, he doesn't flinch. His jaw doesn't clench. The anger doesn't show up. There’s only lust. It won't take long for him to love hearing that word come out of my mouth. He already wants to love it. I decide this is better. If he winces or turns away when I call him master, it will only shame me. His acceptance and desire is better.

Seven goes back to work on my pussy, his mouth unrelenting until I come, writhing and moaning and panting, unable to control my erratic need to feel these feelings under the precise control of his tongue.

When the pleasure recedes, and I'm wet and open and soft in his arms, he mounts me. I gasp again as he fills me. I've never been with a man this large before, and even after my orgasm and arousal, it takes a moment for my body to adjust to his size.

He begins to move slowly inside me, until I'm once again arching up into him, my body begging him for more of this dark violation.

"Please, Master," slips out of my mouth before I can stop it, and he drives into me harder.

Pleasure tightens the cords in his throat as he lets out an animalistic sound. I join him again, a second wave of pleasure cresting over me as he grinds against my clit. Then he pulls out of me, gets up off the mattress, and puts his jeans back on.

Now that his lust has been fed, he looks guilty, ashamed. He can't meet my eyes. And I hate that. I feel wrong for this, but I liked who he was a few minutes ago, when he didn't give one flying fuck about the cameras or the situation. When I was something he wanted, something he'd decided to take, and his desire and need to be sheathed inside me was the only reality that existed between us.

A couple of water bottles are tossed in through the slot in the wall, then several minutes later, a plate of the promised steaming hot food. Seven takes it as it comes through the slot and then there is a second plate.

One plate is blue and the other is white. Both plates have the same food. Steak, green beans, and a baked potato with just a little butter. It looks and smells delicious, but we'll both have to eat very slowly to not get sick.

The voice comes out over the speaker. "The food on the blue plate is drugged. I'll leave it to the two of you to decide who gets the drugged food. I think you know which would please me, and I think you know you need to factor pleasing me into all of your decisions from this point onward."

I swallow hard, staring at the food. "If I take the drugged food, you can fight him off if he comes in," I say.

Seven shakes his head. "He means the drugs for me; that means the amount is too high for you. It could endanger your life if you eat it. I'm not going to risk it. You are *not* eating the drugged food."

My lip is trembling. "But if you eat it, he could come in here and..."

His expression goes tight. "I know."

"We could split the food on the white plate," I offer.

"That'll just piss him off, and you need a full meal. Fuck! You eat the food. I won't eat. I'm not going to let him come in here and..."

"You have to eat," I say. "If you die, I'll be here with him by myself. Please don't leave me alone with him."

Seven pushes the white plate toward me. "Eat," he says.

“What if they're both drugged, and he's just playing with us?” If that's the case there's nothing we can do. It's either drugged food or no food.

Seven doesn't reply to this. He just watches me. Finally, I give in and start eating. I still think we should have shared this food. But he's right about it making our captor mad, as though we're trying to cheat at his game.

I've nearly finished eating the food on my plate and drinking the water when Seven finally makes the decision to eat his own. He knows there's no choice. He either eats or he dies.

I can tell it pains him to leave me unprotected while he's unconscious, but what other choices do we really have?

“Come here,” Seven says when he's finished eating. He pulls me into his arms, and we lie down on the mattress curled up together. I grip his hand, willing him not to fall asleep even though I know he won't be able to fight the drugs.

I hear it when his breathing pattern finally shifts, and my breath hitches in panic.

A few minutes later, the door to the cell opens for the first time.

Our captor steps into the room. Given the monster he so obviously is, I expected him to be ugly, but he isn't. At least not on the outside. He's cruel beauty. A little shorter than Seven, probably six feet tall, and not quite as broad. In a fair fight, Seven would win no question, but I can see the clearly strong and lethal muscles under his T-shirt. He has strange light gray eyes that appear empty of everything and hair just a little lighter than Seven's. He's clean-shaven, where Seven has a growing beard, probably because of an inability to shave in here.

I grip Seven's hand harder as if he can protect me from our captor while unconscious.

The menacing stranger, the man who has insisted I, and I alone, call him master crosses the room to us. He hasn't demanded a title from Seven, and I'm starting to think his assessment is right. This man wants to make Seven a monster and me their whore.

He pries my fingers out of Seven's while I struggle against him and cry. “Please... please... don't hurt me.” I've never been more afraid than I am now in this man's presence.

He tilts his head to the side like a curious puppy. Then he says, “Please, please don't hurt me, what?”

“M-Master,” I say quickly.

He nods, satisfied with this answer but unwilling to offer me any reassurances to answer my plea.

He picks me up off the floor, then walks me to my corner on the other end of the room.

“Sit,” he demands.

I slide wordlessly to the ground, the tears moving down my cheeks. Then he turns and crosses the floor to Seven. He grips the man by the shoulders, and drags him to the door.

“W-wait, where are you taking him?”

He looks up at me and smiles a hollow, soulless smile. “Oh, don't worry Pretty Toy, you'll get your turn soon enough.”

He presses his thumb to a keypad, the door slides open, and he drags Seven out, leaving me alone in the cell.

FOUR

It seems like hours go by while I'm in this classical elevator music hell alone. Finally, the door slides open, and he drags Seven back inside. I gasp at the sight of him, shirtless but still in jeans. Our captor tosses Seven on the mattress, lying on his stomach, revealing horrifying whip lashes across his back, several of them bleeding.

He's very still, and at first I'm terrified he's dead, but then I see his breath slowly moving in and out of him in a ragged labored way. I'm not sure if he passed out from pain or if he was drugged again. Then my captor's eyes move to me.

“Your turn, Pretty Toy.”

I shake my head, the panic and tears back. “No, no please... Master, please... I'll do whatever you want... please... don't...” I look at the disaster that is Seven's back again.

My captor doesn't reply; he just walks slowly and calmly over to me.

“Please,” I whimper. “I'm not as strong as him... I can't take... please...” I'm babbling. I can't think straight enough to make a clear sentence come out of my mouth. I'm just so scared. And I know none of what I say matters anyway. You can't reason with the devil.

I don't understand why. WHY? We did what he asked. And in this short time... he's already escalated his plans to torture. I'm sure I'll hyperventilate or faint when he reaches me.

“Stand up and come with me, Kate,” he says.

I don't know why it should surprise me that he knows my name. I had my driver's license on me when he took me. If he undressed me and put me in

this cell, of course he's gone through all my things.

I choke back another sob and use the wall to steady myself and stand. I know if I resist him, whatever he has planned can only be worse. I grip the bath towel around me, but he tugs it out of my grasp and off me until I'm standing inches from him, naked.

He grips my upper arm and leads me out of the cell. When we get out into the main house, I realize the finality of my fate. Even phrases like *ridiculous grandiose wealth* do not fully capture this situation. There's a level of resources where you know there's basically no limit to a person's power.

This guy has those kinds of resources. That kind of power. No one will ever find us. No one will ever free us. We're at the mercy of this monster for as long as he lets us live. And I'm not sure if a short time or a long time is better or worse under the circumstances.

The door to our cell is hidden behind a giant painting. The hallway alone in this place is breathtaking. High vaulted ceilings. Chandeliers that each probably cost about the same as a normal-sized house in the suburbs. We pass by windows, and outside the windows I see endless rolling hills. It's as though I've been transported to a whole other planet that only the three of us inhabit. Maybe it's a private island. I don't see any palm trees, but I really just have no idea at this point.

He has to have staff. A cleaning service. Something. There's no way he manages this on his own. So have there been others here while we've been here then? There must have been. If he isn't worried about us screaming and getting found out, the cell must be soundproof.

I could ask myself why someone with this much money would even do something like this. But why not? If you obviously have no conscience, after you get bored with all conventional accumulation of power, surely something like this is next.

At the end of this hallway, there's another door with a security panel. It's not hidden like our cell. I wonder if people ask what's behind this door. I'm sure others are curious, but I don't want to know. I don't want to go in there.

I struggle to get away from him, but his impossible grip only gets tighter. "Careful, now. Probably best not to irritate the psycho," he says.

At least he knows he's crazy. I'm not sure if that helps or only makes it worse.

Behind this new high-security steel door is a set of stairs that spiral down. The walls are white, and the stairs look like stairs in an office building. There

are guide lights in the floor which offer the only illumination. The stairs seem to go down forever, and the further we go into this pit, the more claustrophobic I become.

It's some kind of sex dungeon. There are whips and paddles and floggers and canes. Clamps of various types and sizes. A box full of sex toys and blindfolds. Bondage equipment is scattered around the room. There's a large cage on one end of this endless underground space. And there's a bed, built with the explicit understanding that someone should be bound to it.

A part of me wishes I didn't know what all of this stuff was for. But I know. I'm crying again. It started before I even realized—traitorous tears making escape attempts down my cheeks.

I flinch when he wipes away a stray tear with his thumb. "Don't cry yet, Pretty Toy. I haven't even gotten started. Save your tears for the good part."

This only makes me cry harder, and the sinister smirk that inches up his cheek only confirms this was the reaction he was hoping for.

"You're here because you disobeyed me. You *both* disobeyed me."

Is he talking about the fact that we didn't immediately rush to fuck for his viewing pleasure when he first told us this was the price for food? Before I can ask this question, he continues.

"I told you, no names, Kate. But the first opportunity you got, the two of you huddled in your private shower and started whispering secrets. I may not have cameras in the bathroom, but I do have listening devices, one embedded in the shower in fact. Seven thought he could outsmart me. You have to be punished, Pretty Toy. I can't have this defiance."

"Master, please." I want to say it was Seven's idea, but my captor knows that already, and I can't stand the idea of betraying Seven, so I don't say anything more.

I jerk away when he strokes my hair.

"Don't worry. He took a greater punishment to protect you, and I always keep my word. You can handle what I'm about to do. I won't break your skin. I don't want to break my Pretty Toy after all, now do I?"

A long slow breath pushes its way out of me as my hysteria calms the tiniest fraction. I know he could be lying. I know he's evil. I know he's going to kill us when he's finished with his game, but I hold out hope that Seven really did take a harder punishment to give me a lighter one.

"Go lie down on the bed. On your stomach, arms and legs spread out like an X."

I can't do this. My body refuses to move to obey his command. There isn't enough air in this room. I can't. I know I have no choices here. He could get tired of me and kill me. The more easily I do whatever he wants the longer I'm sure I'll live, but I can't.

My body refuses to hold me up, and suddenly I'm on the ground, kneeling in front of him.

“Master please... please, I'm sorry I disobeyed. Please... don't hurt me. I promise I'll never do it again,” I whimper. I am so pathetic right now. And a part of me knows this will only excite him, only drive him on, but I can't stop myself from begging and hoping for mercy he obviously doesn't possess.

He's cold and empty and completely unreachable, which only makes me feel more helpless. It makes me sick to think of Seven being beaten down here, knowing I would be next and that he can't truly protect me. No one can protect me.

“Kate,” he says quietly. “I will only tell you once more. Get up and do what I said. Otherwise, I won't go easier on you, and Seven's suffering will have been for nothing. Is that what you want?”

“No, Master.”

“Then obey me.”

There's suddenly a hand next to my face, offering to help me stand. I take his hand and struggle to my feet. Then, having no other options, I go to the bed and lie down spread-eagled like he demanded.

I continue to cry hopelessly as he binds me to the bed with the attached restraints. They aren't for show or light play. A grown man couldn't get out of them on his own. I wonder if Seven was in this same spot only a little while ago or if our captor tied him to something else, maybe the giant X-shaped contraption leaning against one of the exposed brick walls.

I watch as he goes to the wall where the whipping implements hang, deciding what to use on me. He returns with a flogger. It's not the worst thing he could have picked, but he could still make it unbearable.

He sits on the bed beside me, and I flinch as he strokes my hair and then my back.

“Shhh, Pretty Toy.”

He continues this soothing behavior until my body has no choice but to relax and calm under his touch. Something inside me gives up the fight to tense in his hands.

“That's a good girl,” he soothes. His gaze holds mine as he says this.

His eyes really are beautiful. But they are so cold it's hard to look into them. They are gray like a storm. It's as though they were formed from pieces of ice. I'm certain there's nothing that could melt his gaze.

“As long as you're a good girl for me, I won't get a new toy to replace you.”

He doesn't spell it out, but we both know what replacing me means. It doesn't mean he'll let me go.

I wish he wasn't so attractive. There's a twisted sick part of me that has a hard time completely understanding the danger he represents. This part of my mind can only process his beauty, and the way he's touching me isn't helping. These soothing gentle caresses are confusing.

My body arches into his touch as his hand strokes farther downward, until he's rubbing my ass. I should pull away even though there's nowhere for me to go. I want to pull away. I'm so scared right now, but I know he will do whatever he wants with me, and all my brain can process is that I'll be safe as long as I'm a good girl.

This thought repeats over and over in my mind like a mantra.

I don't really know this is true, but I cling to it anyway.

I'm caught off guard by the hard smack on my ass. It's followed by several more sharp blows in quick succession. I cry out, part from pain, part from shock at the sudden shift. But before I can tense up again, he's back to the soothing stroking.

Heat rises into my face as I realize my body has decided this is sexually exciting. Wetness floods between my legs. It's such a betrayal, this thing my body is doing to me. It was different with Seven. It's okay with Seven.

But this nameless man who took me off the street and locked me in a cell... I can't feel this when he touches me. I can't allow it. But my body doesn't care. My body equally craves the touch of both men. There is no either/or, it is only both/and. My eyes have greedily drunk both men's beauty and found them equally satisfying.

He spans me again, this time the other cheek, and before he even gets to the gentle caress, even in the midst of the pain as I cry out, a deep throbbing ache begins between my legs. He rubs the sting out where he spanked me.

“Are you wet for me?” he asks.

I don't bother to lie because as bad as it is for me, I know the truth will please him. And that may be good for me.

“Yes, Master.”

His hand moves between my legs, stroking my wet folds. I try not to grind against his hand. I try to just lie there, but when he presses a finger inside me, I begin to move against him. My body wants to fuck.

He chuckles. "Such a greedy toy. I like you."

I feel a perverse relief at this statement. If he were ugly, it would be easy to resist. My body would agree with my mind. If he were seriously hurting me, it would also be easy. But the pain he gives me is erotic, and his restraint only makes me want more.

There's something very wrong with me. I try to reason with myself that he didn't feed us for three days. I have so much adrenaline coursing through my body. I've been put in this completely helpless position, and instead of doing whatever grisly things psychos are supposed to do, he's giving me pleasure. It's incredibly hard to fight that, to be good.

Anyway, my definition of good and his definition are completely opposite. And the only definition that matters for my survival is his.

"Such a good girl. You are so responsive," he says as he continues to pet me between my legs.

I whimper, but otherwise, I can say nothing. I can do nothing but grind helplessly against his hand as he keeps my gaze trapped in his.

"Because you are such a good girl, I'm going to give you a choice. I can punish you with the flogger, or I can let you come. Tell me which do you want? Would you rather be whipped or come on my fingers?"

I squeeze my eyes shut even as I continue to move with his fingers. He pulls his hand away, and it takes everything inside me not to beg for more. Seven will touch me. I can get this from Seven. I won't have to feel like something is completely broken inside me because he's a good man. But I cannot give myself to *this* man except for survival. Not for pleasure. Not for sheer wanton desire. If there's a choice, I have to make the choice that won't make me feel so good.

"Open your eyes and look at me," he demands.

I open my eyes.

"Good. Now, choose, Kate. Pain or pleasure."

But I can't choose. It's demented to ask for pain, and even more wrong to ask for pleasure from this man. Or is it the opposite?

"Master, please... I can't."

"It's a hard choice, I get it," he says. He stands next to the bed, and a moment later, the flogger falls so hard against my back I lose my breath.

“That's pain,” he says, as if this were a confusing sensation I wouldn't figure out on my own.

He climbs back onto the bed, straddling me, trailing kisses down my back, running his tongue over the welts his hand left only minutes ago. Then his fingers are inside me again, rubbing in the most intensely pleasurable way.

“This is pleasure,” he says. “Do you want the demonstration again, or can you choose now?”

I know which he wants me to choose. If I deny him this and choose pain, he will make me regret it. Maybe he won't draw blood with the flogger, but it will hurt. What he just gave me was only a taste.

And so I fall. I submit. I give him what will please him even as it will break away a piece of my soul.

“Pleasure, Master.”

“You're such a sweet whore,” he says. His fingers fuck me harder as I buck shamelessly against his hand. It feels good, but I know I can't really come this way. I've never had that kind of orgasm—the one that comes from the inside. Part of me thinks they are a myth. Even so, I'm determined to fake it if necessary to please this dangerous man and save myself whatever pain I can.

But I don't have to. His other hand slips underneath me and rubs my clit. He drives me harder and harder, my body growing wetter and more aroused with each pleasurable sensation he offers me.

“Come, Kate,” he demands.

I wish he would call me Pretty Toy or even sweet whore. Not Kate. I can't stand to hear my name on his lips as I come apart in his hands.

The pleasure shatters me, and he is pleased.

“Good girl.”

I shut my eyes as the shame crawls over me. I didn't just *let* this monster touch me, I wanted him to. My body craved him. If he had wanted to fuck me, I would have spread my legs wider and thrust my hips up at him in obedient invitation. I wouldn't have screamed or cried or begged him to stop.

This can't be me. This can't be who I am.

I think he'll untie me now and take me back to the cell, but he doesn't. Instead he goes to the box in the corner and comes back with a blindfold. I let him tie the dark cloth around my eyes without complaint because there's relief here. I don't have to look at him or be ensnared by that cold gray gaze. I

can hide here.

“I'm not quite done with you. I want to test something.”

He releases me from my bonds, then urges me onto my back and restrains me again, spread-eagled. I'm even more grateful for the blindfold now. This is too exposed. I want to beg him, but I'm not sure what I would be begging for. So I remain quiet and hide in this darkness he's offered me.

I hear his footsteps retreat. I hear things being moved around in that box he got the blindfold out of. Then he returns to me and sits beside me on the bed.

“I'm going to ask you some questions, Pretty Toy. And it's very important for your own safety that you tell me the truth. I'm good at spotting liars. You do not want to test me. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes, Master.”

“Good. Do you masturbate?”

“Yes, Master,” I whisper.

He releases one of my hands. “Show me how you do it.”

“Please...” Even after all he's seen... even after how he's touched me and watched me come, I can't touch myself while he watches. I just... can't.

“I can still punish you,” he says.

I don't want him to punish me. I'm too afraid after what I saw of Seven's back that if he gets started, if he gets too much of a taste for hurting me, he won't stop, and I won't survive it. Or if I do, I'll wish I hadn't.

My hand drifts down between my legs, and I begin to stroke my clit. I can feel his intense gaze on me. I feel like he's studying me, evaluating me—as though I'm getting some sort of performance review.

“Stop,” he says.

My hand stills over my pussy.

“Do you not go inside?”

I shake my head.

“Why not?”

I've never had a discussion with anyone about this before. It's far too private, and I don't want this to be the person I tell this to. I know there's no right or wrong way to touch myself, but he makes me feel like there is, as though there's something childish in my technique.

“I only have an orgasm from the outside, so I don't see the point...”

He laughs out loud at this, and heat rises into my cheeks.

“What about vibrators? Do you use vibrators?” he asks.

“S-sometimes.”

“On the inside or outside?”

“Outside.”

“Hmmm,” he says. “I don't like that. We're changing that right now. I'm going to train you to come with penetration.”

“And if I can't?” I ask, the fear threading my voice, making it come out small and quiet. Will he get a new toy, one he doesn't deem defective?

“You will. You've just never been taught properly.”

If I weren't so afraid, I would be offended that this stranger thinks he understands my body and what it is and isn't capable of better than I do. I've tried masturbating that way before. It doesn't work. It makes me feel foolish as though I'm seeking an impossible thing that everybody else is faking, and I'm just too dumb to know it's all an act.

I jump when his hand encircles my wrist. He pulls my arm back over my head and secures me the way he had me.

“What if I can't?” I ask again. I know I shouldn't keep pushing this button, but I have to know. “A-are you going to kill me?”

Amusement laces his voice. “No, Kate, I'm not going to kill you. Killing is so unimaginative. I can't understand the soulless being who can't think of more interesting things to do than take life. I have far better things to do with you than kill you.”

“Until you get tired of me,” I say, wishing I could just shut up. I actually flinch when I say this because I'm afraid I'm pushing too far. I brace myself for the punishment I worry might still be coming.

But he just strokes my inner thigh. “Do you think I'm stupid, Pretty Toy?”

“N-no, Master.”

“Only the stupid get bored. I'll never run out of ways to twist you to my will.”

Somehow this possibility is more terrifying to me than death. Death promises an end. But my captor is offering the possibility that there will never be an end. And now I'm afraid there won't be. I was so busy worrying about him killing me that I didn't bother to worry about what would happen if he didn't.

He strokes my hair. “No more questions. Just feel. I'm going to teach your cunt how to obey me now.”

I hear a buzzing, and I know he's turned the vibrator up to the highest setting. I want to tell him it will be too intense. I want him to start at the low

setting, which I can handle.

As though he can read my mind, he leans in close to my ear and whispers, "I like sluts who can take intense hard vibrations. You will take it, and you will open your legs wider to take more. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

Tears begin to slip out from beneath the fabric. Every time he speaks to me like this, my body wants him more. I can't cope with how he so easily turns me into his pliant plaything. I thought I would fight more.

I wanted to be someone who would fight. But I can't fight this man. Some part of me knows it's because of the days of head games I've already experienced. The very real threat of starvation I experienced in the cell. I don't want that to happen ever again. And I don't want him to do to me what he did to Seven.

Is it so wrong that I want pleasure over pain even if it comes from a monster?

He spreads me open and presses the toy directly against my clit. I jerk away at the intensity, but he holds it there. I take slow, measured breaths.

He starts to move it up and down over my clit, and then he's dragging the pulsating tip down to my opening, then slowly back up again. He moves the toy over my entire pussy, from my most sensitive flesh, to my least sensitive. When I'm close to coming, he moves away from my clit and focuses on another area with far fewer nerve endings.

This torment goes on forever, and after a while, I'm arching and grinding, moving with the toy. He slips it briefly inside me, then out again. Then he's teasing me everywhere but my clit. He's gotten me so close to the edge, but he refuses to give me sensation where I need it to get off.

"Beg me to come," he says.

I don't bother to fight. There's no point. We both know I want this, but I thought he was going to fuck me with it.

"Please, Master, let me come." It's the second time I've said these words today, and to two different men. It makes me feel like such a whore.

He begins to work the vibrator inside me, even as I desperately want it on my clit. I'm so wet and throbbing and needy right now. I've never been this aroused before. I've never been tormented this long and kept on the edge of pleasure like this.

He fucks me with it, dragging it in and out so slowly I want to scream: *I can't come this way!* Then he's on the outside again, teasing my opening,

running the toy over my labia, barely grazing my clit.

I'm crying now. "Please..."

"The only way you're coming is if the vibrator is inside you. I don't care if it takes hours to get there. You will get there. It's the only way it's happening, so your body better figure it out."

It's moving inside me again, slow, then fast, then slow again. This tease goes on forever. I'm trembling with my need. I want to beg him *please please just touch my clit. Please I'll do anything.* But I can't say those shameful words.

I wonder how long he'll do this before he gives up and punishes me for not being able to do what he wants me to do.

But then suddenly with no warning, I arch off the bed, my body bucking wildly against the vibrator as he fucks me harder with it. The pleasure builds from somewhere deep inside me and explodes in the most shattering orgasm I've ever had.

He turns the toy off. I lie there for a moment, shaking, unable to believe what just happened, unable to comprehend that the one thing I've wanted so desperately to experience I only somehow managed in captivity.

A moment later the tip presses at my lips.

"Clean it," he orders.

My tongue darts out and licks my own juices off the toy.

"Good girl. I told you, you just needed to be taught how to come that way. You just needed patience. It will get easier each time. And then it will be my cock taking you there."

He lies down next to me and strokes my face and the side of my neck for what feels like forever, and I hate myself just a little bit for wanting him to never stop.

FIVE

When I'm returned to the cell, it's silent. No music. Seven is still unconscious. I was gone probably less than an hour, but I'm still worried because he hasn't woken yet. The cell door opens again, and I flinch, but our captor only leaves clean clothes for Seven. None for me, of course. I'm never getting clothes again, and he made it very clear to me before bringing me back that he doesn't want to see the towel on me anymore.

I go to the bathroom and take the first aid kit out of the cabinet. When I return, I put everything on the ground next to the mattress and sit down. I gently touch a part of his shoulder that isn't damaged and shake him.

"Master," I say. Our captor was very clear about how I am to address my co-captive. It doesn't matter what Seven and I think about it, it isn't worth it to disobey. And after the darkly twisted pleasure I just received in the dungeon, the smallest part of me wants to follow these orders even beyond the terror of what might happen if I don't.

He groans and shifts.

I stroke the side of his face. "Just be still. I'm going to bandage you up."

Seven becomes alert, his eyes flying open. "Did he hurt you?"

"N-no. Not like you. I'm okay." I'm not *really* okay, but I'm not bleeding.

"Don't call me that," he says. So he heard the first word I spoke to him.

"I have to. It's what he wants. Don't shame me for..."

He reaches out, his hand gripping mine, stopping me.

"I would never shame you, but I can't stand to see you demeaned like this."

"I know."

I gently extricate my hand from his and start cleaning the marks on his back. I have a complicated swirl of emotions surrounding Seven. In such a short period of time, I'm starting to feel things for him that I don't think I should, things I'm not sure are real. It's the trauma bonding of an extreme situation.

Not that I wouldn't be attracted if we'd met in a normal way. I would be. And I'm sure in time, I would come to know and understand his very appealing protective nature. But it feels like letting myself feel things for Seven is all a part of a complex game that I don't yet fully understand the rules for. And I'm afraid if I let myself care for him, it only gives me more to lose.

He winces but doesn't cry out as I apply an antibiotic cream to his back. I feel so guilty that I don't have any marks. I know it would upset Seven if my skin had been broken, but it feels wrong that he got all this pain and damage, and I got earth shattering pleasure.

The original shame I felt at this is completely overwhelmed by the shame I feel now at the very different experience I got in the dungeon. I unroll the gauze across the marks that are open, and tape it down with medical tape. Some of his whip lashes are just red, not bloody, so I leave those alone except for the cream.

Seven struggles to sit up. He lets out a pained hiss as he leans against the wall.

"Maybe you shouldn't do that," I say.

He shakes his head. "No. It's cool to the touch. It's better now. I'm fine." His hazel gaze cuts to mine, concerned. "What did he do to you?"

I look away. "Just leave it."

The voice of our captor comes out over the speaker again. "I gave our girl her first vaginal orgasm. It's too bad you missed the show, the way she bucked against the vibrator... the way she *begged* me. It was beautiful."

My face flames at this, and I can't look at Seven.

"You sick fuck!" Seven says.

For the smallest moment, I worry those words are directed at me, but when I look back at him, I see his face is turned up toward the camera.

"You were the one who wanted her to have a lighter punishment. You made a trade. Do you regret the choice now that you know what *lighter punishment* means?" our captor mocks.

Seven's voice comes out so cold it frightens me. "You will make a

mistake. And when you do, I will kill you.”

The only response from our captor is laughter. “I really love this noble act you've got going.”

“It's not an act.”

“Of course it is. Everything is an act. Everything is a game,” our captor says. “Ready for lunch, pets? You've been so good I didn't even drug it this time.”

Bottles of water are dropped through the slot. Since Seven is hurt, I go over to the food slot and take the plates as they come through. Both plates are white this time. It's ham and cheese sandwiches, pickles, and potato chips. Is it really lunchtime?

I know it's at least day because of my time outside the cell, the windows we passed.

We eat experimentally as if we don't trust our captor's assurances about the state of the food, but there really are no drugs this time. So he must not be coming in. In fact, several days pass without him coming in or even speaking to us except to announce food so one of us can go get it as it's passed through the slot.

We're fed three times a day, and the food matches the time of day. Typical breakfast, lunch, and dinner fare seem to be served at the appropriate times.

I find myself weirdly grateful to our captor for this way to mark time. Each night, Seven and I sleep curled up together on the mattress. We turn the bathroom light out to sleep and lie together in total darkness.

In this darkness and privacy, Seven touches me. We never had a conversation about it. He didn't ask. I didn't say no. And he hasn't asked for the favor to be returned. I feel somehow shy about touching him back. So I just lie there under the cover of darkness as he caresses me and kisses my throat.

He starts out innocent each time. Safe places. My hair and face. My arms and legs. But he always finds his way to my breasts and then between my thighs, which I spread open for him every night without fail. He strokes me until I come, trying to keep my desperate panting and moans quiet but always failing. Then he whispers in my ear “Sleep.”

And I do.

My dreams are intense and erotic. Usually it's Seven I dream about. But sometimes it's our captor. I try not to think about those dreams. Seven is

okay. Our captor isn't. Even so, the dreams with cold light gray eyes are more intense because they are more wrong.

What I do for Seven each day isn't sexual. I take care of his back. I help him bathe without getting the bandages wet, and then I change them, applying more ointment to the whiplashes that still need them.

Each morning there are new clothes for Seven and the old clothes have been taken out. There seems to be a rotation of three pairs of jeans and T-shirts for him since he doesn't sleep naked. He never wears the T-shirt anymore. I think he only wears the jeans because he doesn't want me to feel threatened by his near-constant erection around me.

I've slept through this strange clothing exchange every night but one. One night I heard the door slide open. I held my breath. No light ever came on, which makes me wonder if our captor is using night vision goggles. He never touched me. I just heard a few soft sounds, and then he was gone.

SIX

I t's the fifth day of this routine. We just had our breakfast. Seven is in the bathroom running a bath in the large jacuzzi tub. When he steps out into the cell, the bandages are gone. There will be scars, but he's healed and no longer in any pain. And thankfully, they didn't get infected.

“Come take a bath,” he says. I think I hear an unspoken *with me* in there.

I've grown to not only trust Seven but to feel comfortable with him. I no longer try to hide my body from his hungry gaze. I'm not sure why our captor hasn't escalated things, why he hasn't touched me again, or why he hasn't made Seven fuck me for his amusement again. And while I'm grateful, there are the dreams that say there's an animal part of me that wants more to happen—that is ready for more to happen, even though the civilized part of me rebels.

It's only in the absence of the sexual demands of our captor that I learn to crave it. To want it. Maybe it's partly because of the way Seven has unknowingly stoked this fire within me each night as he touches me, and I open and surrender to his questing hands. I don't know why Seven does it. I think it's some sort of strange comfort.

Or maybe he wants me too much. Maybe fucking me that first time has stoked a fire in him that now won't go out, either. Maybe he reasons that giving me pleasure is less evil than taking it from me. After all, what does he get out of this arrangement?

I get up and follow Seven into the bathroom. He strips off his jeans and gets into the tub. He crooks a finger at me and points to the water. The way he looks at me now is entirely carnal. He doesn't want to just take a bath. And

neither do I.

I climb into the tub with him, leaning back against his chest. His erection presses against my lower back.

“Seven?”

His hand clamps over my mouth.

“Shhh. Listening devices, remember?”

I nod, and he pulls his hand away.

“Master?” I think if I quickly correct my error, our captor might not punish me for the mistake.

I feel Seven's cock go harder beneath me. He may be upset by my degradation on a purely moral level. But he likes it when I use that word. He likes that word directed at him. It turns him on. It doesn't mean he wants it exactly—especially if he thinks I don't want it—but it *does* excite him, which makes me feel just a little bit better about it. Because it excites me, too.

“Why do you think he's doing this?” I ask. We both know I don't mean why is he holding us captive. *He's a psycho* doesn't really need further explanation. No, the question is why is he just feeding us and leaving us alone, not taunting us, not messing with us. Is he bored? I remember he said smart people don't get bored, and I know he thinks of himself as smart.

“I'm not sure. But I don't like it. I don't think we can trust this peace and safety.”

I tense in Seven's arms, but I think the same.

We don't say anything more. There's been a silence between us for most of our time together in the cell, but it's a comfortable silence. It's a silence that feels much safer than talking.

He takes a raspberry shower gel and squeezes some into his hands and starts to wash me. I sigh in contented pleasure leaning into his touch as he massages the gel into my skin. I shouldn't feel this good being held captive. Seven is slow and thorough. His hands linger longer over my breasts, my ass, and between my legs. His fingers slip inside me, and I buck against him.

“Wait...” I say, “what about you?”

I wanted to return the favor and wash him, though maybe not with raspberry. I think I saw some peppermint in the cabinet. Even though I find myself too shy to initiate anything, to touch him without him guiding me to, I really want to touch him. I remember that first day in the shower. I want to lick that 'V' again.

“I showered while you were still sleeping. We don't need to bathe me.

Turn around and straddle me.”

We've gone days with him only giving, never taking. His restraint has been admirable. Each day he hasn't asked anything of me, I've grown to trust him a little more. But we both have needs, and we're here together. It seems foolish not to take our pleasures where we can get them. Especially if we'll probably die here.

I know our captor says he won't get bored and that killing is unimaginative, but what does he plan to do with us when he's finished? Because someday he will be finished.

I start to turn around to do what Seven has asked, but his hand on my hip stills me.

“Wait, are you on birth control?”

He could have asked the question when we fucked a few days ago, but we were hungry and not exactly in the right frame of mind for that thought process. And it didn't matter anyway, if we wanted to eat. He knows I can't be on the pill. Is he hoping I had the shot?

“No, but I don't need it. I can't have children.”

“How do you know?”

“Trust me. I know. I had to see a lot of doctors when I was a teenager. They discovered an abnormality in my uterus. It wasn't directly related to the problem I was having but they stumbled on it. I've been this way since birth. The short version is I can't have kids.”

“There's no treatment or surgery?”

“There really isn't anything they can do in my case. Some women with milder abnormalities have lots of miscarriages but have at least a small chance of maintaining a pregnancy, but mine is too malformed. It just can't happen. I'm not built right.”

At first I don't realize I've started crying. Seven strokes my back.

“Shhh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I just didn't want to take more risks than we had to.”

“It's okay.”

Is this why he hasn't taken? Even though we're being fed on a regular schedule, I'm still bait. I'm still naked, locked in an enclosed space with a man strong enough to take what he wants. And he would never get caught by any outside authorities because we both know we will never be free.

If he wasn't afraid I'd get pregnant—with whatever added horror *that* might entail—would he still have had this saintly self-control?

He's stroking my hair. "Do you want me?" he asks.

He never asked if I wanted him to stroke me to orgasm each night in the dark. My legs falling open when he reached my thighs was enough for him. But this is obviously different.

"Yes, Master."

A sharp intake of breath is his only reply. He *does* like it when I call him that. He doesn't want to like it, but he likes it.

"You know you don't have to call me that when we're alone."

"I have to call you something, and he won't allow names. It doesn't bother me."

"Climb on top of me and ride me," he says, choosing not to address the fact that calling him master *doesn't bother me*.

It's such a weird thing for me to have said, but it *doesn't* bother me. In the time we've been captive together I've started to feel this strange submissive urge toward him. I like the idea of him having this power. It makes me feel safer even though I know I'm not.

I turn and straddle him, sliding down over his huge cock. I don't know how many times we'll do this, but I'm sure I'll never get used to his size.

"You are so fucking tight. How are you so fucking tight?"

I shrug. "No children?"

"Good point."

I close my eyes and slowly start to move. I brace my hands against his chest. His hands come up and close over mine.

"Open your eyes. Look at me," he says.

I open my eyes and hold his hazel gaze. This can't really be called fucking. It's making love. I'm not sure how I feel about that, but it's what it is. It's slow and sweet, but the angles are all wrong. It's too hard to do this in this tub. Seven realizes the same thing.

"Let's move to the shower," he says.

"Okay." I get up on shaking legs, and he helps me out of the tub. He pulls the plug and lets that water drain as he moves us into the huge shower. He doesn't turn the water on. He just pulls me into the enclosed glass space with him. Without a word, he bends me forward until my hands are resting flat on the ground.

I gasp when he enters me from behind. I've never done this in this position. The penetration is so deep that I feel this excited flip in my stomach with every thrust. I've secretly wanted his cock inside me again for so long

that I don't need him to tease me or work me up. I'm already wet and ready for him.

The wait, the tightness, the angle, it's all too much for him, too. He drives into me with such ferocity it steals my breath. No sweet words of endearment are exchanged between us. We are no longer making love. We are fucking. Or he is fucking me. There is something animal and wild in this moment. His ability to resist this has frayed at the edges. *He* has frayed at the edges.

He lets out a harsh guttural sound when he comes, then he pulls out of me. I think I might cry. I know he didn't mean it this way, but I feel like he just used me for his own pleasure without anything for me—like he just masturbated inside my body. A part of me is turned on, but another part is pissed being left like this, so desperate and needing.

I know I'm technically way ahead on the orgasm count, but still.

He steps out of the shower, and I just stand there for several minutes, numb. How is it that what happened in the dungeon with that sick psychopath feels like less of a violation somehow than this? I just had a bath, but I feel like I need another one.

I'm about to turn on the water and bathe again when he says, “Come out here.”

I step out of the shower to find he's laid several large thick bath towels down on the tile floor. He motions for me and I join him.

“Lie down.”

I wonder if these short sharp orders are a result of hearing the word *Master* on my lips. It's as though this word flips a switch inside him, and suddenly he wants to possess me.

I lie down on my back. He settles between my legs and languidly caresses and licks me until I come, my legs shaking from the force of my pleasure. I now feel so stupid for doubting him, for thinking he would leave me unfulfilled and just use me. I let out a long contented sigh as he strokes my belly.

He gets up and comes back a few minutes later with a warm wet wash cloth which he uses to clean me from our mingling fluids slipping down my thighs. I am falling for this man, and I no longer care if it's real.



I FEEL STRANGELY self-conscious when we go back into the cell. Seven has jeans on again. He sits on his side of the cell beside the mattress, and I sit on mine. This draws an odd look from him.

“Don't you want to come lie down with me?” he asks. He looks almost hurt by this, as though I'm rejecting him.

I don't know why I went to my old spot. Before I can answer, sounds are coming out of the speaker. It's the sounds of him fucking me in the shower—that wild animal sound he made when he came. There's silence for a moment, and then it's my recorded moans of pleasure filling the cell.

Then the voice speaks for the first time outside of meals in five days. “It's about time,” he says. “I thought you two would never fuck on your own. It was like watching pandas in captivity.”

I swallow hard, my gaze going to Seven's.

“Congratulations, pets,” our captor says. “You've unlocked the next level. I know he's been touching you at night. The cameras have a night vision setting, but you can't level up unless you fuck on your own. I'm so excited.”

I don't know why my subconscious mind has been romanticizing and sending me erotic dream imagery of our captor, but suddenly all the fear of him is back in a single moment.

There's a light tinkling metallic sound on the floor under the food slot, and I see that a key has been dropped onto the ground.

“Pretty Toy,” our captor says, “chain him up.”

I look at Seven, my eyes wide. Somehow I'd thought he would have to feed us and give Seven the drugs before he could come in here. Somehow I'd been living in the false security that I was safe at all other times inside this cell. He can't come in here otherwise without being overpowered unless he brings a weapon, and I know Seven would rush him, even if he pointed a gun.

This option hadn't occurred to me.

There's a loud sigh over the speaker as I remain frozen, staring at that key.

“No more food comes through the slot until you chain him up. You already know I can wait you out, so I suggest the two of you cooperate. There's no point starving yourself and suffering more. Don't you agree?”

The look in Seven's eyes is stark, not because he's about to allow himself to be chained up, but because it leaves me vulnerable and because it was his need to fuck me without orders to do so that *unlocked the next level*.

I struggle to stand and cross the floor to the food slot. I stare at the shiny

silver key for several minutes as though trying to teleport it out of this house so we'll be safe. But the key stubbornly refuses to disappear under the urgency of my thoughts.

Finally, I pick it up and cross the room to Seven.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"You couldn't have known."

"I should have."

My hands are shaking too hard to unlock the shackles on the wall, so Seven takes the key from me and unlocks them. He gives it back before locking the first shackle on himself. He holds out his other wrist. I'm crying now.

I shake my head. "I can't." I turn up toward the camera. "Are you going to hurt him?"

"Of course not," the voice says. "He didn't break any rules."

"A-are you going to hurt me?"

"Address me properly," he says. I know he heard everything in the bathroom. Of course he must be angry that I would so easily and without prompting call Seven *Master*, but refuse the title to him. It wasn't intentional. I would never intentionally piss this guy off. I'm just too scared to think.

"I'm sorry, Master."

But he doesn't answer my question. He only says, "Obey, Pretty Toy."

I look to Seven as if he can offer me some guidance. There are no choices here. If I don't chain him up, we'll just go for days without food until I finally give in, and then I'll be half starved on top of whatever is about to happen here. But if I do lock the other chain around Seven's wrist... that door is going to open.

I can't cope with the idea of that door opening and that swirling mass of darkness coming into this cell with us.

I pace back and forth, my hands shaking so violently I drop the key.

"You're only making this harder on yourself," our captor says. His voice is so calm and reasonable I want to scream.

"Look at me," Seven says, careful not to use my name, careful not to break the rules.

I look into his eyes. I'm struggling to calm my crying, struggling to breathe.

"It's okay," Seven says.

It's not okay, and we both know it. But I have no real choice. I take a deep

shuddering breath and lock the second shackle around his wrist. That click is the loudest sound I've ever heard.

The chains are long enough that he's still able to pull me into his arms. He holds me, cradling my head against his chest like he did that first day in the shower. His other hand strokes my back.

“Shhhh,” he soothes. But I can't stop crying.

I flinch when I hear the metal door slide open and the sound of our captor walking into the room. I squeeze my eyes shut and press harder against Seven's chest.

“Come to me, Pretty Toy.”

I hold on to Seven harder. I can't go to that monster.

“Don't hurt her,” Seven warns.

“Or what? You'll do something heroic? Kate, what did I say about names in here? I distinctly heard you say his name in the bathroom. If you're smart, you will step out of his arms and beg me for mercy.”

Seven's grip on me tightens like he's just made up his mind to never let me go, to never let our captor have me. I wish it were that simple, but I know it's not.

Our captor comes closer, standing on the side my face is turned toward.

“Open your eyes, sweet whore.”

I bite back my sobs and open my eyes to see that cold gray gaze sliding into me. Something dark inside me awakens, and I feel the throbbing start between my legs. I try to make it stop, but it won't, even as I'm so fucking scared of him.

My gaze drops to the cane in his hand.

“Master, please, please...”

But he's not concerned with me right now. He's turned his attention to Seven. He props the cane against the wall and pulls a syringe out of his pocket. He removes the protective cap from the needle and pushes the air out, tapping the side of the needle.

“You can release her to me, or I can inject you with a sedative and take her. She'll be punished worse if I have to do that.”

I feel Seven's arms slacken around me in defeat.

“Good. Now, Kate, come, throw yourself on my mercy.”

I know what he wants from me. There is this almost psychic link that formed between us that day in the dungeon. I've had to start trying to think like him to survive this total mind fuck he's got me under. I pull myself from

the warm, safe circle of Seven's arms, turn away from him, and kneel in front of our captor. I think of him as our captor, but the thought that really keeps coming to the front of my mind is *my master*.

I've been trying so hard for days to not think that phrase, to not let it burrow inside my soul and set up camp there. But it's useless. This man owns me, and both Seven and I know it. He may also own Seven in a sense, but he has this twisted desire to bring my would-be protector over to his side of the good and evil divide, leaving me alone, helpless, and at the mercy of both of them.

I want to convince myself that this isn't possible, but look at how he's already conditioned me. And I know how much Seven wants me and how the word *Master* affects him. It's only a matter of time before my one safe haven is gone.

I let the tears fall because there's no point in being brave. I don't think bravery wins me points with this man. He wants to watch me break and crumble at his feet. And so I do. I give him what he wants. I let him see this absolute vulnerability and how broken I am. I think that if I do this, somehow I can hold onto a small piece of myself and hide it and keep it safe within me.

"Master, please. I beg you. Forgive me. I'm sorry I disobeyed. Please... spare me."

He chuckles. "Oh, yes, my sweet whore. You know exactly the way I like it."

He derives a real pleasure from these words I speak, these tears I cry, my total despair kneeling at his feet. He seems to get the kind of satisfaction from this that most men get from a blow job.

I flinch when he starts to stroke my hair.

He reaches down, takes my hands in his, and pulls me to stand. Then he spins me around so that my back is pressed against his front, so that I'm exposed, facing Seven. He holds my throat in a possessive grip with one hand as the other moves slowly over my body—as though he's displaying a pretty object he intends to sell for the right price.

"Look at her," he says to Seven. "She's so fucking perfect. Already she's so perfect. You will soon come to appreciate all the work I'm doing. Watch her." Then he whispers in my ear. "Look at him. Do you see the lust? He's not your hero. Remember that, Pretty Toy. Remember that when he goes dark. Because he will."

There's anger at our captor in Seven's eyes, but beneath that I do see it. I

see the lust. I see the animal way he wants me. One side of him wants to break free of these chains and protect me—and he does make a valiant effort as he pulls on them with all the strength he has. But the shadow inside him wants to feed.

“Now, I need you to be a very good girl for me and go stand next to your chains facing the wall. It's time for your punishment.”

“Please,” I whimper. I'm falling apart in his arms. I can barely hold myself up as the terror of that cane grips me.

“Shhhh,” he says, “I'm very pleased with your begging.” He cups his hand against my mound, pulling me back against him. I feel his hard length pressing into my bare skin through his pants. “You've earned some mercy. Now go, before you lose it again.”

He releases me, and I stumble a few steps forward. Seven reaches out and catches me. His thumb strokes over my arm—a barely perceptible gesture of comfort. I look away from his gaze, right myself, and go to the other end of the cell, turning to face the wall.

When our captor comes to me, he's collected the cane and the silver key. I think I may hyperventilate as he unlocks the shackles and locks my wrists into them. These are smaller than Seven's for much smaller wrists—like mine.

“Press your hands flat against the wall, up near your face to support yourself,” he growls in my ear. “And do not move them. You're getting five.”

I whimper as he slowly and gently drags the tip of the cane over my back. I find myself arching toward these soothing pleasurable sensations, but then he pulls away.

The pain from the first strike across my ass makes all of my nerve endings cringe, trying desperately to escape his reach. The instrument he just used to give me comfort has transformed back to its true form—a thing to be feared. My scream bounces off the walls of the cell. There's no way I can handle four more of these.

“M-master, please...”

“Ooops. I promised you some mercy. I forgot. It's so easy to forget rules. I'm sure you can relate.” His voice drips with acid.

“I'm sorry! I swear I'll never speak his name again.” It pains me to say this because I really like the sound of Seven's name on my lips. When I forget it's a number, the simple sound of it is comforting and sensual, like a far more sophisticated and worldly Kevin.

“Good girl,” my master says.

The next four strikes are tolerable but still leave their searing impression into my flesh. Tears slide down my cheeks in response to each harsh kiss of the cane. My body trembles, but I can handle it. It doesn't feel like the world is on fire. It doesn't feel like *I* am on fire.

This time he keeps his word and stops after the fifth strike. He leans the cane against the wall and begins to carefully rub the welts he left. Then he's kneeling behind me, his tongue trailing over them, causing me to shudder against his warm questing mouth. He presses a kiss against my skin and rises.

“You will be a good girl from now on, won't you?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Good.” He presses his hand between my legs and chuckles. “I knew you would be wet for me after your punishment.”

He strokes between my legs for a moment. I try not to grind against his hand, but I fail. He stops, only needing to make the point that my body belongs to him whether or not my mind has fully caught up yet.

He unlocks the shackles, and I slide bonelessly to the floor, leaning against his leg for support. But he's far from done with me. I feel the energy in him change, and I brace myself for whatever is coming next.

I chance a glance at Seven. He looks broken, like he was the one who just got caned.

“Let's play a different game,” he says. “Today it's lady's choice. I can fuck you while Seven watches, or I can give him a punishment to spare you this indignity.”

“I'll take the punishment,” Seven says without hesitation even though he just truly healed from the last one.

“Are you a lady? I wasn't asking you. That's not how this game works. *She* gets to choose.”

I bite my lip, willing myself not to cry anymore. I hate how much I cry now, how weak and fragile I've become in so short a time. He steps away from me, and I manage to catch myself, my hands bracing against the floor.

I look up and his cold gray gaze settles on me. He knows what I'll choose. I can't let him beat Seven. I can't *choose* for him to beat Seven. He already took a punishment to spare me.

“I'll take the punishment,” Seven says, more insistent, this time to me. “It's okay. I can't watch him force himself on you.”

Our captor laughs at this. “Oh, believe me, it won't be forced. Our Kate

has a secret. She wants me. And she hates herself for it. But she *does* want me. We have a connection. I felt it. I felt the way she surrendered in the dungeon and gave herself over to me.”

“She's terrified of you!”

“Yes. But her desire runs far deeper than her fear. And she's so grateful for the way I awakened her to a new level of pleasure she didn't even know she could feel.” He turns to me then. “Tell me, Kate, and be honest, you know how I hate lies. You've thought about what it would be like when I fucked you. You've gotten aroused by it. Haven't you?”

I can't stand to say these words out loud, but I'm sure he will punish me again much worse if I lie. “Y-yes, Master.”

“So, see, Seven... it actually won't be some big horror for her to let me inside her pretty pussy. What bothers her is that you will watch and maybe judge her just a little for what a dirty whore she is. And you *will* watch. I would hate for her to have to degrade herself like this only for you to cheat on our game. Then I'll have to fuck her *and* punish you.”

“Listen to me, you don't have to do this. I'll take the punishment,” Seven says, his hazel gaze capturing mine before I look away again.

I notice he's not saying my name. He knows what will happen if he does.

Our captor notices it, too. “Oh yes,” he says. “I forgot. You don't have anything to call her. Hmmm. If I'm going to share ownership, you need a pet name for her. How do you feel about Slut?”

Seven practically roars. He's so angry that for a moment I'm almost more afraid of him than our captor. Despite his evil, our captor remains calm, calculated. He doesn't do anything without thinking five moves ahead. But Seven is pure, raw emotion. Pure anger. He jerks on the chains so hard a part of me thinks he actually can pull them out of the wall and somehow save me... save us.

But the chains are solid, bolted into the concrete, too strong for even the greatest anger and protective instinct to break.

“Okay. No Slut,” our captor says. “You could have just vetoed the choice. For fuck's sake. You are such a drama queen.” He paces like he's really thinking this through. “So something cute then? Something sweet? How about Kitten?”

Seven catches my gaze, and there's a question there. I nod. I like Kitten. And I would especially like it coming out of Seven's mouth, which makes it seem impossible that our captor will actually allow us this small kindness.

“Excellent. Kitten it is, then. See how easy that was? Not everything has to be a fight, Seven. Not every discussion is a dragon for you to slay. We can come to terms you and I. We can share her. We already know how much you enjoy her. So let's enjoy her together.”

Seven ignores the taunt and turns back to me. “Kitten, let me take the punishment. You have a choice. Use it.”

I shake my head. “I can't, Master.”

He flinches almost imperceptibly when I say this, but I'm afraid if I don't use the title, more punishment will come to me.

“Good girl,” our captor says softly, reaching down to pet my hair. “You're learning.”

I lean into his touch without thought.

Every word out of his mouth is true. I don't emotionally want him, but my body craves him. A twisted part of me does want to know what it feels like to have him moving inside of me. How will he fuck me? Will he be rough like Seven was in the shower? Or will he maintain this calculated calm?

And I do hate myself for this. He is evil. He can do any terrible thing he wants to either of us. This man quite literally has no soul. No conscience. There's nothing behind his eyes beyond the simple amusement of his game and we, his pawns. We are the pieces he moves around his game board with impunity.

I can only hope he truly doesn't get bored and that his creativity doesn't turn to brutal torture. It feels like he's inside my head. I'm sure he studies and analyzes me with the help of his cameras. Always. He studies Seven, too.

He knows exactly which button to push with me and exactly when and how to push it. This is the most terrifying thing about him—how smart he is. I've never known somebody this smart. If he had been violent from the start with me, I might have quickly rushed to obey him, but it would have been only out of fear.

And I *do* fear him, more than anything I've ever feared. But he's right; the desire is louder. And it wouldn't be there if he hadn't been so patient, so gentle with me so far. Yes, he's punished me, and it hurt, but he hasn't done any of the extremely violent things he could have so easily done. And he didn't rape me. And it isn't because he isn't capable of these things. I saw that clearly enough on Seven's back.

All of this combines with his physical beauty to create this gratefulness and need—this sick part of me that finds myself *wanting* to please him to pay

him back for these small kindnesses.

But I don't kid myself about this. He wants to break me. He *is* breaking me. But he wants to do it with pleasure. That's the cruelest way to do it. I know this, but still I want him. And though I feel a deep shame at the idea of Seven watching me fall... the throbbing wetness, this continuing and growing ache between my legs tells me, part of me wants him to watch.

“Make your choice, Kate. Let me fuck you while Seven watches, or let our noble hero take another punishment for you.”

“Kitten...” Seven says. It comes out a low rumbling growl.

Our captor is right. There's this bizarre connection between us. I know what I'll choose, and I know exactly how he wants me to phrase it. I know what will please him the most to hear.

So I look up at him, still kneeling on the floor. My lip trembles as I say, “Please, Master, fuck me.”

“Good girl,” he says, a slow, amused smile spreading across his face.

I barter with myself in this moment. I promise myself I will only give my softer feelings to Seven. I will only *love* Seven, because I know I am beginning to love him. Who wouldn't? He's perfect in every way. I'm safe with him.

But I will never love our captor. I will give him my body. I will please him. I will do whatever he asks of me, but I won't let myself feel the things that are okay with Seven. I won't give him my mind or my soul.

“I can't think how I want to take you. Any requests, Seven?”

Seven is taking slow, measured breaths. I can't reassure him that I'm okay with our captor fucking me. It sounds insane even locked safely inside my own mind. And I'm not sure I want to see the look on Seven's face if he believed me.

He doesn't respond to our captor's taunts, and so I'm placed on my hands and knees, facing Seven. I hear a zipper, then pants falling to the floor. I assume he removes his T-shirt as well but I can't bring myself to turn around and look at him. If he's as perfect under that T-shirt as I suspect, I don't think I could cope with the level of lust I might feel if I paused to truly drink in his beauty.

He presses a strangely sweet kiss to the small of my back, causing me to forget for the smallest fraction of a second what he is... why we're here. A second later, his hand is moving between my legs, my arousal coating his fingers.

“She's so wet,” he says. It's almost an accusation, as though it's yet another thing I should be punished for.

I'm breathing hard, almost panting. I can't believe how turned on I am. It's wrong to feel this way, but something about my time in this cell, the realization of the hopelessness of the situation, it gives me permission to feel what I feel, no matter what that feeling might be.

Three days of hunger. Five days of peace and solace. Quiet interspersed with classical music and evil sarcasm. I am the farthest thing in the world from free, but I am free of one thing... the moral judgment or pity of the outside world. Even Seven's possible judgment can't touch me in this moment because I'm so aroused by the idea of him watching me like this as our captor takes me on the floor of the cell.

His hand snakes around my throat, pulling me back. “Look at him,” our captor says to me. “You will hold his gaze while I fuck you. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes, Master.”

But Seven is looking away, his gaze trained on a distant spot on the wall.

“Seven...” he warns. “Look at her. If you look at her, I'll be gentle. If you don't...” He doesn't need to finish the last part of his threat.

Seven turns his face toward me, his intense hazel gaze locked on mine as our captor slides easily into me. He's big, like Seven, but my body has decided to welcome him eagerly, not even asking for time to adjust to his size.

I moan as he slams his cock into me. It's not exactly gentle, but it's also not exactly unpleasant. I watch Seven watching me as I'm fucked and used at the whim of the twisted stranger who holds our lives in his hands. His fingers dig into my hips as he thrusts.

“Even if you can, don't come this time,” he growls. “This one is *only* for me.”

There's a low, hard flip in my stomach, and I feel myself go wetter as he slides even more effortlessly in and out of me. What is wrong with me? When Seven left me wanting in the bathroom, I felt hurt. This man does it, and it feels like Christmas.

I know he'll let me come; he's just decided that this time I'm to give him everything and take nothing other than the satisfaction of his pleasure. And the part of me too broken to know it's broken excitedly complies with these demands.

He falls into a hypnotic rhythm, and I find myself opening to him more, so much so that I feel the teasing edges of a potential orgasm licking at my insides. I feel like I could chase it and catch it if I tried, but I let it flutter away like a wayward butterfly as he lets out a harsh groan, taking his pleasure and spilling into me.

“Look at him, Pretty Toy.”

My eyes haven't left Seven's, but that's not what I'm being asked to look at.

“Look how hard he is. Maybe he's not such a hero after all. Crawl to him. I want to watch you suck his dick.”

Our captor slides out of me and puts his jeans back on. I crawl over to Seven, but suddenly I can't look at him. It's somehow easier with our captor. Despite his mocking and taunts, I know he doesn't judge me because he doesn't judge. There isn't some moral barometer inside his brain deciding this is okay and that is not. So nothing I can do will ever earn judgment from him. It may earn me punishment, but never judgment.

Seven is different. He might judge me, even if he doesn't want to. And I find myself resenting him a little for it. But then my gaze is drawn to the evidence of his desire. He is so hard, his erection bulging behind his pants, straining to be free to get inside my mouth, to get to the warm wet pleasure he's just been promised.

Our captor stands just behind me, his fingers tangling in my hair. “I want to watch him come down your throat, Pretty Toy. I want to watch you swallow like a good obedient whore.”

I am so turned on right now. I know I shouldn't be. I'm in too much danger to let myself fall into this fucked-up seduction. And it's even more fucked-up that my brain conjures up the word *seduction* in relation to anything that's going on right now.

He removes his hand from my hair, and I turn back to Seven. I struggle with the button and zipper on his jeans to free him. When his cock springs free, I'm about to open my mouth to take him, when a glint of something shiny catches my eye. The syringe lies on the ground, outside of Seven's reach, but not outside mine.

I chance a quick glance up at him, and his eyes widen a fraction as he realizes what I just saw. I know our captor will kill us eventually, and I don't want to die.

Before I can let myself think or lose my courage, I grab the syringe, spin

around, and jab it into our captor's thigh. I push the plunger down, making sure all the drug has emptied into his bloodstream.

I look up to find his eyes widen as he stumbles to the ground.

“Get the key,” Seven says. As if he needed to say that.

When I'm sure our captor is completely out, I slide my hand down inside his front pocket where I saw him deposit the key. It takes actual willpower not to ogle his bare chest. I'm trying to escape this psycho and somehow still feel the need to stop and admire the scenery. The animal part of me that only cares about rutting with a strong alpha male doesn't care about the reality of the situation or why I need to flee, not mount him. But he left me wanting, and the ache between my legs hasn't died down just because an opportunity to get away presented itself.

Finally I turn back toward Seven. “You'll have to drag him over to the door and stretch his arm up to the panel so we can use his thumbprint to get out,” I say, which truthfully is probably as obvious as his *Get the key* comment. But too much adrenaline is flowing to think through all the things which must be obvious to both of us in this critical moment.

I know our captor will probably be out for a while, but I'm still shaking so hard, rushing to try to unlock the metal cuff around Seven's wrist. I still can barely comprehend our luck.

“You're doing great,” Seven says.

It takes several attempts before I'm able to successfully insert the key into the lock and turn it, freeing one of his arms. I hand him the key because I don't think I can manage the next one on my own. He takes it from my shaking hand to unlock his other wrist.

I hear movement and turn, horrified, to find our captor standing over me. “Oh, Pretty Toy, that was an unfortunate choice.”

I turn quickly back to Seven to find he's gotten his other wrist free. He pulls himself to stand, but before he can prepare to fight off our captor, a needle is going into his neck, and he slumps to the floor. Does it just last a few minutes?

Our captor has the shackles around Seven's wrists and the key back in his pocket faster than I can process.

I scramble back as he advances. He tips the syringe he just injected into Seven toward me to reveal a red round label on top of the plunger.

“This is the one with the drugs. What you gave me? Was a saline solution. It was a test, and I'm sorry to say you failed it, Kate.”

I look over to Seven's unconscious body then back to our captor. I don't think people can really die from fear. Because if they could, I would be dead right now—a shadowy misty soul floating high in the air above my expired corpse. But no, fate is not so kind to give me such a quick death, and the look in his eyes says whatever is coming will be slow.

He just shakes his head at me, looking disappointed. The sickest part of this moment is the fact that there's a part of me that feels... contrite. As though I did something wrong. As though I broke his trust. *His* trust. Maybe it's better if he just kills me because I'm already too aberrant to live. I don't want to see the woman I will become if he keeps letting me breathe.

Broken sobs slip out of me even as I try to keep them locked down.

“Not going to beg me? Or was that just for when you were pretending to be a good girl?”

“Would it do any good?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“No.” Gone is his sarcastic word play and his amused expressions as he reveals each new twist in his game.

He sighs, “Come with me, Pretty Toy.”

I don't move. What difference does it make if I try to obey him now or if I resist? “Are you going to kill me?”

“No, Kate.” He stretches out his hand. He's far calmer than I would expect. I did jab a needle with what I thought were drugs in his leg after all. “Now,” he says.

I want him to rush at me, all anger and venom. I want him to grab me and forcibly remove me from the room, drag me kicking and screaming to the dungeon because I cannot just voluntarily walk toward him. But he doesn't. He just waits.

He can apparently wait forever for me to go to him. What else can I do? Run? Where? Around the cell? Into the bathroom? There's nowhere to hide, no way to escape. He can just let me wear myself out.

“It will be worse for you if you don't come with me now.”

These words are all I need to start moving, this small permission to obey him without self-recrimination. After all, it will be *worse* if I don't. So I'm not the stupid girl walking willingly to her doom. I'm the smart girl, stopping this from escalating and becoming *worse*.

I take the offered hand and he leads me over to the door. There's a brief pause while he presses his thumb against the thumbprint scanner, and the door slides open, taking us back out into that impossibly ornate hallway.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

I hadn't noticed it with everything that has transpired. “Yes, Master.”

I expect he will lead me to the end of the hallway and that other steel door that leads into the underground dungeon, but he doesn't. Instead, we stop a couple of doors before that where he takes me into a large modern kitchen.

“Sit,” he says, indicating a bar near the kitchen island.

I sit on a stool, bewildered.

“I'm going to say this once, Kate. This house is locked down. There's no way out. Every window is locked and can only be opened with a key. Each door is locked. The windows are shatterproof. There's an alarm that would sound anyway if anything was breached. So don't be stupid again.”

I watch quietly as he takes out some pans and begins to make bacon and eggs. I don't understand what's happening. I thought he was going to kill me, but he claims he isn't. And I'm sure he'll punish me. The fact that he's decided he wants to *feed* me right now is beyond my comprehension.

I feel suddenly self-conscious being naked upstairs in his bright kitchen with black and white parquet floors and the huge windows which offer me a stunning view of the gently rolling landscape outside.

My gaze shifts to a wooden block with an array of no doubt very sharp kitchen knives in it. He turns away from the stove and catches my guilty gaze.

He chuckles. “Don't even think about it. You don't want to escalate our relationship to knives. Trust me.”

I swallow hard and nod. Even as the smell of bacon and eggs wafts to my nose, I'm losing my appetite. How can I possibly eat knowing something extremely bad is about to happen to me? I try to keep my tears quiet, but I fail.

He makes no comment.

When the food is done, he places it in front of me and pours me a glass of milk. “Eat.”

I'm not sure if it's the smell of the food triggering my appetite or if somehow biologically my body now responds to his commands. I think it's the first thing but I wouldn't swear on it.

“Aren't *you* going to eat?” I ask.

“I already ate.”

He cleans up the kitchen and washes the dishes, then he leans against the kitchen island, watching me as I finish up the last bite of eggs. He takes the

plate and glass from me and washes those as well. I pray it takes him forever to finish this task so I can stay in the warm, bright, safe kitchen a little longer. At the same time, I can't stand the maddeningly slow way he moves, the way he drags out the time leading to whatever horrors await me for stabbing him with a needle while trying to escape. Can he really blame me for wanting to be free and safe?

“Come, Pretty Toy,” he says.

Then he just walks out of the kitchen. He doesn't grab me and drag me along like some hostage. He simply expects that I will get up and follow him. And I will because every door and window is locked. Everything is shatterproof. There's an alarm. Resisting or running is pointless, and it will only make him angry. I bite back another sob as I slide off the kitchen bar stool and follow him out of the room and the rest of the way down the hallway to that steel door with the security panel that leads down to hell.

He inputs a code, and the door slides open. There's a wide, sweeping motion of his arm in that gallant *after you* gesture. I'm sure I'm about to faint. A wave of dizziness moves over me, and my legs don't want to support my body anymore, but I take a deep breath, and it passes.

He waits.

I feel the tears sliding down my cheeks again. But I know they don't move him—at least not in the way I would want them to. The outline of his erection pressing against the fabric of his jeans tells me that much. I walk in front of him, down the winding stairs into the dungeon.

I'm already on my knees when he gets down there, mostly because I can't hold myself up. And really, it's more like child's pose in yoga. I need to breathe, and this is the only way I can get deep enough breaths into my body without hyperventilating. It's only a bonus that I know it will please him and look like submission. Maybe it is submission. I know it's fear.

His footsteps stop next to me, and then he sits on the ground. I flinch when he strokes my hair and then my back. Over and over again. This is the last thing I expected from him after what happened upstairs—gentleness. And I know it's a lie, but I don't care. I will drink it up like it's the last drop of water on earth. I need just another few minutes of peace before he hurts me.

Oh god, what is he going to do to me?

“I'm not going to harm you,” he finally says.

“But I thought...” I shut my mouth because what the fuck am I doing? If he's decided not to hurt me, I don't want to argue him out of it. *Be smarter,*

Kate.

“I'm going to train you. Don't misunderstand. This isn't kindness or a long lost conscience rearing its head. It's just the best choice for the outcome I want. Punishment and pain are always an option. And I'll use them as necessary, but I want to own every part of you. Completely. If I use too much pain, your fear will drive you to try to escape again. I would never truly own you. But if I inspire gratitude... you're mine forever.”

Well, at least he's laid out his evil plan, so I don't have to drive myself crazy trying to figure out what's going on. Even as I think these thoughts, I know he's calculated the choice of even telling me this. And already I feel gratitude moving through me, unbidden. When one goes from thinking they're going to die to thinking they're going to be tortured, to a good breakfast and the absence of those things... gratitude is the only response one is capable of.

I know I shouldn't feel it. He's keeping me as a slave. He took me away from my life—such that it was. None of this is okay, but I feel so grateful anyway as if everything he's done so far has been one giant favor. And the pleasure and desire that repeatedly winds its way through me at his touch and the promise of it makes it seem true.

The words, “Thank you, Master,” slip out of me so fast I can't stop them.

He chuckles at this. He has me exactly where he wants me. I think he *wanted* me to jab that needle into him no matter what he says about his disappointment at me failing his *test*. He's not disappointed. It's all going according to plan.

Even if I had experience with psychopaths, it wouldn't matter. I'm one hundred percent sure that there's not another human alive who would make the choices this man makes. He possesses the most terrifying combination of brilliance, evil, and patience. And I'm the unlucky lottery winner of his attentions.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I whisper.

“That question was a long time coming. Because I want to.”

There's a long silence. He finally speaks again. “Were you expecting a sad childhood story? Did you want to understand what turned me into such a soulless beast? Would that make it all okay? If you could point to some moment in time where I was a sad, scared little boy? Well, sorry to disappoint, Pretty Toy. That's not my story. My parents gave me everything I could ever want. I started out having everything, and then I doubled that

wealth. I've acquired every object I've ever wanted, and now I've acquired you. My living, breathing fuck doll."

He stands, then I feel his hands wrapped around mine, helping me off the floor. He leads me to the bondage bed at the far end of the dungeon and lays me down on my back. I watch as he goes to the large box where he got the vibrator the last time. He returns with a ball gag.

"Open," he says when he's beside me.

I open my mouth, and he presses the black rubber ball into place, fastening the straps behind my head. Then he presses a button on a remote, and the classical music I'd almost forgotten about begins to fill the dungeon. It's all so... civilized.

He doesn't restrain me. On a certain level, it's overkill. He doesn't need to tie me down unless it pleases him. The door at the top of the stairs is locked. There's no way out. I could jump off the bed and try to run, but he might change his mind about punishment if I do that. And I would eventually get tired. He only has to wait me out. He's already shown how patient and willing to wait he is.

The gag is worse than the restraints. With restraints, I can still beg. Even though I know there's nothing human in him, it still seems to amuse him and please him enough to offer me small indulgences. But I don't even have the power to beg now.

I watch warily as he lies beside me. He props himself on his side and observes me. I look away from his cold gray stare. It's too much to have that gaze leveled on me, taking me in, analyzing, deciding my fate.

"Look at me, Pretty Toy," he says. There's a warning wrapped inside the command.

I take a breath and look back at him, trying to hold his gaze. I flinch when he brushes my hair out of my eyes. Then he spends a small eternity just stroking my breasts and watching my reactions. He massages them first gently, then more roughly. He pinches my nipples into hard points and then releases the pressure.

Eventually, the tension eases from my body. I become soft and yielding. I find myself pressing into his hand, moaning behind the gag, my eyes drifting closed as my body arches into each caress.

"Good girl," he murmurs.

These words unlock the need between my legs as the arousal pulses to life again.

“If I put my fingers inside your pussy, will you be wet for me?”

I nod.

His hand trails over my belly and between my legs. I can hear my wetness as he presses a finger inside me. He smiles, satisfied with my body's response.

“This is mine. And because I allow it, Seven's. You're going to be our good whore. No more silly escape attempts. No more denying your desires. You want this, don't you, Pretty Toy?”

I could lie to myself. I could say that I only nod in answer to appease him, to try to stay safe. But I do have needs. I'm only human, and they are both so beautiful. There's no resistance to Seven. But our captor? I wish it was somehow okay to want what he's doing right now, to just exist and float on this haze of erotic satisfaction.

I'm supposed to fight. I'm supposed to struggle and cry and beg him not to touch me. But I just open my legs wider, holding his gaze, arching up to meet his fingers as they slide in and out of me.

“You will give me your pleasure. It belongs to me. The first thing you need to learn is how to come for me.”

I'm pretty sure I already know how to do that. I feel myself blush at the memory of what he did that first day on this bed.

He chuckles. “No, I mean you're going to learn how to come *for* me. You're going to come, and then come again, and then again, until *I* say it's time to stop. Sometimes pleasure can be so much that it becomes pain. You'll learn that, and then you'll learn to accept it and push through it to give me more of your pleasure. Until I allow you to stop.”

My eyes widen at this. I'm not that woman who has multiple orgasms. I don't know that I can't, I've just never tried. I'm satisfied after one. Again I find myself wondering what happens if I can't give him what he wants. A punishment of some type? I'm growing less afraid that he'll kill me. My escape attempt didn't push him to it so I now feel irrationally safe from death—at least for the foreseeable future. I'm not sure how accurate this assessment is, but it makes me feel the tiniest bit less guilty for the way I crave his touch.

He gets up and stretches my arms and legs out and binds me to the bed, much like he had me that first day. He produces a blindfold from a drawer in the base of the bed and secures it around my eyes.

I feel the panic edging in. Bound, no sight, no ability to cry out.

“Shhhh,” he says, stroking the side of my face. “I will remove the gag on one condition. You're not allowed to beg. You can make any sounds you want but no words. Do you accept these terms?”

I nod, desperate to have even the tiniest freedom.

“I want to be sure you understand. If you beg me, if you say a single word to me that I don't command, you will be punished. I can leave the gag in. It won't be comfortable, but you'll be safe. Do you want me to leave it in?”

I shake my head.

He sighs. “All right. Be careful with this favor, Pretty Toy. It may bite you in the end.”

This scares me a little. *Can* I resist the urge to beg? To try to reason with him? To speak the title he's demanded from me over and over?

I don't know, but the gag is starting to hurt, and it makes me panic and feel like I can't take in proper breaths. He unfastens the straps and pulls it off me. I lick my dry lips, then something plastic prods at my mouth.

“Drink.” When I hesitate, he says “It's only water.”

I take the water he offers, then lie back when he pulls it away.

A moment later, I feel his tongue between my legs, and I'm already past the point of even pretending to resist him. I don't speak. I don't beg. I just arch up toward his exploring tongue, whimpers and moans flowing out of me.

My first orgasm comes after only a few minutes. But he doesn't stop. He drinks me up, never slowing in his assault on my senses. He pulls away, and I'm panting.

He leaves me for a moment, and I take a long shaky breath. I know he isn't finished with me. Upon his return, I hear the distinct buzzing sound. I can tell he has it on the highest setting.

I cringe away before he reaches me, but he spreads me wide so that he can press these intense vibrations directly against my clit. I struggle away from the sensation, but there's nowhere to go. He grips my hip, stilling me.

“Be good and accept it, Pretty Toy.”

I breathe slowly. After a little while, the sensations start to feel like pleasure again as another orgasm prepares to crest over me. But before it can, he pulls it away from my clit.

The words “Please, Master” are at the edge of my tongue before I bite them back, remembering the promise of punishment.

He chuckles at this. He pushes the vibrator inside me much as he did that first day. This time I know I'll come. And it's as earthshattering as it was the

first time, building from some place deep within me and then exploding outward. I buck my hips with it, trying to fuck the toy instead of the toy fucking me.

I'm panting and whimpering when it finally subsides, and he pulls the toy away. But he only allows me a minute of rest before he's started in on me again. He uses multiple toys in a rotation as he drags orgasm out of orgasm from my quivering pussy.

My legs shake with the force of each release, and I bite my tongue to stop myself from begging please, no more. Please, please, Master, stop. But I hold these words in. I don't want to be punished. But in its own way, this is becoming a different kind of punishment.

Still, I don't allow myself to beg.

Some of the toys vibrate, some of them don't. One feels similar to oral sex against my clit. Some are larger than others, stretching me as they make me come for him. Sometimes he stimulates my clit, and other times he brings my orgasm out from the inside, training me to produce these new and exciting pleasurable pulses at his command.

I've lost count of how many orgasms I've had.

The next thing that slides inside me is his cock. He's on top of me, his movements so achingly slow that even with all the pleasure I've already had, I find myself arching up into him.

He leans close to my ear. "This time, you will come."

I've come so many times since we've been down here that it's nothing to my body to do it just one more time for his cock. He shudders and releases inside me as my pussy grips onto him, milking him while riding out my own orgasm.

Finally, he collapses on top of me. And then he's peppering kisses over my throat, moving to my mouth, causing me to jump as his tongue slips inside. His kiss is consuming, possessing. I didn't expect him to kiss me, and I'm so confused by how it makes me feel.

After a few more minutes, I hear him collecting and moving things about. Water runs in an attached room, probably a bathroom, as he cleans things up. He returns and unties me but leaves the blindfold in place. I feel unsteady as he helps me to stand.

"Come with me," he says. He guides me slowly across the floor and up the stairs. When we leave the dungeon I sense we're moving back down that same hallway.

I think he's returning me to the cell, but there's a shift in direction. Then we're climbing another set of stairs. Another hallway. After what just happened in the dungeon, I feel so tired, I'm afraid I'll collapse. But before I can, he picks me up and lays me down on a bed.

He locks a chain around my ankle and removes the blindfold. He covers me with blankets. I'm dimly aware that he's brought me up to what must be his room.

“Sleep.”

He pulls the shades down and turns out the light, then leaves me alone in his bed. I haven't been awake that long, but after all that happened this morning, I'm so exhausted that it doesn't take very long for sleep to claim me.

SEVEN

Several days pass, and a routine is formed. I sleep in my captor's bed with him each night. He fondles me. He fucks me. He lies behind me and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me into him—the little spoon—as though we're normal lovers. As though I mean something to him. This intimate cuddling is what unmakes me the most; it's the thing that makes it harder and harder to think of escape.

He's trained me to wake him with a blow job each morning and to swallow like a good girl. When I complete this task, he rewards me with those words which fill me with an inappropriate pride each time I hear them. After that, he feeds me, bathes me, and then takes me to the dungeon where he forces orgasm after orgasm out of me until he's satisfied.

It's easier to please him with blow jobs. In the dungeon, he never seems to want to allow my body rest. It's his fingers, his tongue, the vibrator, his cock. Over and over until I've lost track of the orgasms. And I'm supposed to count them. When I forget to count or lose track of how many, he punishes me.

His punishments hurt but haven't been overly harsh. I've never felt I was in true physical danger from them.

And every day he spends a lot of time on my ass. First it was his finger, lubed, pressing into me. I squirmed away at first, terrified, but he petted my hair and spoke soft words and was so gentle that I let my body relax until it did feel good. Strange, but also somehow pleasurable.

Since then he's been working me up with toys and butt plugs, slowly stretching me. I know what he's preparing me for, and a dark part of me is excited.

There's a strange comfort in this routine, much like the one I'd formed with Seven for those few days when he touched me in the dark at night.

I'm worried about Seven. Is he alive? Is he hurt? Is he being neglected? Is he being fed? I wish I knew what was happening to him. Does our captor feed him when he's not with me? I've been afraid to ask. He hasn't given any indication he doesn't still want to share me, so maybe that guarantees Seven's safety and continuing existence.

Today after our daily routine, he takes me to a small room with large screens along the wall, revealing different angles of the cell Seven is in.

"Sit," he orders.

I sit in the rolling leather chair, and he binds my wrists to the arms using cable ties from a desk nearby.

"Stay. And watch that screen." I couldn't disobey the first order, unless I got out of the room and rolled down the hallway.

Before I can respond, he's gone. I turn my gaze back to the screen. Seven is chained in the cell. He can't have been chained the entire time because he looks clean, and the cell is clean. He's obviously used the bathroom and shower facilities. So that means our captor must be drugging him multiple times a day. This thought upsets me.

You can't just keep someone drugged like that without causing serious health consequences. Our captor never drugs me, but what happens when Seven starts to get sick from all the drugs building up in his system?

I'm relieved at least to see he's still alive. If he was beaten again, I can't find evidence of it. But his back is against the wall, so I can't know for sure. I tense as I watch the metal door slide open in the cell. Our captor pushes in a giant screen on wheels. From one of the screens in the control room I can see Seven clearly head on. From another I can see the screen that has been rolled into the cell.

"Where is she?" Seven demands. "Is she alive? If you've hurt her..."

"Relax, Hero. She's alive. She's fine. No permanent marks anywhere but her soul. She's still with me, learning to be good. Don't worry, I'll share her with you again soon. You still have to be trained to take proper control of her."

Seven says nothing in response to this, but his glare tells me everything. I wish I could reach the microphone and the button on the control panel to talk to him and let him know I'm okay.

"I have a treat for you," our captor says. "I felt bad that you weren't there

for that first day when I took her into the dungeon. You missed watching the way she surrendered so sweetly to me. But I made a video. Would you like to see it?"

"No," he says flatly, but he can't hide the curiosity and desire in his eyes.

Our captor laughs. "Yes, you do. Don't worry. I won't tell her you watched." He pushes a play button on the screen and leaves Seven alone in the cell.

I'm horrified to see myself as he spansks me while I beg then asks if I want pleasure or pain. I don't want to watch myself like this, but I am riveted by the erotic display in front of me, so much so that I've forgotten Seven altogether.

Several minutes pass as I watch the kind of porn men would pay for. I jump when I hear the door to the control room open, and he's with me again.

"Wrong screen, Pretty Toy. Watch Seven."

I turn my gaze to the other screen, shocked to find Seven's cock freed of his jeans as he watches and jerks off to the images in front of him.

My master leans close to my ear. "See, Kate, we're all the same. He's no better than me. He's sitting there, getting off knowing you were terrified and tied up at my mercy. He's getting off watching me make you come. And he does this, even without knowing what I've been doing to you the last week. If I've starved you, if I've beaten you. He just can't help himself. We're all animals in the end."

His hand moves between my legs, and he chuckles. "I've trained you so well. So fucking wet. Are you ready to go back to Seven? I think it's time we both fucked you, don't you? Admit it, you want us both inside you."

I strain for more contact, trying to grind my clit against his hand, but he pulls away. "Save it for Seven."

I turn back to the screen in time to see Seven come on the concrete floor with a satisfied groan as if he's been saving it up the entire time I've been away from him.

Our captor flicks a switch on the control panel and leans into the microphone. "Kate is here with me, watching you come like a horny teenager. But I kept my word; I didn't *tell* her you were watching."

Seven's hand stills on his cock. When he looks up at the screen, he looks guilty.

"I'm bringing her back to you now, so you'll be able to offer your sincerest apologies. I'm sure she'll be moved."



WHEN I'M RETURNED to the cell, Seven can't meet my gaze. I run, flinging myself into his arms. He holds tightly onto me, clearly surprised that I'm not hurt or angry, pushing him away after what I just saw him do. I bury my head in his chest, breathing in his clean masculine scent, feeling his heartbeat thud against my own skin.

I expect our captor to stay, but he leaves us alone in the cell. A minute later, I hear a metallic sound as the silver key drops through the slot again. I go get it and unlock Seven's wrists. This time I'm shaking because I've missed him so much and just want to get the damn chains off him.

When he's finally free, he stands and pulls me into his arms for a real hug.

“Are you okay, Kitten?”

“Yes, Master.”

He doesn't flinch when I say it this time. After he just jerked off to a video of me helplessly coming for our captor, this title I offer him no longer seems like such a big deal.

He doesn't ask any more questions about what happened to me. I know he doesn't want to know, and I don't want to tell it. The main reason I don't want to tell it is because what happened to me wasn't nearly as terrible as I wish I could say it was.

We soak together in the tub, and he takes me again in the shower. At night, we lie in the darkness, and he resumes his pattern of stroking me to orgasm, my moan filling the cell before we both drift off to sleep wrapped in each other's arms.

This temporary peace is broken the next morning.

“Breakfast time, inmates,” our captor says cheerily over the speaker.

Seven goes to the slot to collect the food. It's sausage and gravy biscuits. A white plate and a blue plate. I know what this means even before our captor's voice rings out again.

“The blue plate special is for Seven.”

“You can't keep drugging him like this,” I say. “You'll kill him.”

Our captor laughs. “Awwww, Seven has a girlfriend. So sweet. He'll be fine. He's tough.”

A couple of water bottles are dropped in through the slot.

We sit on the floor of the cell and eat in silence. Seven goes to sit against the wall when he's finished. After a few minutes, he's unconscious.

I move back to my corner when the door slides open and warily watch our captor. He drags Seven to the door.

“Don't hurt him,” I say.

“Careful, Pretty Toy. I might get jealous of the affection you lavish on him.”

I don't say anything else. Afraid that if I do, he might take it out on Seven. He presses his thumb against the scanner and takes Seven out of the cell.

He returns a couple of hours later, and I'm terrified by what he may have done to Seven in that time and why he hasn't brought him back.

“Come,” he says, beckoning me toward him. I slowly get up off the floor and walk even more slowly. Even just a few hours away from our routine, and his constant attentions has made me afraid again.

“It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you.”

He opens the door and urges me out ahead of him. His hand rests on my bare lower back as he guides me down the hallway to the door that leads down to the dungeon. He strokes my back when I tense.

“It's okay,” he says again as he inputs the code.

When we get downstairs, Seven is still unconscious, lying naked on his back, spread-eagled and bound to the bed the same way I've so often been. It's hard to look at him like this and imagine this was what I looked like. So exposed and vulnerable.

I rush to him, running my hands over his body, searching for injuries, but unless it's his back, I don't see anything. But there must be something.

“What did you do to him?” I demand.

He advances on me and pulls me off Seven before pushing me up against the wall, his hand at my throat, his gray gaze holding mine. “Do *not* speak to me in that disrespectful tone.”

I'm crying and struggling even though he isn't squeezing hard.

“I'm sorry... M-master. Please. Please.”

He releases me and takes a step back, straightening his clothes as if he's civilized and above these petty threats. “Now, to answer your question, I've done nothing to him. The drugs were for transport, and it takes a while for them to wear off. I haven't touched him.”

I hear a groan and turn toward the bed where Seven is waking up. “Let me go, motherfucker!” he growls.

“Ah, ah... There's a lady present,” our captor says.

Seven turns sharply toward me. “Ka—” He stops himself in time.

“Kitten,” he says instead.

“Okay,” our captor says, a delighted gleam in his eyes. “I just thought up a fun game. Last time it was lady's choice. Let's switch it up. Seven... you get to choose. Do I punish Kate or does she give me a blow job?”

I freeze at this and look at Seven. His expression mirrors my own.

“If it helps, whichever one you pick, you get to watch. And Kate, you can't tell him which you prefer. It takes all the fun out.”

The truth is, he's twisted me so much in just a few days alone with him that I would be okay with either, but only if the punishment was like other punishments—not so much I can't stand it. But I'm afraid if Seven chooses for me to be punished, our captor will go harder on me to punish *him*. I'm afraid he'll make me bleed.

I know Seven; even though he's seen how I respond to our captor, he won't want to choose to put me in a sexual situation I might not want. It's a wasted worry on his part. I'm already too far gone, but I don't know how to communicate this with just my eyes. And the truth is, I'm ashamed to, because there's something about the idea that I would rather suck our captor's cock while Seven watches than take a punishment that seems too twisted to accept.

“Punish me,” Seven says.

“No. That's not the choice. You always try to cheat the rules.”

“I'm not choosing either thing,” Seven spits out, glaring at our captor.

A sigh. “This is so tiring. Have I not already established how everything works? I say do something, you refuse, I withhold food, you do it, you get fed. Why not skip the suffering part? It's not as though I get some pleasure out of not feeding bad pets.”

“I can't *choose* to hurt her!” Seven roars.

“Then choose the blow job.”

“That's hurting her!”

Our captor laughs. “Oh, sweet, innocent Seven. Where *did* you come from? She's practically salivating at the idea of being on her knees with my cock in her mouth while you watch and get hard.”

Seven looks at me, and I look away, but I know my face is red, revealing the truth of that sick statement.

“I'm not choosing to hurt her,” Seven says more quietly.

“I've had blow jobs all week, and she was perfectly eager. She's less eager about pain. It's an easy choice.”

“No,” Seven says.

“Fine. I'll leave you two down here a couple of days, and you can decide when I come back.”

I touch Seven's arm. “Master, please. Whatever you choose is okay.”

It's not really. I don't want to be punished. I know what our captor wants, and if Seven gives him any other answer, he'll take it out on me even harder. But I also know by now that if I tell him what to choose, I'll be punished for that, too. It may have taken a while, but I'm getting smarter about how to play his games. I may not be able to win, but at least I can avoid losing.

“Okay, I'm bored.” Our captor turns to go back up the stairs.

“No, please!” I say.

“Blow job,” Seven says quietly.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Excellent!” our captor says. He moves to sit in a chair a few feet away from the bed right in Seven's line of sight. He unzips his pants and crooks a finger, smug satisfaction painted across his face. And god help me, but his power has started to corrode something inside me and turn me on. His smug arrogance is no barrier to the wetness gathering between my thighs.

“Crawl to me, Pretty Toy.”

I drop to my hands and knees and crawl across the floor, the thrumming excitement between my legs only growing in anticipation. Part of me wants to hide how aroused I am from Seven, but then I realize it will hurt him less if he knows that I'm not being *hurt* by this.

So I don't hold back.

When I reach him, I spend a few moments dragging my tongue over his cock as though I have all day and he is my favorite type of candy, which I want to make last forever. He chuckles at this but indulges my languid exploration. I know all the places he's most sensitive, and I lick and kiss and gently suck until I feel the power between us shift the slightest amount, if for only a moment as he groans with the need for more.

His fingers thread into my hair, guiding but not forcing. It's the most surprising and wonderful thing I've learned about him the last few days. Although he's large, he never tries to choke or gag me with his cock. He doesn't fuck my mouth like some animal. Oral sex is the only time with him where I feel like I have the power. I know I only have it because he allows it, but still, it makes everything between us feel different. It has made it harder and harder to see myself as his captive, even though I'm kept chained beside

his bed or in the cell with Seven.

Sometimes I swear he'll say *Please* if I tease him for too long. But he never does even though I can feel the word screaming out in his mind.

The teasing now leaves no doubt for Seven that I'm not actually suffering through this. I *want* to be here. No matter what it says about me, I like being on my knees in front of him like this, wrapping my mouth around his cock. I devote myself completely to the task now, taking him further down my throat. I relax and let him inside as far as I can take.

I can't take it all, but he doesn't force it all. I know exactly where the pleasure gathers in him, where to focus my attentions. After a few minutes of greater dedication, he comes.

My throat works to swallow as he tries to regain the capacity for speech. When he finally succeeds, the words he speaks goes straight to my core.

“That's right, my sweet whore, take it all. Such a good girl.”

He strokes my throat as I swallow. When I'm finished and pull away from him, he absently strokes my hair, guiding me to rest my head against his thigh. I hate how much I love this affection from him.

I hate how I feel like a puppy, proud of performing a trick properly. And I hate how badly I want him to fuck me right now.

Or maybe this is all a lie. Maybe I don't hate any of these things no matter how much I know I should.

“Look at him. Look how hard he is.”

I raise my head up and turn to find Seven fully erect.

“Get on the bed with him.”

He doesn't need to ask twice. I crawl onto the bed and lie down next to Seven. I rest my head against the center of his chest, my hand drifting down over his stomach until I find his cock. It jumps against my touch as I stroke it.

“We're going to take her together. At the same time. I'd let you take her ass, but I can't trust you to unchain you. I gave this a lot of thought actually, but I know how it would play out. You'd try to fight me, even though you'd be locked down here without the code. Then, if you bested me, you'd tie me up and then do whatever was necessary—assuming you aren't all talk and could stomach it—until I cracked and gave you the code. So we have to do it this way.”

This villain monologue doesn't do anything to dampen Seven's desire. He's seen too much to push it away now. I don't even think he'll object to the idea of them both fucking me together. Even though I'm sure he's afraid it

will hurt me. How could he know our captor has been preparing my body patiently for days so I can take this?

I run my fingertips gently along Seven's stomach. His body is strung so tight with tension. I press a kiss against his chest and up to his neck. The tension slowly starts to drain out, but he's fighting to hold onto it.

He can't let himself enjoy this because he hasn't been broken the way I have—with pleasure.

“Now, Pretty Toy... I want you to get on your hands and knees so that you're straddling his body, and keep eye contact. But I don't want you to fuck yet. You can have him inside you when I *say* you can have him inside you.”

I can't stop the whimper as I move to obey his command. The last time in the cell, as I was grabbing the syringe, there was the smallest twisted regret that I wouldn't get to have them both. It had simmered beneath the surface, a thought I couldn't allow to take full form, but it was there. Now that I've seen the futility of escape, I'm grateful for a second chance to do this.

I now live in our captor's darkness. I breathe it like oxygen. As the rest of reality has faded away, the only thing that remains is pleasure and desire. The question on my mind is no longer *how can I escape him?* It's *how can I climb the mountain to reach the peak of my orgasm faster? How can I come harder?* Though our captor never leaves me to solve these complex problems on my own. He's a fixer.

A moment later, he's behind me, pushing a lubed toy slowly in and out of my ass. It's a little smaller than he is, but not by much. I hold Seven's gaze and moan as I adjust to the toy and begin to crave more. But Seven isn't yet in this. He still feels the guilt. He can't give himself over. So I lean forward and kiss him.

His mouth opens to accept my tongue, and a moment later, I feel him truly join me. If he was free to do so, he'd wrap his arms around me and pull me so far into him no one would be able to detect where one of us ends and the other begins.

I yelp and pull away as a hard slap connects with my ass.

“Eye contact, Kate.”

“I'm sorry, Master.”

I hold Seven's gaze in mine while our captor prepares me. He takes his time as he recovers from his last release. Finally, he says, “Mount him like a bitch in heat and ride.”

I moan just at that order. I wish this man hadn't taken me captive and that

I could give myself over completely to him. No matter how much I know that morality no longer matters for us, I can't change my emotional nature and make it okay to give this man my soul. And I know it's not safe.

So I shift this energy to Seven as I lower myself on top of him. A tiny cry leaves my throat as I let him fully inside. My greedy pussy grabs hold of him as though his cock is the last thing that will ever fill me. And then I begin to move.

It isn't long before our captor has removed the toy. Now it's his slickly lubed cock easing inside me with so much more gentleness than a man like him should be capable of or even care to offer. I'm filled with and overwhelmed by both men now. One darkness, the other light. Both of them go still, as I adjust.

I move first.

I ride Seven as our captor rides me. He strokes my breasts, pinching my nipple so hard I scream, but it isn't from the pain. It's from the pleasure that just intensified between my legs. I'm so wet I can hear myself as I move on Seven's cock. His intense hazel gaze is locked on mine.

Our captor doesn't even have to touch my clit. I've been trained so well to respond that all I need is something inside me now, and the way they both feel moving together is so intense that my orgasm catches me off guard. And now, for the first time, I come with Seven inside me. And I am loud. And I don't care. All I care about is that I'm in the midst of the most powerfully transcendent sexual release of my life.

The two of them come with their own more masculine, guttural sounds a moment later. And now... we are all in this together.

EIGHT

It feels like I've existed in this cell forever. I should have been counting the days more closely, but they all bleed together. And why does it matter how long this has gone on?

I wake to find Seven asleep on the floor. I shake him to try to wake him and realize it's not normal sleep. Did our captor slip in and dose him again? He never drugs me. He doesn't need to. I'm so small and weak, I can't put up a real struggle, but Seven is his match. He may even be a bit stronger than our captor, so more precautions must be taken.

Though our captor plays with us and watches us fuck each other, he still hasn't fully broken Seven. I know his eventual plan is for Seven to fully embrace this role as my master, so that our captor can let him off the leash. He's tempted him. He's promised him he doesn't have to stay in the cell. There are much nicer rooms upstairs. They can be on the same side. I can be their captive together. But Seven refuses to take any of the bait on offer.

Our captor will never be able to trust Seven unchained. He's not a dog that can be trained. I somehow have grown to think of him as my protector, even though he can't truly protect me from anything. Not like this. The door opens, and I scoot back to the far corner of the cell. As much as he has taken me and shaped me to his will, as much as my body wants him, there's the lingering uncertainty, the fear that the mask of calm will drop and this will all end.

He chains Seven up, then smacks him a few times in the face.

“Wake up!”

Seven slowly comes to. His eyes immediately find mine as if reassuring

himself I'm still here and okay. It does something to me when he looks at me like this.

“Good. I need you both awake for this announcement,” our captor says.

I want to join Seven. I want to be wrapped in his arms right now, but our captor is standing beside him, and I don't dare make that trip across the cell because something has changed, and I'm terrified that I think I know what it is.

I've craved both of these men, but it only feels right or sane with Seven, so I pour all my emotional energy into him and try to forget the excitement I feel when the other man touches me. Obviously, it's Stockholm Syndrome, but even so, it's convincingly real. It reminds me of a lucid dream I once had where I spent several minutes just touching this textured wallpaper, knowing I was dreaming but unable to comprehend how real it all felt. As I'd stroked the velvety smooth wall, I kept thinking to myself *how can this not be real?*

This dream is even more real.

“I've grown tired of this game,” our captor says.

The tears come immediately. It's like I've locked them away and saved them just for this moment. He's going to kill us. I knew this day was coming, but I'd hoped it would be farther in the future. I crawl over to him, forgetting my former resistance. “Please, Master... don't...” But I can't bring myself to say the words. If he's grown tired of this game, there's nothing I can do to change his mind. I've always known I existed at his pleasure, on his terms.

I flinch when he strokes my hair. He sighs. “I'm going to let you go,” he says finally.

“W-what?” I can't have heard him right. He can't just let us go. How would that even work? Isn't he afraid we'll report him? Before I can work through all the ramifications and how he could possibly let us go without endangering himself, the reality that I've spent weeks ignoring because it no longer mattered, slaps me in the face.

I still have no job, no money, no apartment. Probably not even clothes. I'm sure Carolyn must have tossed my things when I didn't come back for them. I will starve to death out there. I'm pretty sure I can't get Andrew to take me back, not after he thinks I stood him up that night and just never spoke to him again.

He probably thinks I was fucking around with him somehow. And after what has happened here in this cell, I don't think I could ever...

“Master, please... I'll starve. I have nothing, I can't...” I can't believe I'm saying this. But this is truly the situation I'm in, where being this man's captive is a better fate than being set free because of my financial situation. In the back of my mind these weeks, I've feared he would eventually kill me, but it never ever occurred to me that I should worry about going back to the problems I was in before captivity.

He's still stroking my hair, his fingertips moving down to rub the back of my neck. I'm ashamed of how much I love it when he does this. It still feels so wrong to love anything that comes from his hand, especially since I have guilt-free pleasure with Seven. Both men are equally beautiful, but one is a monster, and I can't let myself feel anything for him, so I push these things down as much as I can.

“Don't worry, Kate, I won't let you starve. I'm prepared to offer you two million dollars.”

My breath stops for a second, and maybe my heart as well. I can't have heard him right. Is he paying me for my silence? Or is this just another sick game? What's the catch?

“Unfortunately, this offer is only for you. If you accept, I'll have to kill your companion. But you'll be free and safe. I think it's a pretty good offer. You should carefully consider your answer.”

I'm stunned for a moment. Why would he let me go but not Seven?

“No!” I say as soon as I can get my vocal cords to work again. My refusal comes out shrill and panicked.

He shrugs. “I could just kill you both. I'm offended that you would spit on my generosity in this way.”

I'm crying now, great heaving sobs that I can't get control of. “Please, please...” I whimper.

Then I hear Seven's quiet, strong voice rising above my crying and begging. “Take the deal, Kitten,” he says.

I extricate myself from the hand still stroking the nape of my neck. Our captor acts as if this entire conversation were about something unimportant—not two lives hanging in the balance. But our lives *are* unimportant to him. I crawl the few feet to Seven and bury my face in his chest. I'm grateful the chains give enough leeway for him to put his arms around me. He strokes my back.

“Shhhh,” he says. “I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. I need you to go. Live your life.”

I shake my head, my tears dripping onto his chest. “No, I won't leave you. I love you.”

I involuntarily flinch when I say this because I remember our captor is standing so close. He heard this confession of love, and he surely won't be happy about it.

There's a long beat of tense silence, and then Seven laughs. It's a dark, sinister laugh, like nothing I've heard from him before.

“What was that, Declan? Three weeks?” Seven says.

“Impressive. I thought she'd take the money.”

I pull away from Seven to look in his eyes, still not believing what I've just heard. This can't be real. I trusted him. I thought that he... I thought he was like me...

“You are so adorable,” Seven says. “So sweetly trusting. I love it.”

“No! No, no no...” I can't stop the word. It's gotten stuck on repeat. I scramble back to the corner I was in only minutes ago when Declan first stepped into the room.

I'm still trying to put it all together. I had thought Seven was my captor that first day, but I'd become quickly convinced by the lie of his innocence which only became more convincing the more time passed. And after the way he was tossed in the cell all bloody and broken the day we were punished for speaking each other's names in the seemingly safe space of the shower... Did he *let* Declan beat him like that?

It's strange having a name for my captor now... my *other* captor. Declan unchains Seven, and the two of them stand together, watching me, amusement on their triumphant faces. It was a game, and Seven won. Good for him.

I seek desperately to put together a new narrative of what really happened these past weeks. Obviously, he did let Declan beat him that day, something I can't begin to comprehend. But it served its purpose. It convinced me we were *in this together*. That we were a team. Us against the monster. It bonded me to him more tightly than any other play they could have made.

Did they plan and coordinate each move? Did Seven know ahead of time how every last detail would unfold? When Declan was keeping me in his bedroom and blindfolding me to take me to the dungeon... Seven had to have been walking around free outside the cell. Did he watch? Did he become the new voyeur?

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to think about the fact that while I

worried Declan was starving him and beating him, or had even killed him, that he was just taking a break from the *game*.

Whenever Seven was dragged out of the cell, Declan wasn't moving him long distances to punish him or whatever. It was all just a show until he got out into the hallway.

Seven knew there were no real drugs in the syringe the day of the escape attempt. He knew Declan was lying there fully conscious waiting for us to almost get free before pulling the rug out.

Another realization slams into me like a mallet. Seven was never drugged. The food he ate was the same as mine. And every time he was injected with what I thought were drugs, it was only a saline solution. Nothing was real.

Declan told the truth every time he said Seven wasn't my hero and everything was an act and a game. He put the truth right under my nose in plain sight. He openly stated it while I thought he was just taunting me.

"You're going to kill me aren't you?" I say, the tears still flowing down my cheeks. I *loved* Seven. God help me, but I still love him.

"No," Seven says. "We really are letting you go. I mean there's only so long I can live in a cell with nothing else to do. So here's the deal. You will sign a non-disclosure agreement, backdated to the date that we took you. The contract states that you were here of your own free will playing a game with us. You can tell no one about anything that has happened here."

I wish it was Declan telling me all this because it's so hard to see this change in Seven. I thought he cared about me... I thought...

"You will not go to the police. We own nearly every judge in this corrupt city, and we can guarantee we would get one of those judges should a trial ever occur. And we own about half the police. If you go to one of our guys, he'll just bring you right back to us, and we will be very displeased. You can't imagine the punishment."

"Master, please..." I can't dwell on this betrayal because starvation is still a real possibility, and I have nowhere to go, and I'm sure the money was part of their sick joke—the carrot they could take away as soon as my greedy little eyes lit upon it. "Please... I have nowhere to go," I say quietly.

"Yes, you do," Seven says. "Declan has set up a bank account in your name, and we have all the paperwork and bank cards for you. The account has five million dollars in it. You also now own a penthouse apartment in the city, fully furnished. And a car, a blue Porsche 911 Carrera. You're

welcome.”

I shake my head. “It's not real. You're just fucking with me again.” I can't take any more of these lies.

Seven steps out of the cell for a moment, the keypad accepting his thumbprint as easily as Declan's. As if I needed any more proof of his role in this. No wonder Declan made me call Seven, *master*.

I cry harder now as I'm left alone in the room with Declan. The bad master. The scary one. But they are both utterly terrifying now. They were just playing good cop/bad cop with me, and I was too stupid to see it.

“You're both psychopaths,” I whisper.

“Oh, come now, Pretty Toy. If we were psychopaths, you'd be dead right now. We're sociopaths.”

“What's the difference?” I never actually thought there was a difference. I've heard the terms used interchangeably so many times.

Declan walks over to me. I cringe away from him, my back now pressed against the wall with no more room to run. He sits on the ground beside me, stroking my hair.

“Sociopaths can form bonds with a select few people. And lucky for you, you're now one of those people.”

I don't believe him. I can't. The amount of deceit both men have used with me these past few weeks is too great for me to believe a word out of their pathologically lying mouths.

“Did I ever once threaten your life?” he asks.

“No.” He did mention starving, but I know he means violent immediate murder threats. It's fucked-up that I can read between his lines and know what he means even if he isn't entirely specific.

“No, *what*? You aren't free quite yet. Let's not get too casual.”

“N-no, Master.” I can't stop crying.

“Good girl. Did either of us ever physically harm you in any serious way? Any broken bones? Cutting? Amputations? Starvation? And I mean actual starvation, refusing you food with no way for you to rectify that situation. Were you at any point violently raped?”

“No, Master,” I whisper.

“That's what I thought.” He stands back up as Seven re-enters the room with some papers, a pen, and the clothes I was wearing the night I was taken. The little black dress. He takes me by the arm and guides me to the bathroom where the light is better. The latest white roses are wilting in the vase. Some

of the petals have fallen onto the counter.

It's jarring, because there were always fresh roses. They never got to this state before being replaced with more, always while I was sleeping.

“Read, sign, and initial in the marked places,” he says.

Seven strokes my back as I read. I hate him more than Declan right now. At least I always knew Declan was the bad guy. Seven's betrayal cuts deeper.

I can barely read through my tears but I get the gist of it. It doesn't even matter what the fuck these papers say. I have no choice but to sign them. I'm not really agreeing to anything, just obeying one more of their whims.

I sign and initial in all the appropriate places.

“Good girl,” Seven says, passing the papers to Declan. “Now get dressed, and I'll take you to your new home.”

My hands shake as I put on the bra, panties, dress, and heels. It feels so uncomfortably strange to have fabric resting against my skin after so much time naked.

He pulls a black scrap of fabric out of his pocket and ties it around my eyes.

When I panic, he says, “It's just until we get away from the house.”

He leads me out of the cell, down a hallway, out a front door. Birds are chirping as he opens a car door and guides me inside.

“Buckle up,” he says before shutting me into the silence of the car.

He joins me a moment later and the engine revs to life. As we drive, I wonder how many women they've done this to.

There's this sick part of me that still wants to be with Seven because a part of my mind is still in shock and can't accept that he's the bad guy. I'm still not sure he's not just taking me somewhere to kill me. His level of elaborate deceit makes anything now possible.

But I don't ask or beg because if he were planning to kill me, he wouldn't tell me the truth about it anyway. I remember what Declan said back in the cell about how sociopaths could form a few limited bonds. Maybe they know they have to kill me but don't want me to see it coming. Maybe this is their twisted way of showing mercy.

With a blindfold, I wouldn't see it coming. Seven could just park the car somewhere, reach over and snap my neck. If he kills me, I hope he does it like that. Quick, where I don't see it coming.

“I can't believe I believed you. I believed you cared...” I say, needing to talk to get my mind off the dark fears consuming me.

“Shhh,” he says before I can start sobbing again. His hand strokes my knee, and I can't bring myself to pull away, and it isn't the fear. I hate myself right now for still wanting him to touch me.

“Don't feel bad,” he says. “There are women married for decades to serial killers, with children even. They never suspect. Without a real conscience, it's easy to hide, and normal people can't even fathom what goes on inside our minds. And you never really know anyone anyway. Everything you think you know about anyone you've ever met is just the parts they've shown you. You never really know anyone,” he says again. Does he really believe this? I'm not sure. Maybe it's true though.

We always have a skewed perspective of other people, even those closest to us. We make shorthand assumptions about their thoughts and feelings and motivations. We project ourselves onto them. We become disillusioned when we find out we were wrong about people.

My hands are clenched together in my lap. “I felt safe with you.”

“You were safe with me. You're still safe with me. Tell me, Kitten, if you needed surgery, would you prefer to have someone very empathetic or very sociopathic operate on you?”

What kind of question is this? “Someone empathetic, of course.”

He laughs. “No, you wouldn't. Very empathetic people are the type of people who break down into tears when a disaster happens on the other side of the world to random strangers they've never met. They hold candlelight vigils and pray and wring their hands. They see a starving African child on a television commercial and send money they probably could put to better use for their own family because they felt sad seeing a small sad-eyed hungry child. And they need to assuage their guilt at having a full belly. They are altruistic even to the point of neglecting their own needs or their family's needs. They have no strong loyalties because they love everyone with a shallow love that is really just their lack of emotional control.”

I let these words fall over me. I don't know if I should believe them, but they do sound true. I've known people like this. Every news story depresses them or makes them anxious. They get emotionally over-involved in the lives of strangers.

“It's not black or white, Kate. I guarantee you every top surgeon in the world is at least a bit sociopathic. You have to be able to shut your feelings off and just see a body in front of you so you can make clear-headed rational choices. You don't want someone who is too emotional or falls apart at every

little thing or feels everybody else's emotions. Most politicians are sociopaths. Most CEOs are sociopaths. And yet the world still spins.”

“You didn't really feel anything for me. I didn't expect Declan to, but I thought you...”

“Obviously, I felt something, Kitten. He does, too.”

And that's all I'm going to get from him. I know this because he seems to become a wall. He turns on the radio to a classical music station, and we drive the rest of the way in silence.

Finally the car stops, he removes the blindfold from my eyes, and he gives me a folder with all my bank stuff, my purse, and a set of keys.

“Your car is in the parking garage. And you live on the top floor.” He winks at me. “It's where they typically keep the penthouse. Goodbye, Kate.”

I swallow back the tears. I'm never going to see this man again. I shouldn't want to see him again. And now that I know they were both bad, it seems stupid to deny I also felt something for Declan. Because one of them isn't the safe guilt-free choice anymore. They were both evil. And suddenly, in this moment, I'm flooded with my feelings for Declan, these soft feelings I've denied myself because it was so wrong.

I get out of the car, and before I close the door, I say, “Can I ask you one more question?”

“Ask,” he says.

“How do you know Declan?”

“My only friend since childhood. He was the one person I knew who was like me. Empty.”

These are the last words he says to me. I shut the car door and watch him drive away. I manage to get inside the building and onto the elevator, riding up to the penthouse before I break down into sobs again. I feel so lonely and so wrong in every way one can be wrong.

I feel... discarded. And I am. But at least I won't starve.

I'm surprised when the elevator doors open directly into the penthouse. I had to use a key in the elevator for this floor, but I still somehow expected a hallway. There are floor-to-ceiling windows, and the view is astounding.

I drop my purse, keys, and large bank envelope onto a chair next to the elevator. And then I freeze. Right in front of me, on a marble table, is a vase of fresh fragrant white roses. There's a card in the flowers with my name on it.

My hand shakes as I pull out the card.

When you are ready to come home, call, and we will come get you.

There's a phone number at the bottom.

They're still playing with me. They think I'm so addicted to what they turned me into that I will give up freedom and luxury to go back to them and live in a cell like some animal.

Fuck them both.

I pick up the vase of flowers and hurl it against the wall. The glass shatters into hundreds of tiny shards. I rip up the card with the number on it and throw it in the trash. I will not play their new game.

NINE

An entire week passes before I finally clean up the shattered glass, water, and now wilted roses. I feel inexplicably sad that the life has gone out of them. It's another week before I start to regret throwing the card away. It's long gone now and in a landfill.

During the first few days of my freedom I went to the spa and got every treatment on the menu in a full-day pampering frenzy. It was nice, but massages and body masks and wraps and a mani-pedi cannot erase the memory of their hands on my body, their dark voices in my ear.

I've also shopped. I bought a whole new wardrobe. Nice things. I went out to nice restaurants and contemplated how to get myself out of the self-imposed isolation I'd created, how to form some real and lasting social bonds. I need some friends, but I'm not sure how to do that. Maybe I could volunteer somewhere?

I sit on the floor next to the window in the main open floor plan living area, thinking about my options. Part of me wants to open my own ad agency. I've got the resources now, and I could probably get a few of my old clients to come to me. I could even work here from my new home. There's plenty of room to set up a business and meet clients. But I need time to wallow and ... mourn them.

I feel so wrong and twisted for mourning, but I have so many memories of Seven being so kind. Comforting me. Being gentle. The ugly truth can't erase all the beautiful moments we shared, even if they were never real.

Declan was kind in his own way. He never used violence to break me. He used fear and kindness. Pleasure.

Even if I still had their number, I wouldn't call. There's no way I would ever voluntarily place myself in their hands again no matter how much it haunts my dreams, no matter how many times I bring myself to orgasm when I wake up to find they aren't there. These men are evil. They are dangerous. And it doesn't matter if they told me they felt some *bond* with me or that I'm somehow safe. I know I'm not.

And yet, I also know they know exactly where I am. They could come take me back at any time. So why haven't I used this money to flee the country? Why haven't I transferred the money to another bank, something they don't have access to, because they no doubt have access to the account they set up for me. Why don't I ditch the car and get a new one? Sell the penthouse and pocket the cash? Because I'm stupid and pathetic and some sick part of me hopes they'll come take me so that it's not my fault when this inevitably ends in my grisly death. They are still toying with me, still playing a game. I know this, but I make no move to take my game piece off the board.

My piece is still in play. I know it, and I'm sure they know it.

My eyes light on my handbag, the one that went with the little black dress. It's still sitting on the chair beside the elevator. I actually burned that dress and the panties and bra I was wearing, but I haven't touched the bag. It's partly because it's a sleek, sophisticated black Louis Vuitton that I bought as a splurge when I got my first major promotion at the agency. It has sentimental value even as it also has these conflicted memories now attached.

I can't burn it or throw it out, so it just sat there. My phone is also in there. It's kind of amazing how you can get away without having a cell phone in a big city when you don't really have anyone to call anyway. The penthouse has a landline, so it isn't as though I'm totally without communication to the outside world. And I have a laptop now and the internet. I kind of really missed the internet during those weeks of unreality, playing their game.

I've been trying to think of it that way, that I somehow chose to play. I've been trying to convince myself that the contract I signed is somehow the real story of what went down. Just some kinky games and fun. Just a fantasy that went for a few weeks and now it's over. I've been compensated handsomely for my participation. And now I can move on into a wonderful new life. But can I really?

I pick myself up off the ground and cross to the chair and my bag. I open the sleek black handbag to find my wallet with a small bit of cash untouched

and my credit cards. I should probably pay them off now that I can afford to. There's also a nude lipstick, a mirror, and my phone.

I pull out the phone. I don't know why I expected after a month to be able to just turn it on. Of course the battery is dead. I sigh. I need to get out anyway.

I go by the closest cell phone store. I was on auto-pay, and I'm comforted to find out that the most recent payment charge went through. I get a new charger and stop by a small corner Chinese buffet for some lo mein, sweet and sour chicken, and egg rolls.

Even with money, the issues in my life haven't gone away. I didn't realize how lonely I was. And maybe that's why I think of them so much, why I still crave them so much. I return home and charge the phone, determined that I'm going to find a way to reconnect with people.

While the numbers in my contact list weren't close enough to go to when destitute, I can certainly get together with someone for drinks, especially if I'm buying. It's a start.

When the phone is charged, I'm unsurprised to find I have messages and voice mails. All from Andrew. There are about ten text messages and fifteen voicemails.

The texts are basically: "Where are you?" "I can't find you." "Did you give me the right address?" "Did you mean this restaurant or that one on the corner of Fifth and Main with a similar name?" "Are you fucking with me?" "Why won't you text me back?" "Hello?" "Hello?" "Bitch."

The voice mails are far more abusive. The words "lying whore" and "worthless piece of trash" are colorfully interspersed with "fuck you" and "bitch".

As I listen to this unrelenting stream of man-child screaming, it occurs to me that my captors never screamed at me or called me names. I mean, yes, Declan called me a whore, but it didn't feel like this. Somehow, even though I knew he was the bad guy, it felt almost like an endearment from his lips.

I delete all the messages and texts and block Andrew's number. I don't see a reason to respond to him or ever contact him again. I scroll through the contact list to find someone for those theoretical "on me" drinks, when I find there's a new contact that I didn't put in there. The names Seven and Declan are listed as a single contact in my list.

I want to push the delete button, but I can't bring myself to do it. The strongest feeling I have when I see their number is relief. I have access. It's as

though the card from the flowers reassembled and flew back to me from the trash. This time I have to keep it safe.

But I won't call. I will not call them. It's just nice to know I can.

That's the most disturbing thought I've had in a long time. It's nice to know I can? What the fuck have they done to me?

I try to make myself delete it again, but this time, insanely, I press the call button. It rings twice, and I end the call before anyone answers. I spend five minutes staring at the screen, waiting for it to light up and ring, for them to call me back. But they don't.

Maybe they're doing this with someone else now. I waited too long, and now they're playing the game with somebody new. I shudder at that thought and the actual bit of jealousy it inspires. I should feel sorry for the poor girl, whoever she is, horrified by her situation, not jealous that it isn't me.

I call a girl named Julie from my contacts. When she answers, she says she wondered what happened with me, and she hated to see me leave the agency. Says it was nice to have a little less testosterone there. We agree to meet for drinks on Friday.

TEN

Friday night and three drinks too many sees me flopping face down onto a gray leather sofa in the penthouse at two in the morning. I get a text. Julie making sure I got home okay. I let her know I did, make sure she did, too, then flop back against the leather.

She's nice enough, but there isn't really a strong friend connection there. I scroll through the contact list, landing once again on Seven and Declan. Alcohol and cell phones are really bad combinations for me. I know this. It's how that sad clown phone call to Andrew happened.

I'm not calling them. Yes, let's call two psychos who spent three weeks fucking me in every way one can be fucked both physically and mentally, in the middle of the night. What could possibly go wrong?

But drunk Kate is not strong enough to stop herself from pushing the call button.

Seven answers on the third ring. "Hello, Kate."

I have visions of Hannibal Lector at this smooth greeting at two o'clock in the morning. Suddenly I feel stone-cold sober. I bolt upright on the sofa, gripping the phone like a lifeline. I should hang up, but I don't. I just want to hear his voice.

"Hey, Seven," I say, trying to sound casual as though we once had a few nice dates and I'm just calling to catch up.

"I'm sorry, that's not my name, and you know it."

"Master," I correct. I can't help that this word goes straight to my pussy. They've trained me so well. And they knew I would call and beg to come back to my cage. Though I haven't sunk quite so low yet.

“Better,” he says. “Now what can I do for you?” His voice is so calm and in control, and I crave everything that voice is right now. I crave their calm control even as I know how messed up it is.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have called. It’s late. I had some drinks. I’m... I’m sorry.”

His voice is low and soft when he speaks again. “Do you want us to come get you and bring you back home, Kitten?”

I try to keep my tears quiet, but I’m sure he can hear them. “Yes, Master,” I whisper. And it’s true.

I’m in so much trouble.



THE WORDS *Seven and Declan* light up my phone screen when it rings.

“Master?” I say when I answer.

“Good girl,” Seven says. “I’m here. Come to the parking garage. Bring nothing but your keys.” He disconnects the call before I can respond.

Suddenly I’m nothing but doubt and anxiety. What am I doing? Why would I hand myself back over to them? Yet even as I silently ask the question, I know why. At the sound of his voice in my ear, with only those few words, my body is alive, awake in a way it hasn’t been awake since they released me.

I shove the keys into the pocket of my jeans.

When I enter the parking garage, he’s leaning against an understated gold Maserati, his arms crossed casually over his chest, his gaze locked on mine. Some fucked-up broken part of me wants to kneel at his feet and wait for the praise as he pets my hair and calls me his good girl, but I resist. This is a public place, and even in the middle of the night, anyone could stumble upon us.

I want to run back inside and lock myself inside the penthouse. The fact that he has this effect on me even after everything has me scared of him in an entirely new way.

“I missed you, Kitten.”

He pushes off the car then unlocks and opens the passenger side for me. I get in and jump when the door shuts. Before I can do something sane, like open my door and run, he’s in the driver’s seat, the car is starting, and we’re

moving.

The drive back *home* is silent except for the sound of classical music coming in through the sound system. I wonder if Seven is the classical music lover or if both of them are. The drive is longer than I remember, and it becomes obvious the longer we drive that it truly is out in the middle of nowhere.

We're driving now on an old road without any street lights, with endless old and thick gnarled trees lined up, their branches and leaves canopying over us, inviting us ominously into the deep, dark wood. I feel like red riding hood, and my driver is the wolf.

After what feels like an endless drive in this densely wooded area, we finally come upon a huge iron gate. He presses a button on a remote control, and it slides open without complaint. Now there are lights every few yards, and the landscape is what I remember, the endless gently rolling hills free of trees. I look back to see a high wall winding around the perimeter of the property.

Now *this* road feels like it goes on forever. The anticipation is killing me. Finally we reach... well, house isn't exactly the word I'd use. Since I wasn't allowed to roam freely, I never knew just how big it was. But house is far too mild a description. Estate? Mansion? Palace? Resort? Nothing really seems expansive enough to explain where they live.

It looks a bit like a fairy tale castle. Huge, imposing, and regal. But it's not the kind of fairy tale most of us dream about. There are all sorts of spotlights around the place, aimed up, illuminating it in the darkness, making it seem even more impressive than it might be in the day. There is an enormous fountain in the front with similar lighting, making already spooky gargoyles look all the more imposing. In any other circumstance, I might think the gargoyles were over-the-top, but there are several guarding the rooftops as well, and honestly? It works in a villain fortress sort of way.

"I forgot you haven't actually seen the house from the outside," Seven says. Apparently he thinks the word *house* is just fine. "What do you think? Better than your penthouse?" he says with gentle teasing. It's that charming facade that falls so easily into place with him that it lets me forget for a moment what lies beneath.

He pulls the car into a circular driveway, then he takes me in the front door as though I'm a normal guest coming here for a normal reason. I don't know why, but for some reason, I thought he'd sneak me in through a back

servant entrance as though there were people to hide me from. I know for sure there's a cleaning service, even though I've yet to encounter them directly.

Declan is waiting on a sofa against the wall when we walk in.

He winks at me when I catch that gray gaze which seems the smallest degree warmer than I've ever seen it. Maybe I'm seeing what I want to see—something to convince me that this isn't crazy, putting myself back in the hands of these two psychos.

“Welcome home, Pretty Toy.”

My stomach does a little flip at this, and a longing I'd almost made myself forget comes rushing back to the surface, igniting the place between my legs with warm liquid heat.

“I'm going to get her settled,” Seven says. “Come, Kitten.”

I tear my gaze from Declan and follow Seven wordlessly up a grand staircase and down a long wide hallway. “This is your room,” he says, stopping in front of a large room halfway down the hall.

Gauzy transparent white curtains hang in front of the windows, and even from the doorway, I can see there are French doors that go out onto a balcony. It's a beautiful room. Blond hardwood floors, a king-sized canopy bed with that same gauzy fabric. With a canopy bed, it should look like a little girl's room, but it's the grown-up sophisticated version. The furniture is all natural light-colored wood, with a few gold accents like the full-length leaner mirror on one side wall. Somehow it doesn't look gauche. The walls are a pale cream.

On a table beside the balcony doors is a large vase of fragrant white roses. The room has an attached bathroom, but I can't see inside it from my vantage point.

“What? But I thought...” I stop myself before the sentence is out fully in the open air for us all to stare at it and ponder how idiotic it is.

“You thought you were going back to the cell?”

I look down, unable to meet his eyes suddenly. “Yes.”

“Do you *want* to go back to the cell?”

“N-no, Master, I just thought...” Again I stop because I shouldn't question it. If I don't have to sleep on a bare mattress—however nice—in a dark gray cell, I should not call attention to the fact that that's an actual option.

“Once the puppy is trained, it doesn't have to stay in the crate. And you are definitely trained,” Seven says.

Declan only chuckles at this. He must have followed us up the stairs. I was too busy being in awe of my gilded cage to notice.

Being back with them, it's becoming increasingly obvious that Seven is the real game maker. He's the one running everything, pulling all the strings behind the scenes. Declan is just as responsible, of course. He was a happy and willing participant, but this is Seven's game. It always has been.

I was always wrong about who had the power here. It's so much more obvious now that Seven isn't playing his role as my co-captive. He stands taller and broader than his friend and partner in crime. I know Declan can hold his own, but there's a subtle deference he shows Seven. I didn't notice it the day I learned the truth, but it's so clear now.

Not only is Seven the one in charge, but I'm now sure he's the most dangerous of the two—and I slept trustingly inside the circle of his arms on that mattress for weeks while he stroked my hair, got me off, and whispered soothing words into my ear.

The tears come out of nowhere. Maybe not out of nowhere, but I'm sure that's how it appears to these men who have trained me to think of them as my masters.

“Kate?” Seven says. He looks concerned that I'm crying. He wears the mask so well, and it hurts even more when he plays this game with me. At least I always got the truth with Declan. That cold emptiness. But Seven still likes to pretend he has something inside.

And I still want so badly to believe it.

He steps closer to me, and I instinctively take a step back. He arches a brow. I called *him* after all. Nobody forced me to come back here, but it's hard not to take a step back. He seems so much taller now that he's not my protector.

He takes another step closer, and I fight the urge to run. A long shuddering breath flows out of me as he looks down at me and strokes the side of my cheek. I lean into him, my eyes drifting closed before I can stop them. He pulls me into his arms and strokes my hair.

“Shhhh,” he murmurs as though he actually cares. And I want to believe. I find myself leaning more heavily against him as a wave of dizziness washes over me. I'd sobered up pretty quickly after calling them—or I thought I did. But I did have a lot of alcohol. And I know it was just the adrenaline overriding everything else going on in my body, making me think I was okay when I'm not.

“Declan,” he says quietly, “she needs to eat. Will you bring something up?”

I don't hear an answer, only the receding of footsteps out of the room.

Seven undresses me and puts me in the bed, then he sits on the edge, watching me for several minutes. Finally he sighs and says, “It's late. After you eat, I want you to sleep. We'll discuss what comes next in the morning.”

I can't help tensing at these words. But he only takes my hand in his, stroking the back of it, still soothing me.

Declan comes up a little while later with some food. It's a chicken salad sandwich on toasted bread with a huge tomato on it. And some baked barbeque potato chips. He leaves the plate of food and a glass of water on the bedside table.

“Thank you,” I say.

Now it's his turn to arch a brow.

“M-master,” I add quickly.

He nods.

It's not that I forgot; I just wasn't sure how things were supposed to be now. What are the new rules? With Seven in charge, I just don't know. Seven turns on the bedside lamp, then both men leave the room, turning off the main light and shutting the door behind them. The lock is on the inside, so they can't lock me in. It's a small relief.

If I weren't still so drunk, I might be tempted to sneak out and explore the house, but I feel awful, and I'm so tired. I somehow manage to eat the food without getting sick. I really did need it. It was too much alcohol swirling around without any kind of buffer. I'm about to turn off the lamp when I spot a card sticking out of the roses. I struggle to stand and move toward the card as though in a trance. With shaking hands, I slide the card out of its small envelope.

Welcome home, Kitten. There's no going back now.

The piece of stiff ecru paper falls from my hand onto the hardwood floor. I don't bother to pick it up. I'm afraid bending over would just make me feel dizzy again. I open the balcony door and step outside for some fresh air, trying to settle my now pounding heart as I worry about the sinister promises in those words.

The view from here is different from the ones I've glimpsed through hallway and kitchen windows on the first floor. This view overlooks an enormous garden of white roses, illuminated by an intricate patchwork of

outdoor lighting. So not only do they have a cleaning service, they have landscapers and gardeners.

The scent wafts to my nose on the breeze. It's sweet and fragrant but not cloying. It makes me feel calm even when I know I shouldn't. I look down over the ornate iron railing. It's a high drop, and I know there's a big wall around the perimeter anyway. I wish I hadn't had so many drinks tonight. Drunk Kate is Stupid Kate. And the extreme truth of that is only just now beginning to sink into my awareness past the fog of an unfortunate number of tequila shots.

I stumble back into the bedroom, turn off the lamp, and slide between the cool silk sheets. The world shuts off as soon as my head touches the pillow.

ELEVEN

I wake in pitch blackness. Even with windows in this room, it's so dark I may as well be blindfolded. I don't know if the moon is dark tonight or if clouds are covering it, but being out as far as we are, there are no street lights. And they've obviously shut off the outdoor lighting.

It only takes a moment to realize why I've woken. I feel him beside me in the bed. I don't mean physically—skin against skin. I just know I'm not alone. And I know it's Seven. I realize suddenly how I know. It's his scent. The clean, safe maleness of him. I've associated his scent with safety for so long, my brain can't rewrite the code now.

I let out a surprised gasp when he pulls back the blankets, exposing my body to the cool air of the room. I wonder if he can see me, if he's using whatever night vision assistance Declan used when he would come into the cell at night, switching out Seven's clothes and the roses on the bathroom counter.

My legs fall open without his command, and he begins to stroke me just like he used to do inside the cell. It doesn't take long for my moans and whimpers to fill the darkness and then only a short while longer for me to come.

“Sleep, Kitten,” he whispers. He covers me back up, and I feel his weight lift off the bed. The door opens, letting the smallest whisper of distant light drift in, then I'm alone again, still panting.

I've got a headache when I wake to the sunlight streaming in through the windows and balcony door a few hours later. Seven is already beside me with some aspirin and water. Then he's feeding me again in bed—a big plate of

soft scrambled eggs and dry toast.

“How do you feel, Kitten?” he asks after I've eaten.

“Bad.”

And I must look it, too, because he doesn't get angry about the lack of title or punish me. He just takes the plate and glass away. He pulls the blinds and curtains on the window and balcony door, giving me as much darkness as the day will allow and leaves.

He returns a few minutes later and puts another glass of water on the bedside table then presses a kiss to my forehead before shutting the door and leaving me alone to sleep it off.

I lie in bed for a while, unable to fall back asleep, trying to figure out what his angle is. He seems so much like the Seven I thought I knew from the cell that it makes my heart hurt. It's so cruel that he would play with me like this—give me this lie when what's really inside him is cold, swirling darkness threatening to capsize my mind at any moment.

Why the fuck did I call? The words on the card repeat over and over in my mind. *No going back now.* I roll over, pull the blankets over my head, and drift back to sleep.



IT'S JUST past three in the afternoon when I wake. There's a clock on the wall just across from me. I feel a thousand times better than I did this morning, but I feel gross. I use the bathroom and take a shower, feeling more human with each step into this routine of normalcy which distracts me from what could be coming as soon as I'm well enough.

The bathroom matches the bedroom more or less. It's weirdly not quite as nice as the one attached to the cell, but there's a shower and a claw foot bathtub next to a large picture window, so it's nice enough. Even if we weren't so isolated, being on the second floor, no one could see in, but I can still see the rose garden, at least when I stand looking directly outside.

I return to the bedroom with a towel wrapped around me, startled to find both Seven and Declan standing in the room waiting, arms crossed over chests as though they are my bodyguards rather than my captors. *Captors I ran back to,* I remind myself. With every minute of full sobriety, I realize my foolishness, how I've sealed my fate.

“Feeling better, Kitten?”

“Y-yes, Master.”

“Good, now drop the towel and kneel.”

The air goes out of my lungs, and both the fear and excitement I haven't felt in weeks is back in one sudden rush. And yet I feel self-conscious. I had gotten so used to being their naked caged animal, but now I've become used to the civilizing influence of clothing. I unconsciously clutch the fabric tight across myself.

“I don't want to start with punishment,” Seven says.

I take a deep breath and let the towel fall. Then I kneel on a soft pale rug in front of them.

“Good girl.” This time it's Declan who speaks.

Seven reaches behind him to pick up something from the bed. It's a round silver-colored metal band. There are glittering pale pink gemstones inlaid in the metal, which is probably platinum. He uses a key to unlock it, then puts it around my throat and locks it in place.

“The collar doesn't come off. It's safe to get it wet. Every day you'll be allowed to leave the property from eleven in the morning until six in the evening. The penthouse, car, and money remain yours.”

They're letting me come and go? How do they know I won't run if whatever this is becomes too much for me? It's possible this question is plainly readable on my face because Seven's next words are: “There's a tracking device in the collar. Don't make us chase you.”

So not really free, just a very long leash. I'm still confused by their generosity. I can't square it with what they've done to me. And I can't figure out where exactly they exist on the good and evil scale. I keep foolishly wanting to believe maybe they aren't that evil. But even I can't pretend they've only engaged in a little harmless coloring outside the moral lines.

“Let's take her to the dungeon,” Declan says. “We have more interesting things down there.”

“True, and we can finally play without the pretense.”

A strangled sob escapes my throat at this pronouncement.

“Shhh, Pretty Toy. We don't hurt good girls, and you're going to be our good girl, right?”

“Y-yes, Master.”

I'm already mentally plotting ways to escape. I can use my “prison yard time” to find someone who can get this fucking collar off me and transfer

money out of that account and get the fuck as far from them as possible—like I should have done from the beginning. It doesn't matter how much I want and need them to touch me. I cannot continue down this road.

Declan chuckles, as though he can read these thoughts right out of my head. And probably he can. I'm not able to hide my true feelings in the way they can behind a face trained to show the expected emotions.

“You will not seek help from any of the staff as they come and go. They're all here illegally. They know the consequences of interfering in our personal affairs. And you will be seriously punished,” Declan says.

I swallow hard and nod my understanding. I believe him. Somehow I know I've never been seriously punished by them. I may have been played with and by them, but my punishments have been warnings... tastes of theoretical terrors should I breach the limits of their patience.

Seven helps me to stand, and they lead me downstairs, back down that long hallway to the dungeon. My heart is beating so fast, and I don't know if it's fear or arousal.

The dungeon feels different now. As much as I loved the Seven who I thought was trying to protect me, I also kind of hated him. I hated that extra bit of shame I felt because he wasn't fully on board. I hated that I had to carry that shame long after I was already broken and ready to please and be pleased by both of them.

He was always the holdout, except that he never was.

When we get to the dungeon, I kneel again. I don't wait to be commanded. I just do it.

“Good girl,” Seven says. It continues to feel strange when he takes this role that had previously only been Declan's domain. He bends down, his hand going between my legs. “I think it's time to wax this pussy, don't you, Kitten?”

My breath goes shallow. “Y-yes, Master.”

“I'll heat the wax,” Declan says, disappearing into the adjacent bathroom.

I'm scared now because waxing hurts, and I don't have the greatest pain threshold. After a while, you get used to it, and it's not so bad when a professional does it. But Seven and Declan aren't professionals, and I'm afraid it will hurt more because of that. But I don't voice this concern. I do, however, wish that I'd made a waxing appointment for Friday before I went out for drinks. I knew it was about time to do it, but I was so wrapped up in my own self-pity—poor little newly rich girl—that it didn't occur to me.

Seven helps me off the floor and guides me to a St. Andrew's Cross leaned against one exposed brick wall. I've never been bound to this before. Spanking benches, yes. And the bondage bed was Declan's favorite. It's convenient and far more comfortable than it looks.

“M-Master? Did I do something wrong?”

He laughs at this. “I haven't gotten to punish you yet. Don't you think I should get to?”

“Yes, Master.” It's almost a whisper.

“I could give you a list of your minor missteps, all adding up to a justification, but I don't need a justification. You are *mine*. I will do whatever I want with you.”

Suddenly, the waxing is the last thing on my mind.

He nods toward the St. Andrew's Cross. I turn away from him and spread my arms and legs out so he can bind me to the end points. I close my eyes. I don't want to watch him picking whatever it is he plans to use on me. I hope it's not the cane.

I cry out at the unexpected pain of a paddle landing hard against my ass. In its own way it's just as bad as the cane. The tears come immediately after only the first blow. He rubs my heated flesh.

“Yes, Kitten. I like how you don't hold back. Let me have those pretty tears. I'm jealous you only gave them to Declan for so long.”

He paddles me as though I truly have done something worthy of punishment, and something about this particular implement makes me feel contrite even as the space between my legs responds with arousal.

He stops and presses his body against mine. I feel his erection through his pants. He steps away again and gives me another hard smack with the paddle. I'm blubbering and sobbing.

“Please,” I whimper. If I knew of some wrong I'd committed that deserved punishment I would beg forgiveness, but I know he's doing this for his own gratification. He strokes my skin again and presses a kiss to my tear-streaked cheek.

“Shhhh, Kitten.”

Then there is a vibrating toy between my legs. I squirm and twist trying to gain more contact every time he pulls it away. Unlike Declan, he likes to tease me with the lowest setting so long that I think I'll lose my mind from it.

“Master, please...”

I want the toy inside me. For some reason in the time I was apart from

them, when I masturbated, I stayed on the outside. I couldn't bring myself to change the way I touched myself alone. I couldn't admit they'd changed me and what my body craves forever. Now I *need* to come that way. I need Seven to shove the toy inside me. Or his fingers. Or his cock. Anything. But he only presses the vibrator harder against my clit until I come, bucking against it and his hand.

“The wax is on the warmer. It's ready when you are,” Declan says.

“In a minute. I'm not done here yet. We need to retrain her ass. It's been weeks. Unless she was putting things inside her own ass in our absence,” he says, amusement threading his voice. “*Were* you doing that, Kitten?”

“N-no, Master.”

He sighs. “Such a shame. I would have jerked off to that thought for ages.”

I take a slow, deep breath when he slides a toy heavy with lube into my ass. It feels far better than it should after such a long break. I find myself moving with it, thrusting my ass back toward him trying to get deeper penetration with the toy.

“I told you she was becoming an anal slut,” Declan says.

I flush hot at these words, but I can't stop myself from seeking more contact with the toy he's fucking me with. When he pulls it away, I say, “No... please... more.”

“Not tonight, Kitten.”

But he does grant me another orgasm, this time with his fingers, still refusing to allow me the penetration I seek.

I feel weak and shaky when Seven takes me off the St. Andrew's Cross. He carries me to the bed and arranges us so that he sits against the headboard and I'm leaning back against his chest.

“Open your legs,” he orders.

I spread my legs and Declan joins us with the wax and cloth strips. I know he can see the fear in my eyes.

“It's okay, Pretty Toy. I know what I'm doing.”

Before he starts, though, he bends down and licks between my legs. I arch off the bed into his hungry mouth. He makes me come again while Seven holds me still for him.

When Declan finally starts waxing, I'm relieved to find that he does know what he's doing. The heated wax is somehow soothing and not too hot. And he knows just the right way to rub over the cloth. He gives a nice clean rip,

and though it hurts, it's only for a second. But I cry out each time; I can't help it.

Seven distracts me, stroking my breasts in a way that is somehow more soothing than erotic. "You're doing great," he says.

When Declan is finally finished, and I'm once again smooth and bare for them, he rubs a cooling salve between my legs.

"I'm going to take her to bed," Seven says.

I'm grateful when he picks me up and carries me up the stairs. I lay my head against his shoulder. On the main level, he takes me to the kitchen and sits me down on a bar stool. We eat some leftover pizza from the fridge. I find myself unable to believe he eats pizza.

When we get to Seven's room, he orders me to join him in the shower, but he isn't there to get either himself or me clean. And he's not there to fuck me, either. He holds my gaze while he takes my hand and wraps it around his cock.

I jerk him off in the shower.

"Fuck, yes. Just like that."

It only takes a few minutes before he comes over my hand. He leans forward, his head resting against my shoulder in an oddly sweet moment as he struggles to gain control of his breathing again.

He shuts the shower off, dries us both, then carries me to his bed. There are blackout shades in his room, and his balcony door is solid, not glass. He pulls the shades and turns out the light before joining me.

My breath hitches in my throat alone in the dark with him just as I've been so many nights before. I'm so sore and tender from where they waxed me. Even so, I would give almost anything for him to fuck me right now, even if it hurt. I'd pay that price just to feel him inside.

My legs fall open for him automatically, and he touches me like he always does in the dark. Except this time he's more careful than normal, slower and more gentle. He uses lube to stroke me, and I come apart under his hands.

Even after I've come, I want to ask for more, but I don't. He presses a kiss to my forehead.

"Sleep, Kitten."

TWELVE

We have a late breakfast, this time in the kitchen. Part of me thought since I'm their slave, and they can do whatever they want with me, that I would start taking over domestic duties. Even if they have a cleaning service, maybe they don't have a cook. But they seem to be content doing the cooking themselves.

I've been allowed clothing today—jeans and a pale pink tank top. In fact, I was shocked to find my closet and drawers filled with clothes and shoes and undergarments all in my sizes. I suppose if they were planning this for a long time, they had plenty of time to get clothes for me.

Declan and Seven are both dressed sharply in suits, and it occurs to me I have no idea what they even do with their lives. I know Seven at least has always been well off, but what do they actually *do* during the day now that their life is back to the status quo? I don't bother asking because I'm sure they'll tell me it's none of my business, and I'm not sure I want to know the way men without conscience manage to acquire this much wealth and power over the police force.

Seven glances down at his watch. "Eleven a.m., Kitten. You're off the leash. See you at six. Each of them kiss me as though we are in some sort of unconventional, yet still fairly normal relationship. Then they just... leave. The house.

I stare after them, gaping like a fish. When I'm able to snap out of this fugue state, I step outside the main door to find that yes, they're driving off the property in separate cars. I find my blue Porsche sitting shiny and gleaming in the circular driveway. I have no idea how it got here, and it looks

like someone washed it.

A young man who I hadn't noticed before, hands me the keys. "The car is ready, Ms. Mitchell. Mr. Kelly said to take care of it for you." He speaks in good but slightly broken English. His accent is unmistakable, but I can't fully place its origin.

"What about the gate?" I find myself asking.

"There's a programmed remote in the glove box." He opens the passenger side and shows me a slim black remote control with a single button.

"Thanks," I manage. My fingers drift unconsciously up to touch my collar. With the pink gemstones, it looks like regular jewelry, especially since it matches what I'm wearing, but still, I feel exposed. I also feel a bit like a puppy with a shock collar to keep me from straying too far.

They must feel very confident in their powers to keep me while giving me the illusion of freedom.

I put the keys in my pocket and take a walk around the property. There are a few gardeners in the gardens. There's an enormous pool on one side of the house with what I would consider a "party jacuzzi". It's all decked out on the far end of the house for BBQs as though this is an activity Seven and Declan engage in routinely. I just can't see it.

When I make my way back around to the front of the house, there are several white vans parked in the drive.

The guy who washed my car notices my wariness and says, "It's just the cleaning service, Ms. Mitchell."

I manage a weak smile. Then I go inside and as unobtrusively as possible do a walk-through of the house. It's just beginning to dawn on me that I *live* here now. The penthouse was swank, no question, but this is on another level.

For all my ambition when I worked at the ad agency and the level of success I'd acquired, I'd never thought of myself as materialistic. Aside from the Louis Vuitton bag, I didn't put a lot of stock in things. And they didn't impress me. My drive for success was more about the pleasure of being the best at something and less about the financial rewards even though I *did* enjoy them.

But I can't help but stand in absolute awe of this exquisite house. There's a huge formal dining room on the first floor just off the generous entryway. There's a sort of fancy game room with billiard tables. There is literally a room which I think is meant just for smoking cigars and drinking whatever manly drink men prefer to have with cigars.

There is a solarium and an indoor pool. A library that extends up two stories. A fitness room. A fucking ballroom. Is there any reason to ever leave a house like this and go out into the world? I half expect to come across a restaurant or a gift shop, but of course I don't. There are a few smaller, cozier rooms that most people would call things like "living room". At the end of the hallway is a nice large office, but when I push the door open to one, a maid says, "I wouldn't, Ms. Mitchell, that's Mr. Kelly's private office."

I'm a bit troubled that I don't know which one of my masters Mr. Kelly is. I think it's probably Seven, but I don't know for sure, and I feel confident Seven and Declan won't submit to an interrogation about the matter, so I quietly shut the door.

"Sorry, I was just exploring."

She smiles, not unkindly, and goes on about her business.

I'm also a little weirded out that every single bit of staff knows my name. The second floor has several large nice bedrooms with balconies, several of which have their own bathrooms, like mine. None of the rooms are Declan's or Seven's. It's the third floor where I find their rooms. They look different in the day. Both are understated and masculine.

Having seen just about everything there is to see, I go back outside and get in my car. I don't remember the way here, so I program the address of my penthouse into the GPS.

It only takes about thirty minutes to get back to the city. It seemed farther away, but I guess every drive feels long when you're drunk, scared, and about to lose all your freedom to people you know you can't truly trust.

I go back to my penthouse and just sit on the sofa, staring out at the view of the city. I'm still processing all of this. I order in pizza and watch TV and take a bubble bath trying to feel normal. I'm still not sure if that drunk phone call was my worst idea or my best.

I get back home ten minutes before six to find Seven standing in the main entryway, still wearing the suit. My mouth goes dry. That look really works for him. "We're having dinner in the formal dining room. I'm told you've snooped around so you know where it is."

I'm not sure if he's upset about that. They didn't say I couldn't look around. They never said any area of the house was off limits.

"I'm sorry, Master," I say even though I don't really feel I owe him an apology.

He smirks. "For knowing where the dining room is? Yes, you should

surely be punished for that high crime. Go upstairs. There's a dress for you on the bed. Put it on and come down. Dinner's almost ready.”

Upstairs, draped across the bed is the most sophisticated black evening gown I've ever seen, and a pair of silver heels. I dress and fix my hair and makeup then stand for a few minutes admiring myself in the leaner mirror. The pink gemstones glitter in the light. The band isn't too thick and clunky, so it doesn't seem out of place.

“You really are a pretty toy.”

I spin around to find Declan—also still in a suit—leaning against the door frame.

“Dinner's ready; come down now.”

“Yes, Master,” I say, but he's already disappeared down the hallway.

I move slower than him in heels, so I never quite catch up. When I reach the formal dining room, fine bone china and crystal has been laid out. The silverware is actual silver. Servants are serving some type of soup in shallow elegant bowls.

Seven sits at the head of the table. Declan is seated to his right. There's another place setting across from Declan. One of the servants pulls out that chair for me, and I sit.

“You look beautiful, Kitten,” Seven says.

“Thank you.”

“I'm sorry, what?”

“Thank you, Sir,” I attempt, hoping he'll take that because we aren't alone in this room.

“No,” he says flatly, even as his hazel eyes flash with emotion. “That will not work for me. Try again, Kitten.”

“Thank you, Master,” I murmur as I feel the flush crawl over my skin.

“Good girl.”

We've just finished dinner in the formal dining room when the doorbell rings. Seven and Declan remain seated. I hear the front door open, some murmured words, and then a moment later a dangerous-looking man with dark hair and coal black eyes steps into the room. He, too, wears a suit, but even dressed nice, he looks rough and hardened, which makes the suit seem ill-fitted, even though it's as well-tailored as Seven's and Declan's.

I tense as his gaze sweeps appreciatively over me. There's something slimy and oily about the way he looks at me. He lingers on my cleavage before moving up, but not to my face. To my collar.

He knows. Then he looks me straight in the eyes and smiles.
His attention shifts to Seven.

“I thought I'd never get a meeting. I heard you were gone for a few weeks.”

Seven's gaze cuts to me for the barest second, then back to his visitor. He seems unruffled by the man standing in the dining room.

“International business. It couldn't be helped. You could always have met with Declan. I've been back for a while, but I've been busy.”

I realize this *international business* was when he was in the cell with me, playing his game while Declan handled all his outside affairs.

“I didn't want Declan. I wanted you,” he says.

Declan pretends to be offended by this, but I know he doesn't care.

The stranger's attention shifts back to me again. “I see you have a new pet. I know you'll want to share her. Same price as always?” He comes around the table, and stands behind me.

I squeeze my eyes shut as his fingertips brush against my throat. I want to beg. I'm not even opposed to calling him master right now, even with an audience because this man knows anyway, and I'll do anything to keep his hands off me, but I'm too afraid to beg. It could make Seven look weak. And I know he'd never forgive that.

“Do. Not. Touch. Her.” Seven says. His voice is cold and boiling all at once, both dead and the most alive he's ever been.

Declan stands, his hand going to his waist, and I realize suddenly he has a gun.

The stranger immediately pulls his hand back, and I let out a relieved sigh.

“You usually share.”

“Not this one,” Seven says.

“What's so special about her?” he asks, still pushing.

“Do you want to walk out of this room tonight?” Seven challenges.

The man's tone shifts sharply as he becomes aware of the threat and finally reads the room properly. “Yes, Mr. Kelly. I apologize. I won't ask again.”

“Good. Spread the word. No one asks. Ever.”

“Yes, Mr. Kelly. Of course.”

Seven drops his napkin on his plate and stands. “Let's go to my study and talk business.”

The stranger leaves the dining room, followed by Seven. Declan rises also.

“Go to your room and wait for us, Pretty Toy.” He gives me a once-over. “And don't take the dress off.”



It's a while before Seven and Declan come to my room. I worry briefly that something bad happened, that one or both of them is hurt, or worse. But of course this is silly. The house has too much electronic security. Besides, there are other people here tonight. And Declan, at least, is armed. Maybe Seven, too.

Seven is already loosening his tie when he steps into the room. His intense predatory gaze locks on mine, and for a moment, I think he's angry with me.

I'm standing. Declan said to leave the dress on, and I can't kneel in it. It's too tight in the wrong places. Plus, it's silk. I don't want to damage it.

They prowl around me, taking a good look at the dress. Then both of them are running their hands over my body encased in this exquisite fabric. Finally, they stop circling me like I'm prey. Declan is in front and Seven at my back. They begin to kiss my exposed skin as Seven pulls down the zipper of the gown. They work together undressing me.

I'm surprised when Seven is tying a blindfold around my eyes. Then one of them takes my hands in his.

“I'm taking your ass tonight,” Seven growls in my ear. Besides punishing me, this is the other thing he wasn't able to do while he was getting the thrill of pretending to be my protector. And I find myself wanting it as much as he does.

“Thank you, Master.” These words just come to me, and I say them because I know he'll get off on it.

He chuckles. “We trained you so well. Such a natural. I knew when I first saw you the day we started watching you that you were the one for us.”

In other circumstances, some of those words might have passed for romantic.

Both men help me onto the bed. Declan guides me to straddle him. I know which of them is which by the way they touch me. I'm already wet, so

hungry for the fucking I've been denied since my return as if I were being punished for playing their game the way they designed it.

He lets out a hiss of pleasure as I lower myself onto him. A mouth latches onto my breast and I know from the angles, that it's Declan's. He bites my nipple hard enough to elicit a cry from me, and his answering chuckle reverberates against my skin.

Seven is busy placing open-mouthed kisses against my throat. I'm still adjusting to Declan inside me. I'd forgotten how big he was. My body has had too much rest from them.

“Fuck me,” Declan orders.

I begin to move.

Seven is kissing my back, pressing a kiss against the small of it—something I had thought was only a Declan thing. I like it. It's strangely tender and intimate. A drawer opens and closes. And then a lubed toy is being worked inside my ass. Tears stream down my face. Not pain—relief that this is finally happening again.

“Shhhh, Kitten,” Seven says, misunderstanding the cause of my tears. He strokes my back as the toy slides in and out of me. Declan's fingers dig into my hips arching and thrusting upward.

Then the toy is gone, and it's Seven. I gasp when he pushes himself inside me. He grabs my throat and pulls me back against him. His mouth is at my ear.

“This is the best place my dick has ever been,” he growls, which sends another jolt of arousal between my legs.

One of Declan's hands leaves my hip as his thumb moves against my clit. I'm lost in a sea of darkness behind the blindfold unable to do anything but feel them both as they fill me, stretching me, claiming me in the most complete and carnal way I've ever experienced.

Now that the mask is off, Seven is the rougher lover. But the force with which he takes me only drives me higher and faster toward my peak.

Then, in the most unlikely of sexual lotteries, all three of us come at the same time. We are a symphonic mix of my whimpers and their animalistic growls. Seven pulls out of me, pushing me forward over Declan, spilling himself onto my back as my pussy clenches around and milks the rest of Declan's release, greedily sucking it inside me.

I rise off of Declan. He removes the blindfold and pulls me down to lie against his chest, stroking my hair. I expect that now all three of us will

cuddle together in this bed. It feels like what should come next. But it isn't what comes next.

“You can have her in your bed tonight,” Seven says, getting dressed. Then he leaves the room without another word.

I stare after him, wondering if I've done something wrong, wondering if now that he's scratched these twin itches of punishment and fucking my ass if he finds it wasn't truly worth the wait after all. Is he bored now? Declan notices my distress.

“It's not you, Kate. He's got some business to take care of. It's fine.”

I nod, not feeling reassured.

Declan doesn't fuck me again tonight. Instead, he takes me up to his room on the third floor and pulls me into the shower with him. He silently washes me, and I wash him. It's intimate, but not sexual in the way one would expect. Then we lie down together in his bed. He pulls me into him—always and forever his little spoon. It's the first time I'm able to fully relax into this moment where we are wrapped in a tender embrace inside his bed. It's the first time I don't warn myself that it isn't real.

THIRTEEN

Months go by in this new normal. Declan was right, it wasn't me. Seven grows distant at times, but he always comes back to me, giving me that glimmer of the man I first knew.

Each morning passes much as any ordinary couple might pass it—except that it's three instead of two. Every day we have breakfast in a strangely comfortable silence at the kitchen table, they kiss me, and they leave. Then I go about my day.

I've gotten to know the names of most of the staff as they come and go. I still don't know what Seven and Declan do, though I'm certain it's some kind of organized crime. On the second day of our new arrangement, I learned they have security that goes well beyond electronic. Guards. And it's really a full-on security team. No wonder they weren't afraid I'd ask the staff for help. The guards stay outside and work in shifts. There are two security buildings, one at the front near the gate and one at the back end of the property.

That, combined with the occasional unsavory visitors who come to the house, retreating always to a private study to talk business with Seven, and it's not as though I need a diagram. Many of these men look at me with clear lust in their gaze, knowing exactly what I am to my masters, and also knowing they will never be allowed to touch me no matter what they did with *the others*.

I wonder what happened to the others? And did Seven and Declan start with the same game they did with me? Or did they go a different route? Did they use their money from the very beginning to simply buy what they wanted? Did they want my submission to come from a different place? After

all, when they first offered me my freedom, I only took it because it seemed I didn't have the option to stay. And when I came back, I thought I was going back to the cell. So it wasn't for their money.

For the first few weeks, I used my *outdoor kitty* time to shop and take in some movies, and of course, the spa. But it got boring. I missed work. So I started working on setting up my own ad agency.

It's not a traditional agency. I don't have the necessary freedom to do that. I redid the penthouse to function as a place to meet clients. I'll only take a few at a time, and my availability is by appointment only. But it seems to be working out.

When I get home in the evenings, we eat. I've since learned that actually they do have a cook who comes in several days a week to prepare meals. Though they also like to cook part of the time and always for breakfast.

After dinner, things stop being quite so benign. They torment me endlessly with pleasure while demanding the same from me along with my absolute obedience. They use me in whatever way pleases them, but no matter what they do, my body always hungers for more. Sometimes I sleep in my own bed, but more often than not, I'm invited into either Declan's or Seven's bed for the night.

I look down at my phone to check the time and am filled with horror. It's almost six. I've never been late coming home. Will they think I ran? Will they come after me? I'm so scared of how they might punish me for this infraction that I can't think straight. I've come to trust over time that as fucked-up as they are, they really do seem to feel something for me and to not want to cause me actual harm.

At the same time, that doesn't stop the fact that they are terrifying, and I've disobeyed their orders. I try to think of an appropriate lie, even though I know I'm not a good liar and that will probably only make things worse.

Hell, maybe I should wreck the car so I have an excuse. The fact that I'm even thinking such crazy thoughts is a testament to how wrong I am now. I'm so... *wrong*. But if they took the collar off my throat and told me to leave, I would beg them to let me stay. There's no saving me anymore. My body, mind, and soul, have long been theirs.

And when I don't judge myself or think about how society would feel about this, how they might judge or pity me, I think I'm actually happy. But if I'm so happy, why am I so scared to go home so late?

Aside from what they've done to twist my mind, they truly have never

harmed me. They've never lost their tempers with me. The only reason I've ever felt my life was in danger at their hands was because of what I know about their lack of remorse. They don't have the same leash on them that other people have.

It's not so much that they're evil—at least not to me—it's that they're wild. They're like wild animals. You can work with a wild predatory animal every day for years... You can believe you've built trust, that the animal sees you as a friend. And then one day, out of nowhere, the tiger mauls you to death. This is what I worry about. That they'll get bored with me, and that one day that switch inside them will flip, and their predatory gaze will settle on me, and my number's up.

But I'm too fucked-up now to live outside their cage. I tried. I do believe they care for me, probably more than they've ever cared for anything besides each other. But am I fooling myself? Is it a false sense of security that every time I walk inside the tiger's cage, I'm certain I'm getting out alive?

Yet I'm sure I'm the equivalent of the serial killer's wife of two decades. He will never ever harm her. He will wear that mask and make her feel loved, and maybe she's the one person who can make him feel anything. I like that feeling. Being that one person that someone cares about. There's no other human being who can turn their gaze or hold their attention, and there's a rush of power in that which I'm ashamed I like.

Even if they ever let me go, even if I somehow could go on without them, I would be lonely for the rest of my life. They have ruined me for any other relationship, no matter how healthy and good and true it might be. I've become twisted in the tangled vines of their darkness, and there's nowhere left to go but down.

Maybe I should call and apologize, explain to them that I just lost track of time. I left my cell phone in the car and wonder if they've already tried to call or text. My hands shake as I fumble with the key fob to get into the Porsche. I stumble back as a hand with a foul smelling cloth goes over my mouth.



WHEN I COME TO, a blindfold covers my eyes, and my hands are tied together over my head. I'm still wearing my sundress, but my shoes are gone. My bare feet are cold under the hard floor. I still feel foggy from the drugs. Why the

fuck did they drug me? Did they really think that was necessary?

“Please... I'm sorry...” I whimper. The tears are already rolling down my cheeks. “I... I lost track of the time... please forgive me, Master.”

A hand grips my throat, hard. Harder than normal. I gasp and choke for air, struggling against the ropes.

A laugh. “Master? My, what fucked-up games has my frigid little bitch been playing?”

My heart sinks. Andrew.

“You LIED to me,” he hisses in my ear as he rips off the blindfold.

I look frantically around. We're in an abandoned meat-packing plant. The ropes tied around my wrists are looped up over a hook that once held dead animal carcasses.

“You were never going to be homeless. You tricked me into caring again and coming to your rescue, and you were gone. Why didn't you answer my calls and messages? WHY? Too busy laughing with a new lover? You obviously found someone very well off with that car you're driving,” he sneers.

He looks crazed. I have no idea what to say to him. He won't believe me if I tell him I was kidnapped. What kind of kidnapper lets their victim go and furnishes them with a Porsche? I'm still trying to process the fact that I'm not tied up for punishment from my masters but for some kind of revenge from my ex-boyfriend.

It sickens me to think I voluntarily dated this piece of shit for as long as I did. He was a mean asshole and bad in bed, but I didn't think he was a violent criminal. I hold onto the small thread of hope that he's bluffing or can't bring himself to do whatever it is he's psyching himself up to do.

“Andrew, this is crazy. It's not what you think. You need to untie me.” It takes everything in me not to say the word Master again. Not because I would ever think of Andrew in that way but because I've been so conditioned these past few months to respond with that word when afraid, when tied up, when at someone else's mercy.

And then I see the knife, and the real panic begins.

“Andrew... please.”

“Andrew, please,” he mimics in a high voice. “This is the only way you'll learn not to be such a lying fucking bitch.” He slices my sundress in several places and rips it off me. Then he does the same with my panties. I'm not wearing a bra for him to destroy.

He goes for my collar, fumbling for a clasp or way to get it off. “Why won't this come off? Why is it locked on?”

The collar. It's become so much a part of me that I forget it's there half the time. I silently pray Seven and Declan are on their way. But how long will they wait before thinking I've tried to run and come for me? And how do I even know there's really a tracking device inside? How would a tracking device be inside?

The tears slide down my cheeks as I realize it was probably just another mindfuck—just something to scare me, to train me and make me obey. What if there isn't a tracking device? And even if there is, what if they haven't gotten concerned enough about my absence to bother coming after me? I could be dead long before they even leave the house.

Andrew takes a step back and stares at the collar, then back at me, then at the collar again, then back at me as he finally puts two and two together.

“Oh. My. God. You fucking whore. This is delicious. I'd fuck you before I killed you, but we both know you'll be dry, you frigid fucking bitch. How on earth did you get some man to play kinky sex games with you when you can't even come? Does he just keep you around for blow jobs? I recall you're actually talented there. Maybe I'll let you blow me before I cut you up.”

I'm crying seriously now—not just a few delicate tears sliding down my cheeks but full-on sobbing. I no longer have just basic fear of punishment for getting home late, but terror as the reality of who has me and why he's taken me has finally clicked inside my drug-addled brain.

“Andrew, please... please, I'm sorry, please... don't hurt me.”

I want to spit in his face. I want to swing back and kick out at him. But I want to live more. I want to see Seven and Declan again. I want to be back home with them. I rack my brain, trying to figure out how to calm him down and somehow get out of this.

I flinch and try to pull away as he presses the tip of the knife at my throat and slowly drags it downward, not drawing blood, not yet. He wants me as afraid as I can possibly be. Maybe he's bluffing. Maybe he just wants to scare me. I hold onto this thought because I still just can't believe he's a killer. I can't believe he would cut me.

“Y-you don't want to do this. I'm not worth prison.”

He laughs again. “Trust me, baby, I won't get caught.” He makes a small, shallow cut across my collar bone, his eyes lighting with delighted malice at the sight of my blood.

I yelp at the thin burning streak. Then my gaze shifts as I catch movement in the shadows. It's them.

I catch Seven's eye. "Master, please..."

"I'm not your *Master*," Andrew says. "You're not worth that much investment, you little freak."

A throat clears, and Andrew nearly jumps out of his skin as he realizes we aren't alone.

"I believe she was referring to me," Seven says, stepping out of the shadows.

Andrew turns wildly, this time holding the knife up like he thinks he's going to fight him with it.

Declan joins Seven, and the two of them throw the full force of their dark, blank stares on Andrew. They are terrifying when they drop the masks and let that cold, menacing darkness swirl out of them.

"Andrew, Andrew, Andrew," Seven says. "This is awkward. We were grateful that you practically gift-wrapped a girl with nothing to lose and nowhere to go for us to just pick right up. But she doesn't belong to you, pal. She belongs to us, and I'm afraid touching our toys is a killing offense."

"Indeed," Declan says.

They are both so calm, and I swear it's a thousand times more frightening than the erratic insanity that just came out of Andrew.

"Drop the knife and step away from our girl," Declan says.

Instead, Andrew moves behind me, pressing the tip of the blade to my throat. "I'll kill her."

Seven laughs. "And what will that get you? Longer torture, probably. Kill her, don't kill her. Either way, you're ours now. And we aren't nearly so gentle with men."

Andrew presses the blade harder against my skin. I cry as another small trickle of blood flows out.

"Master... please."

Neither Seven nor Declan flinches. Nothing changes on their impassible faces. Both men charge so fast toward Andrew, that he actually takes a step back and drops the knife. I can't see what happens behind me, but I hear the scuffling, Andrew's yelping, some punching.

They drag him around in front of me, forcing him to his knees. Declan holds the knife at his throat.

"Beg for forgiveness," Declan says.

“P-please, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. D-don't let them kill me,” Andrew sputters.

Seven hauls him off the ground. “That's fucking pathetic. We don't need to hear any more of *that*. And *let* us kill you? Please.”

Seven holds him while Declan takes out a coil of rope from his inside jacket pocket. He ties the ropes so hard and violently I flinch. They hang him from a meat hook so that he's facing me.

The two men take a couple of steps back. They look back and forth from Andrew to me. Aren't they going to untie me and let me down? It hurts that they acted like they didn't care if Andrew killed me. I know if they'd shown that weakness or hesitation that I'd be in more danger, but it still hurts because a part of me is scared that was the truth—that I'm only a toy to them, only a pet, and they would be barely bothered if I died.

“Now, Andrew,” Seven says, but he's circling and looking at me. “Let's talk about this frigid bitch comment.”

Declan moves up behind me, his mouth peppering kisses across my throat as his tongue slips out and licks the spot on my neck where Andrew pressed the blade.

I can't stop the small whimper as my fear shifts to arousal. I'm sure most people couldn't make such a swift mental shift, but I've been making that shift for so long now that it feels like my default factory setting. Suddenly, the adrenaline inside me has a safe place to land.

“Who do you belong to?” Seven asks.

“You and Declan, Master.”

Declan's hands have snaked around to begin to rub my breasts. I arch shamelessly into his touch. I know this is sick and twisted, but my head falls back against his shoulder, and I close my eyes, letting him fondle me however he wants.

I jump at a hard slap. But there's no pain because I wasn't the recipient. Seven just slapped Andrew.

“Keep your eyes open. Watch. Her. Before you die, you need to know that she was always perfect. The problem was always you. You are the failure. You are the one who doesn't know how to touch a woman and keep her happy. You destroyed her life because you are a fuck up. Watch how responsive she is. Look at what you could have had, you fucking fool.”

There is malice in Andrew's gaze as it meets mine. And the part of me that my masters have twisted beyond repair loves it because there isn't a

goddamn thing he can do to me now. It hurt every time he called me frigid, every time he acted as though there was something wrong and broken with me that I couldn't come with him. And I don't just mean on the inside, I mean at all. I couldn't come at all with him. And now he's getting a front row seat to the truth and what he could never have.

Maybe it should bother me more that he's watching this, but he's seen me naked hundreds of times. He's never seen this, though.

“You will not say a single word while this is happening,” Seven tells Andrew. “Otherwise, we'll keep you alive longer, and trust me when I say you don't want that.”

Declan strokes between my legs, pushing two large fingers inside me. He rubs my inner walls, knowing exactly how and where to touch me. And then Seven joins him, and he kisses me, his hand gripped possessively around my neck while Declan continues his relentless finger fucking. It doesn't take long for me to come. They've trained me too well. Seven pulls back to allow my screams of pleasure to fill the abandoned factory.

Declan doesn't stop until I beg him, pleading that I can't take anymore.

“What do you say to me?” he asks, still gently fondling me, not ready to stop yet.

“Thank you, Master,” I say on a sated sigh. I give him this without shame or fear. He pulls his hand away, pressing his wet fingers into my mouth. I suck on them without prompting.

“Such a good girl,” he soothes, stroking my hair.

I can only whimper in reply.

When I come down off this high, I open my eyes and look over at Andrew. I expect to see shock or disgust on his face. But instead, I see raw lust and anger, as though I had been somehow selfishly withholding this from him all this time.

My gaze shifts to Seven. He's standing next to Andrew again, but he's watching me.

“Take her to the car,” Seven says.

Declan lifts the ropes binding my arms off the hook. I'd lost track of how much that hurt, hanging there, but now I'm newly aware. He unties the ropes and rubs my wrists, then he brings each one to his lips, kissing the chafed skin. He lifts me up and carries me out of the factory. The sun has disappeared behind the trees, and I shiver against the chill in the air.

He settles me in the car and takes off his suit jacket and puts it on me. He

takes a first aid kit out of the glove box and rubs an aloe gel into my wrists where the ropes rubbed me raw in my struggle.

Classical music flows into the car as he turns the key in the ignition. He turns the heat on.

“Stay,” he orders.

I nod. Why would I run now?

FOURTEEN

I watch the clock on the dash as it marches on. Two hours pass before Declan returns to the car. In the glare of the headlights I can see his shirt is covered in blood. I'm surprisingly horrified by this. I knew they were monsters. But I've never seen it in this visceral, violent way before. He and Seven just spent all this time torturing a man to death while I sat out in the car in the dark. This is what they have inside them.

As bad as Andrew was, it still twists something in my gut to know the amount of suffering he just endured. It's so stupid because he had every intention to carve me up like a turkey. Declan takes off the bloody shirt, pops the trunk, and stuffs it inside before getting into the driver's side.

He starts to pull out of the huge parking lot.

“Wait... what about Seven?”

“He's doing clean up and disposal. He'll meet us back at the house later.”

I almost ask how the hell he'll do that if we take the car but then I realize he's going to take Andrew's car... and get rid of it.

We drive silently away from the meat-packing plant and onto a lonely abandoned road. I'm lost deep in thought. I was with Andrew for two years. I thought he was an asshole, a piece of shit. Was he also a sociopath? It's so tempting to try to shift him into that category. He was going to torture me to death. I have no doubt of that.

We want to believe every violent terrible person is *crazy*. We want to believe every sociopath is a crazed violent lunatic. But I'm not sure if that's true. We want to believe that there's a special category of not-really-human who does bad things and that we can never be in that category because we're

sane. We're real people, and they are not.

But just being with Seven and Declan, I've felt pieces of my humanity shut off. I find myself influenced by the way they see the world around them. And what just happened back there... me happily letting them get me off while Andrew watched... something is definitely broken and changed in me. But I'm not a monster.

I know now that Andrew is a monster. But is Andrew empty in the way Seven and Declan are? The idea that I could be safe with the men I'm with but in danger from someone who has no actual mental illness is unsettling.

While I'm thinking all this, I'm very aware that Seven is happily chopping up a body to dispose of. And I'm sure he's happy about it. Possibly gleeful.

In college I took sociology because I thought it would help me in the advertising world. Psychology is the normal choice, and there's a lot of overlap, but if you want to sell a lot of a product, you need to know how people act in herds, not just as individuals.

I remember an experiment we learned about called the Milgram experiment. It showed that normal, good, moral people in shockingly large numbers will obey an authority figure to act against their own conscience to harm a random innocent person. So I'm not sure I'm any more unsafe with these men than I would be with some "good" person.

At least every decision Seven and Declan make comes absolutely from their own will with no other influence. There's a strange safety in that. I stare out the window, clutching Declan's coat around me as I watch the trees move by in a blur outside the window. Night has settled in more deeply, growing comfortable in its cloak of darkness. The full moon rises over the treetops, and there's a strange peace in this moment.

"Are you all right?" he finally asks.

At least I don't have to make up an excuse for being home late. I can't believe that's the thought I'm thinking right now. What have these men done to my mind?

"Yes, Master. Thank you for coming to get me." I almost say thank you for putting the tracking device in my collar, but that's too crazy even for me. Absently, I trail my fingertips over the metal band around my throat that just saved my life.

When we get home, Declan takes me to the master bathroom attached to Seven's room. He runs a hot bath and lights some candles for me.

"Take a bath and then come downstairs. I'll make you something to eat."

“Thank you, Master.”

He just nods and leaves. I take off the suit coat and lay it across the bed in Seven's room, then I turn off the bathroom lights so there's only the soft glow of the candles and get into the tub.

I think I was in shock back at the plant because I finally cry. I let all these feelings inside me come out... the latent fear over what could have so easily happened, and the relief that it didn't, the relief that I'm back home.

I soak for a very long time, but finally I get out of the bath and dry off, blowing out the candles on the way out of the room. I go to my room and find something to wear, selecting a white sundress with small yellow flowers on it. Declan and Seven both like this dress. I'm only allowed underwear when I have my time out of my cage each day so I don't put any on.

When I get downstairs, I find the kitchen table set for three. Declan has made homemade beef pot pie. It's a soothing, comforting meal and exactly what I need right now. He always knows exactly what I need.

The front door opens and slams shut, and a few minutes later, Seven stands in the kitchen doorway. He's covered in blood, much like Declan was, only worse because he had to actually cut up the body. I shudder at that thought.

His gaze finds mine. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, Master.”

“How did it go?” Declan asks.

“No one will ever find him,” Seven replies.

“And the car?”

“Same. I'm going to grab a quick shower.” Seven disappears from the room as Declan pours some tea into my glass and puts a generous serving of pot pie on my plate.

“Eat,” he orders.

I thought we'd wait on Seven, but he doesn't have to tell me twice. I'm so hungry. Every few bites I look up to find his gray gaze on me. He's eating, too, but he doesn't take his eyes from mine. He doesn't say anything.

Is he trying to figure out if I'm really okay? If any lasting psychological damage was done? Part of me thinks they would have enjoyed torturing the life from Andrew even if he'd done nothing wrong just for the sheer sport of it. It's convenient that there was a justifiable excuse.

Fifteen minutes later, Seven is back downstairs, wearing only jeans, water dripping down his back from his still wet hair. He sits across from me and

digs in, eating like this is the first meal he's had in a week. He doesn't look up at me until he's cleaned his plate.

“Do you want more?” Declan asks me, noticing my plate is clean, too.

“No, Master.”

He nods and clears all of our plates from the table.

“Go up to my room and wait for us,” Seven says.

A shiver skates down my spine at this command.

When I get to Seven's room, I strip off the dress and get into his huge bed. When they join me, I don't get the rough claiming fucking I expected. I assumed they would want to piss on their territory. After another man had his hands on me—even if the situation wasn't my choice—surely they'd want to fuck me in a way so there was no mistake who I belonged to, lest any creature with breath in its lungs forget.

But they don't do this. Instead, they are so careful, gentle as though I might break. Soft kisses, gentle caresses, murmured endearments I no longer know if I should let myself believe, yet can't chastise myself for hoping are real. They don't fuck me together. They take turns, and each of them is slow and deliberate, savoring the feel of their body inside of mine.

My monsters take such very good care of me. Maybe they can't really feel love, but I've heard that the early kind of love in a relationship is only infatuation, that it isn't real. Everyone who claims to really know says that love isn't a feeling; it's an action.

If love is an action, then my monsters definitely love me. Maybe they can't feel the same things other people can feel, but they do take care of me. And they do want me.

I don't know if they're still playing a game with me or if what we have is real, but either way, I'll play.

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BIG SKY

ONE

Veronica rolled over to the unimpressive view outside her window: another building far too close to her own. On the mornings when she woke abruptly, it felt as if the building might collide with hers, as if the concrete sidewalks and asphalt roads were a rumbling sea that would toss the buildings to and fro, annihilating anyone in its path.

She stumbled to the kitchen and poured a cup of burnt coffee then went back to the window in an attempt to glimpse the tiny bit of sky she could see from just the right angle. The morning was dreary and overcast—one of those days where the sky would share its contempt for the world by being bleak but unproductive. It would be a day without sun or rain, just an unending and depressing blob of gray.

It was possible the angst was less from the weather and more from the pile of bills on the kitchen counter. Veronica Cason was a Big Deal ad executive. Yes, that's in capital letters, thank you. As a Big Deal she should be in a penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park. But Veronica had always lived outside her means. Extravagantly outside them. It didn't matter how much those means were, she'd never seen a credit card she couldn't max out, and she had a rainbow of them that fluttered out of her wallet in a fan of spending power.

She'd started in a penthouse, and when her credit bills had swelled to a wave that would otherwise swallow her, she'd downshifted into a tiny apartment with no sky. And this was where she'd stayed for the past five years while she'd tried to curb her overspending without success. After all, it took more work and more money to make an ugly apartment habitable. These

were justifiable expenditures. A raise could be on the horizon, then perhaps she could finally dig out of the collection call nightmare.

The interest rates on some of the cards were so criminal that if she only paid the minimum, she'd continue to owe more than she started out with—her debt climbing higher with each passing year. She could consolidate, but that was most of her paycheck, leaving her on Ramen noodles, which she didn't need. Though her finances were a wreck, she did manage self control in her diet. After all, she thought it was pointless to buy stylish clothes in the big girl sizes. When she felt the urge for ice cream, she just bought another dress and pair of Manolo Blahniks. Fat or destitute were the only options her mind would consider, and cardboard box felt more encouraging than size fourteen.

A piece of paper glared from the pile, a bright orange rectangle, a corner of which peeked out from the sea of perfunctory white and light blue. It was an eviction notice from her landlord. Mr. Tuttle had become clever—or so he thought—with his increasingly bright warning notices: pink to neon green, to yellow, to finally orange when he'd dropped the hammer and given her thirty days to get out. That had been twenty-seven days ago.

But it was fine. She had a plan. She'd just use her next paycheck to secure another crappy apartment. She'd get on eBay and start selling off all the ridiculous things she'd acquired. The seriousness of the situation had finally struck home. Her denial had run out only moments before her lease. She had nobody but herself, and she'd systematically sabotaged her security. She could have determined why, but a shrink was a luxury she couldn't afford right now—even with a co-pay.

Her father had left when she was six, and her mother had moved to Rome without a forwarding address. She couldn't ask friends for help. Anyone who could be defined loosely as a friend, she worked with, and she couldn't let them know where she lived now—let alone the fact that she was about to be homeless on a six-figure salary. It was too ludicrous and humiliating. Going back to bed and waiting for the building next door to collide and crush her was beginning to sound like an appealing option.

Veronica put the cup on the counter. Screw this shit. She was going out for breakfast.



THE DINER across the street from Brampton and Simmons Advertising Agency had an inexpensive breakfast that Veronica wouldn't feel as guilty about putting on her credit card. She reached out for the door, but a large, tanned hand—no tiny sliver of sky for him—got there first.

“Let me get that for you, ma'am.”

Veronica looked up, annoyed to see what looked like the Marlboro man, complete with a cowboy hat, holding the door for her.

“Do you live in a corn field? I can open my own damned doors.” Had it been a business man in a suit, and had she been carrying something big and heavy, she wouldn't have protested, but they were far from *Little House on the Prairie*, and she wasn't too feeble to open a door.

He raised an eyebrow. Not amused. Not angry. Just... observant. Creepy. He was attractive in a sun-worn way, but the assessing look he gave her made her want to crawl under a table and hide. Or maybe that was just her life.

She glared at him and finally he took a step back, his hands raised in the air as if he were an outlaw caught without his gun. She rolled her eyes and went inside.

It was a seat-yourself sort of place, so Veronica took a spot by the window. But there was no view.. The monolithic buildings rose out of the ground like oppressive guardians, with only a small bit of gray sky visible between her office building and the building next door.

She ordered scrambled eggs and hot tea and tried not to stare at the Marlboro man who had seated himself a few booths down where he could watch her.

The act unnerved her. She felt stalked, but she'd pulled out the feminist annoyance at not being treated like an equal who could open her own doors. Scurrying like a mouse to a corner booth out of his line of sight would seem to make light of her independence. Instead, she pulled out her smart phone to check her email.

Five minutes later, the bell over the door dinged, and in walked Sandy Mitchell. At best, the woman was a frenemy. They worked together—if one could call their constant battlefield behavior *working together*.

“Ronnie!” She smiled and waved with the fake brightness that was her calling card. Her modus operandi was to kill with kindness. She looked smart in an aquamarine suit that brought out her impossibly blue-green eyes. Without invitation, she sat across from Veronica and flipped her blonde hair. At least she was mostly blocking the Marlboro man now. Or at least she was

serving as a distraction—something else to look at besides tanned, muscular arms, tight jeans, and cowboy boots.

“Just coffee for me, thanks,” she told the waitress when she arrived with the eggs and tea.

Sandy pulled out a small, pink laptop when they were alone again. “Did you come up with a slogan for the Waterson account?”

No, the stress of being evicted put a damper on my creative skills.

“Several,” Veronica lied, not willing to let Sandy see the cards she didn’t have to play.

“Great! Can I see them?”

Nice try.

“Did you come up with any?” Veronica deflected.

“Only five, but I’m not sure they’ll like any of them.”

Like hell she wasn’t sure. Sandy liked to play the defenseless kitten routine, which every man in the office ate up like slow-roasted pulled pork at a BBQ stand. If Mr. Marlboro had opened the door for her, she would have batted her eyelashes, melted into girl-goo, and made a date with him for after work. They’d be fucking by seven-thirty on the dot. She’d no doubt pull the *I never do this with strangers* routine by eight. He’d be out the door by nine, in plenty of time for her beauty sleep so she could be perfect again by morning. Sandy Mitchell? *Not a feminist.*

Veronica glanced over to Mr. Marlboro’s table. He’d ordered enough food for a small army. It might take him an hour to get through the pancakes, sausage, biscuits, eggs, bacon, and milk surrounding him. It was a heart attack waiting to happen, but he was in such good shape he could probably fend it off with brute strength. She forced herself to look away before she could determine if he had a milk mustache.

Sandy dropped her voice an octave and leaned forward in the less-than-subtle way she did. “Did you see the hot guy over there?”

Of course Sandy would zero in on any eligible-for-copulating male within a mile radius. Veronica feigned confusion.

“You know... the cowboy.” She whispered the word *cowboy*. “He could ride me any day.”

Veronica choked a little on her eggs. She took a sip of tea and composed herself. “Oh, the Neanderthal who thinks women are too frail to open doors? Yeah, he’s a peach.”

Sandy rolled her eyes and flipped her hair again, turning briefly to give

him an obvious once-over and no doubt a come-hither smile, but Marlboro Man's eyes were on Veronica, still cataloging and assessing. He was probably a serial killer.

"Why do you hate men so much?" Sandy hissed when she turned back around.

"I don't *hate* men. I just expect to be treated like a human being and not some fragile doll. I'm not some pet or lesser being. Would he have opened the door for another man?"

She shrugged. "Who cares? He's pretty. If you didn't overanalyze the wrong things, you could have a boyfriend by now."

"Oh right. Because landing a man is one of the life goals of every female. It was in the woman manual I was sent at puberty."

"It is unless you're a lesbian. *Are you a lesbian?*" Sandy pulled her jacket closed to hide the girls a little, as if Veronica would leap across the table and dive head first into her cleavage.

"No. I'm not a lesbian. When I find an enlightened man who respects me as an equal, I'll think about letting one into my life. I have a vibrator for God's sake."

The waitress came back with Sandy's coffee and a check for Veronica.

"Oh, please. No straight woman wants equality in the bedroom. They want a dominant alpha male to throw them down and growl and grunt a little."

"Classy. And could you please keep your voice down?"

But the Marlboro man had heard. There was that eyebrow again. Veronica stared at the small bit of eggs left on her plate, wondering if he was aware of the warm flush that had come to her cheeks at Sandy's description. What one fantasized about and what one was willing to actually do could be continents apart. Everybody knew that, with the exception of Sandy Mitchell.



THE MORNING MEETING WAS A DISASTER—FOR everyone but Sandy, who would most likely receive Veronica's office and a raise after this.

"Ms. Cason, you've been *off* for months now. You weren't prepared for the meeting. I was going to let you take the lead on the Waterson account, but you gave me nothing."

Normally Joe called her Ronnie like everybody else. He only pulled out the formal Ms. Cason when he was disappointed with her. Something in his demeanor grated on every indignant cell in her body—like he was being condescending because she was a woman, and he'd been proven right on her incompetence.

"I'm sorry. All right? I've got some personal stuff going on." The quasi-apology took all her willpower to muster.

"What personal stuff?"

If she told Joe her financial situation, he might feel some pity and help her out, but either way it would be all over the office by noon.

"Never mind."

"I'm going to have to let you go, Ronnie." Now it was the more personal form of address, the name to soften the blow and make him sound like a good guy who was simply left with no other alternatives.

If it had been Sandy, she would have collapsed into tears and begged. She would have sandwiched some flirting in there somewhere, and she would have walked out with a better office. But Veronica couldn't bring herself to play the helpless girl card. It offended everything inside her. She turned and headed for her office.

Her boss's voice stopped her. "Don't you have anything to say?"

"What should I say, Joe? I already said I was sorry. I'm not delving into my personal life with you. I'm not going to grovel or cry or scream at you like some petulant child. You've made your decision. I'm going to pack my desk if you don't mind."

"Give me anything, Ronnie. Any indication that things will get better, here. You're brilliant when you want to be, but you isolate yourself. I can't help you if you don't let me."

"I didn't ask for help. Are you firing me or not?"

"You've left me no choice."

"What about unemployment? Are you going to put it down that I was laid off or fired?"

"You know Human Resources won't let me say you were laid off. They watch that stuff more closely now."

"Fine."

Thirty minutes later, she was sitting on the marble slab that encircled the fountain in front of Brampton and Simmons. With her back to the building and her box of things in her hands—a fake plant, a book, and a handful of

nice fountain pens—it was finally safe to cry. Since the sky had betrayed her again, opening to allow rain to pour down, she could do it with a small amount of privacy even in public.

She was so lost in her own misery that she didn't realize she wasn't alone until the dark brown cowboy boots were only a few inches away from her.

She scooted away. "What do you want?"

"Lose your job?"

"Well, look at the box and the pathetic girl crying in the rain. Figure it out, genius."

"You're rude."

"Another brilliant observation," she said. "You'll make it great in the big city."

The rain came down harder. The cowboy stood tall and steady in the downpour as if he were part of the elements and silly things like weather couldn't touch him.

"Let me buy you a cup of coffee."

Had he been lurking and waiting for her? "Why? Do you get off on being yelled at?" Just what she needed. One of *those* freaks.

In answer, he offered a hand to help her stand. It was a public place. And anyway, if he killed her, that might be a step up from the current situation. She had no idea what she was going to do. She'd considered bankruptcy—assuming she could afford the fees to file. But that was out now. It would make it that much harder to find another job, if anybody in the industry even wanted her now. She'd hopped from job to job over the past few years burning bridges with abandon. There might not be any left for her to walk across.

Veronica threw her box of things in the trash on the way to the diner. None of it had sentimental value, and it was all ruined anyway. She tried not to wince or scream at him as he led her inside, his hand resting at the small of her back like he was calling dibs on her and wanted to warn away all other males.

There were no other males in the diner—just the cook, whose name she didn't know.

A familiar waitress came out and led them to a booth. "Oh sweetie, you look like a drowned sewer rat."

"Thanks," Veronica said.

"Let me get you a towel to dry off."

Marlboro man looked somewhat drenched himself, but she didn't offer him a towel, nor did he seem to care for one. It was possible Veronica was a lot more pathetic-looking than she thought.

"I'm Luke," he said, after he'd ordered them some coffee and Veronica was seated in the booth with a towel wrapped around her.

There was a long pause where she couldn't think what to say. He probably wasn't going to kill her in the middle of the diner.

"Ronnie, is it? Is that short for something?" he finally asked. He must have heard Sandy say her name that morning.

"V-Veronica." It was the chill from the rain that had made her stutter. Or that was the story she was going with. She couldn't bring herself to be nasty to him again after he'd bought her a cup of coffee. This was the kind of thinking that got women lured into the middle of nowhere and killed.

"The reason I brought you in for coffee is that I have a ranch in Vermont. I could always use another hand out there."

She looked up, startled. He really *did* plan to lure her to the middle of nowhere. With the way he'd watched her earlier that morning with Sandy, there was no way in hell. "I'm sorry, what?"

"It's not advertising with a slick office, but it comes with room and board."

Images of being kept prisoner by him in some barn filled her head. She tried not to be aroused by those images. Now wasn't the time for those thoughts. It wouldn't play out like her fantasies. He was just so attractive, it was hard not to think those thoughts.

"I'll be fine. I'm really more of a city girl."

"I make you uncomfortable."

She made a face. "Don't be ridiculous."

Veronica jumped when he went for his wallet, and he arched a brow. That eyebrow had a mind and life of its own.

He unfolded the smooth leather and slid an ivory business card across the table. The font was Palatino Linotype—classy, and not at all what she'd expect from a Rancher. She wondered if he'd picked it himself or if someone named Kimberly or Tiffany had suggested it. The ink was in burnt umber. There was a crude image—almost like a stencil—of a G with steer horns coming out of it—also in the brown ink. In the middle of the ivory rectangle were the words: *Granger Ranch, Luke Granger, owner*. An address and phone number were in the lower left, along with a website.

For the briefest moment, Veronica pretended she'd take his offer and that he wasn't potentially dangerous. The business card painted a nice, peaceful scene far from the stress of the city.

"The guys convinced me to take a much-needed vacation, so I'll be here til the end of next week. You can call me if you change your mind. That number is my cell. I always have it on me."

"I don't think I will." She slid the card back in his direction.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. Keep the card. I got a bulk discount." He laid some money on the table and walked out of the diner.

The waitress sat two cups of coffee down on the table. "Is he coming back?"

"Probably not," Veronica said, unsure if she was relieved or disappointed.

"Shame. He's a fine looking cowboy. He could ride me any day."

It seemed to be the sentiment of the day.



VERONICA SAT at the kitchen table with her pile of bills, credit cards, and a bowl of Ramen noodles, keenly aware of how close to nothing she was. Between the bad economy and her colorful job history, her industry as a whole seemed to have decided they were no longer buying what she was selling. Even crappy jobs outside her industry were in short supply these days. Moving to a new city required money she didn't have, so that was out.

Being confronted with the reality of her finances and job prospects in such short order was bracing to say the least.

Luke's business card sat to the side. It reminded her of a famous short story: "The Lady or the Tiger" by Frank Stockton. The only thing she remembered of the story was that a man was presented with two doors. Behind one of them was a beautiful woman who presumably he would take as his wife. Behind the other was a tiger that would maul him to death.

The Rancher's offer felt like that kind of choice. She could choose to stay in the city and try to put her life back together. She could end up pulling it together and having a happy ending, or as a prostitute in an alleyway strung out on heroin. Similarly, if she went with Luke, she could end up safe and happy or in a hole in the ground. It was impossible to know which choice would result in her death, but she felt certain one of them would.

Her credit cards were laid out in a row, ready to be put in the appropriate pile: maxed out or usable. Given her current predicament, all maxed cards would have to be cut up, the others she'd have to live on sparingly, along with her last paycheck, until she could work something else out. She stacked her most current credit card statements in the order the cards were in.

“Maxed out, maxed out, maxed out, maxed out, usable, maxed out, maxed out, usable, usable, Victoria’s Secret...” Victoria’s Secret wasn’t maxed, but it had to go in the maxed pile. A card to a lingerie store couldn’t feed her—or actually it could, but she wasn’t about to go down that road. “maxed out, maxed out, maxed out.” The rest were department store cards which suffered the same unfortunate drawback of Victoria’s Secret.

Even with her income, it shouldn’t have been possible for her to acquire so many credit cards. And yet here she was: five Visas, four Mastercards, one Discover card, three American Express cards, and all the rest. Three cards were still usable. One Mastercard and two Visas. Each card had less than two hundred dollars available. She had one paycheck coming in two days and a final check in two weeks. A little under five thousand dollars to her name after taxes, including credit cards. Even if they weren’t maxed, she’d have to get rid of the American Express. The annual fees were too much on top of everything else.

Veronica cut up the bad cards, but rationalized keeping the store cards. After all, if she had no apartment, there was only so much she could carry with her. People needed clothes. She felt like a fugitive. She wouldn’t be able to get an apartment even as nice as the one she was in without proof of current employment. And if she dropped to the next level down, she might as well be the heroin-addicted whore in the alley.

TWO

A week and a half later found her in a deserted park looking like a bag lady. She'd had to be forcibly removed from her apartment. She'd been to all the employment agencies, but the only things available—she was overqualified for. What did that even mean? If you could do more, couldn't you just as easily do less and take the pay cut?

She'd ended up taking only a couple of bags of personal belongings; paying for storage would only get her in a soup kitchen line sooner. She'd thought about selling her stuff on eBay, but the logistics of running an online store from a cheap hotel room while she was running out of money stopped her. She'd be robbed blind if she brought most of that stuff to where she was currently staying, anyway.

It was only a matter of time before the money ran out, and she didn't want to think about what would happen then.

“Ronnie?”

Veronica looked up to see Luke standing in front of her, as physically appealing as ever, while she was doing a great impersonation of a homeless person. She knew she looked like a deer in headlights. There was no other way to look. This wasn't a public place. Technically it was, but the public was out doing other things. She and the cowboy were alone.

He sighed. “It's only been a few days. What could have gone this far south in that period of time? Surely you have savings, friends, family...?”

She didn't want to give him any information but she was sure the expression on her face answered all of his questions. He sat beside her on the bench, and she inched away, trying not to be obvious about it.

“Has somebody hurt you? Is that why you’re scared of me?”

“No. You’re a stranger. And we’re alone. Isn’t that enough?” She left off the part about him watching her, and probably following her, and all the creepy pieces that added up to freaking her out. It was more than a little weird that he was pursuing her like this, offering her a job when she had zero experience of anything that wasn’t in a city.

“Maybe,” he said, unconvinced. “Anyway, I want to show you something.”

She jumped again when he reached in his pocket, but all he came out with was a phone. “I want to show you the ranch. We just set up the website last week. Would you like to see it? Maybe you could help keep it updated.”

Veronica nodded slowly, not liking the way she was being pulled into his trap one answer and small capitulation at a time. He pulled the site up and handed her the phone. The sun began to set, and she was uncomfortably aware of that fact. It would be dark soon. She needed to get away from him and back to her room and the small bit of safety life still afforded her.

She flipped through the pages of the site, getting hungrier with each page. They sold grass-fed beef, as well as milk, cheese, and butter. There were pictures of food that made her want to beg him to take her with him despite the danger he posed. She’d been rationing money for food, afraid for when it ran out. Wasn’t staying in New York the tiger? What if both doors had tigers of different breeds—grisly death either way?

“There are lots of things you could do out there. We’d keep you busy and well fed.”

“Why are you doing this? I was a jerk to you, and I have no ranch-related skills.”

He looked away, but she’d seen his eyes before he’d managed it. He wanted her. She didn’t know why, and she didn’t really care. It was pure animal lust, and going with him meant one way or another she’d end up in his bed.

“I just want to help you.”

She handed the phone back to him, a chill going down her spine as the sun sank beneath the trees. She felt torn. A part of her wanted to ask him to walk her back to her room, but she didn’t feel safe with him, either: then he’d know where she slept at night.

“I’m sorry, I really can’t. I’ll be fine.”

He sighed deeply and stood. “All right. You still have my card?”

Veronica nodded. She'd held that card in her hands, staring at it for days now, wanting it to be a real safety net but too afraid it was a trap. She'd never been the woman who trusted pretty strangers. Women around her would get drunk at bars and trustingly go home with strange men because they were attractive, and therefore somehow safe. Veronica had never looked at things that way. Strangers were strangers. Men you didn't know were men you couldn't trust. And what did she know about men you *could* trust? Nothing. For all she knew, such men were a fairy tale.

"If you change your mind, call me. I'll come get you."

He started to walk away, and for a hysterical moment she wanted to beg him to take her with him. Judging by the way her house of cards had fallen around her, it was fuck him for room and board or fuck strangers. Stripping would be an option right before it got that dire, but she wasn't sure she could stand on a stage and shed her clothing while men ogled her. It seemed almost as bad as sex with strangers for money.

He'd gotten several yards away when he cursed, turned around, and came right for her. There was purpose and determination on his face that froze her to the bench, immobilizing her even down to her vocal cords. By the time she worked up a scream, his hand was over her mouth.

"Sorry, Ronnie, you're coming with me."

Instinctively she bit his hand, and just as instinctively he smacked her, but he didn't look sorry. That scared her more than anything else. He hadn't hit her hard, and didn't look like he would do it again, but the look in his eyes—the look that dared her to challenge him right now—was enough.

"Fine. Scream. My truck's not far."

She kicked desperately out at him, but he swept an arm under her legs and scooped her up. Even with her wriggling and struggling, he made it back to the truck.

He'd left the doors unlocked, probably something he'd grown used to in Vermont. Unluckily for her, some thug hadn't stolen it. She screamed one last time before he shoved her into the passenger side. Moments later, rope from the trunk was being tied around her wrists and ankles. He pulled out a knife, and she shrank back.

"I'm cutting the rope, not you. Relax."

Relax!?

"Ask again why I'm afraid of you." She couldn't stop the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“This is just so you don’t hurt me or wreck us. That’s it. Judging from the state you were in just a week after you were fired, if I left you, you’d die in a ditch or be raped in an alley.”

“How do I know that fate doesn’t await me with you?”

“Guess you’ll have to start being nicer to me.”

He took the second length of rope and pulled her wrists down and tied them to her ankles. The rope was long enough that she could sit up properly in the car, but not long enough for her to hold her arms up to get the attention of other motorists.

Five minutes later he started the engine. It was fully dark now.

“Just let me go.” She tried her best to stay calm, but the act was failing miserably.

“No.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

“Don’t be silly. Why would I kill you?”

She snorted. “Why would you *kidnap* me?”

“Because you clearly can’t take care of yourself. Now I’ve got a place for you where you’ll be fed and safe instead of out on the streets like a crack addict.”

“Are you going to keep me tied up?”

“No. I told you, I have work for you. You’ll be doing work.”

“Like hell, you cretin. I’m not your slave.”

He glanced in the rear view and pulled onto the interstate. “Let me ask you something. Do you have any friends you can stay with?” He had to know the answer to that, given how he’d found her—assuming he hadn’t followed her the whole week. He was just tormenting her.

“No. I have, or *had*, coworkers.”

“Why don’t you have friends? Could it be your charming personality?”

Veronica stared out the window into the night as it blurred by. So much for her lady or the tiger choice. She tried not to cry when she answered. “I worked long hours, so I didn’t have time for much of a social life. What time I did have was spent with coworkers, and I never let them get too close.”

“Why not?”

“I got into financial trouble and lost my penthouse. Status is a big deal in my circle. I couldn’t let them know I was living in such a bad apartment. They aren’t the kind of friends that would let you crash at their place, anyway.” The walls around her personal bubble had dissolved in light of

being kidnapped. Now, talking—making him see her as human—felt like her only shot at survival. He hadn't taken her to help her. He'd taken her because he wanted her. He'd come in like some barbarian and scooped her up as if she were the spoils of war.

“Are you still living in the apartment?”

She shot him a look. “No, I've been abducted.”

A small grin inched up his face. At least it didn't look like a serial killer grin. She hoped.

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I was evicted about a month ago. The day I got fired I had three days left there.”

“So where were you living when I saw you tonight?”

“A hotel. Not a really nice one, but not seedy enough that I felt unsafe sleeping.”

“I see.”

They were quiet for several miles. Veronica decided not to waste her energy fighting him right now. Taking her across state lines was bad, but he'd have to stop for gas or a bathroom break at some point. If she just waited, she'd have her opportunity, assuming she could move like this or find something to cut through the ropes.

“Do you have family?” he asked.

“No.”

“Dead?”

“That's rude.”

“I learned it from you.”

She sighed. “My mom is overseas. I don't even have her phone number. My dad left.”

“When?”

“A long time ago.”

Veronica sat perfectly still, reviewing the past few minutes of conversation. In her attempt to seem human, she'd made it clear what easy prey she was. No family. No friends. No one to miss her. She'd just given him everything he needed. Now he could do whatever he wanted with her and no one would make a call. No one would file a missing person report. No one would be looking for her.

“You should have had savings,” he said. “With what you were probably making, there's no excuse for—”

“Hey! I don’t have to listen to this shit. You’re breaking the law, and you’re probably going to kill me, so on top of that I don’t have to listen to your stupid bullshit. My business is my business. You got it?” The shot of bravery was stupid.

He pulled the car over on the shoulder, and leaned in so close that when he spoke, his warm breath feathered out against her face. “Princess, you have to listen to whatever I say you have to listen to. I took you because I wanted you. All right? Sheer want. I rode up and rescued your ass, and when I’m finished with you, you’ll politely thank me for it.”

Veronica reeled back like she’d been slapped again. “Fine. I fucking hate men. Sandy called it. You bully. You shove your weight around. I never feel safe anywhere I go alone because I might come across a man like you. And even if I’m not around a man like you, I have to worry that maybe that’s what I’ve stumbled upon. I can never feel safe walking through a park at night, or on an elevator with a man alone, or in a parking garage...”

“Who hurt you?”

“Besides you?”

“Oh, I haven’t hurt you, yet.”

The *yet* hung on the air, the darkest threat of the night so far.

Tears slid down her cheeks.

“Answer my question.”

“No one.”

He eased back and she could finally breathe again, then he turned the key in the ignition and pulled back onto the road.



VERONICA WOKE with a jolt when the car door slammed. The clock on the dashboard indicated it was close to midnight.

“You fell asleep, princess.”

“Stop calling me that.”

The gas station he’d stopped at was deserted, with only one flickering light over the gas pump. The night clerk looked like he’d done his fair share of felony, so no help there.

“Are you hungry?”

She’d been hungry since Luke had found her in the park hours ago. She

watched him, afraid to look any weaker than she already looked.

“I got you chips and a drink. You’ll eat better when we get home.” He opened both the chips and soda and passed them to her.

“Could you untie me?”

“Not until we get home.”

“I have to pee.”

“Not here.”

“I *really* have to go.”

“Just eat your snack. I’ll find a place.”

She bent awkwardly forward to eat, her tied hands making it difficult. She wished she was lying about having to use the bathroom. If he stopped on the side of the road somewhere and watched her, she’d die from the humiliation.

“I hope you like BBQ,” he said. “I didn’t know what kind to get. You were asleep.”

She *did* like BBQ, but if he was starting to feel guilty for the situation, she wasn’t about to assuage his guilt with a show of gratitude. Somehow in her mind, everything that had happened was her fault. If she’d managed her money better, she wouldn’t have been so stressed and lost her job. She would have been living in the penthouse still, and she would have made a nice breakfast in her big kitchen with the island oven before work that day. Her path and psycho-cowboy’s path never would have crossed. He would have gone back to Vermont without her ever meeting him, and she’d have a raise, and the coveted corner office with the giant windows and spectacular view.

As they drove and she ate, her mind went down other weird paths to Sandy. She wondered how Sandy would have taken this situation if she’d been in Veronica’s place. Sandy would have stupidly taken the job, eager for the cowboy to take her off to his cattle ranch and *ride* her. Veronica shuddered.

“Are you cold? I can turn on some heat.”

“No, I’m fine.” Though she could admit in a sort of detached way that he was attractive, it was hard to see him that way when he’d taken her like he had. All she wanted was to escape and then punish him for demeaning her like this. Tying her up, treating her like part of his herd of cattle. It made her seethe with rage.

To her surprise, fifteen minutes later he pulled into a rest stop—not the side of the road. She was almost willing to be more agreeable given that he wasn’t going to make her squat in a ditch to pee while he watched.

“This stretch of road is usually pretty dead this time of night. We are going in, and you will not waste time. As you’ve mentioned, I’m in the process of committing a felony. I have no illusions you’d protect me if someone stopped us. I’m taking a risk so you don’t have to suffer. Remember that.”

He untied her and rubbed the soreness out of her ankles and wrists. It felt like a prelude to how he planned to touch her later. He helped her out of the truck and followed her into the restroom, then leaned against the wall outside one of the stalls.

“Don’t think about running. You have even less chance of surviving out here than you do in the city.”

She wanted to kill him.

“Are you just going to stand out here and... listen?”

“That’s the plan. Hop to it, princess.”

“Just go ahead and kill me here. It’ll save us both time and embarrassment.”

“Did you just make a joke?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

“So you trust I’m not going to hurt you?”

“What? No, I don’t trust that. Do you think I’m that stupid?” She shut herself into one of the stalls and locked the door, hoping he wouldn’t crawl under after her.

“I thought you were stupid for isolating yourself, not asking for help, and refusing help that was offered.”

Veronica tried to relax, not believing she was in this situation to begin with. The fear had taken a brief backseat to the embarrassment.

When she stepped out of the stall, he said “That was all? Squirt squirt? And you’re done?”

“I have a tiny bladder.”

She looked at him in the mirror behind her while she washed her hands. He seemed momentarily distracted so she broke off in a run, glad she’d worn tennis shoes and jeans so she could move. Her heart beat erratically as she ran over a couple of hills and into the woods, more scared of the man at her back than the uncertain forest in front of her.

He yelled behind her, but she kept running. Trees came to life, their snarled branches grabbing at her, scratching at her arms, pulling at her shirt in an attempt to rip it. The trees might assault her before Luke ever got the

chance. After a minute or so, the patch of trees thinned into a meadow littered with wildflowers—an unexpectedly beautiful sight in the middle of so much ugliness. She couldn't help looking up for just a moment. The sky opened out before her, vast and fathomless. The night was cold and clear, and the stars and full moon illuminated everything. For a surreal split second she felt more free than she'd ever felt.

Then she was on the ground, and he was on top of her, and she came back to herself.

“Get off me!” She struggled and wedged her knee between his legs, driving hard into his groin.

He cursed and eased off her for a second. It was enough for her to roll onto her stomach and scramble out from under him. Her hands dug into the grass for purchase as she crawled from between his legs. But she wasn't fast enough.

She let out a shriek when he pulled her hair and threw her back down to the ground, this time straddling her hard enough that she couldn't get away.

Her shoulder felt bruised from where she'd hit the ground, and his knees dug hard into her hips, pinning her with little effort.

“Please...” The word came out of her in a broken sob. It was the first time she'd begged him, and she hated herself for thinking it might not be the last. “Don't hurt me.” The words were so soft she wasn't sure if he'd heard her.

He breathed hard. “Why did you stop running?”

She hadn't expected that question. At least he understood that she had to attempt escape.

“The sky.”

He looked up, and if he hadn't had her arms held down, she might have tried to punch him, but the odds weren't in her favor this time. *Don't escalate the situation anymore. Get away if you can, but don't escalate. Wait for the next opportunity.*

But she feared she'd only get the one opportunity. And now it was gone, lost because she couldn't help being swept away by the awe-inspiring beauty of nature. No city lights. No city noise. No dark buildings threatening to crush her. Just the sky and the stars and a million brilliant tiny white flowers glowing in the moonlight.

“You'll love the ranch. This is our sky.”

She didn't say anything to that because anyone who would do something like this had to be so mad she couldn't trust anything he said. He helped her

to her feet and led her back to the truck. She didn't try to pull away; his grip was far too tight for that.

"Am I in trouble?" She didn't know how else to phrase it—how else to ask him if there would be retaliation for running.

"It was my fault for being distracted. You were going to follow your nature. But you won't have another opportunity like that."

When he got her secured in the truck, he noticed the bloody trails down her arms.

"Trees got you pretty bad. I've got something for that." He rummaged through the truck bed and came back with a first aid kit. "Hold your arms out."

There was nothing left to do but try to appease him and pretend she'd learned her lesson. He took a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide from the case and poured it over the cuts.

"Ow."

"Some of these are a little deep. It only stings for a minute." Then he did the craziest thing. He leaned in and blew on her arms, like a mother trying to soothe the sting on a child's scraped knee—not that she'd ever had that kind of mother. But she'd seen them in commercials.

Only one of her arms was scraped badly enough to wrap in gauze, but she still felt like a mummy when he'd finished. Then he got back in the driver's side and started the truck up.

"We're two hours from the ranch," he said, as if putting a fine point on the fact that her last chance to escape had just slipped past.

In the thirty minutes they'd been at the rest stop, not one other vehicle had come by.



IT WAS two o'clock in the morning when they reached the ranch. The white house stood two stories with a wraparound porch on the bottom floor as well as on the top, creating an extended second-story balcony. There were two doors on the second floor that opened out onto the shared balcony.

"The room on your left is mine. You'll sleep in the other room," Luke said.

"I get my own room?" She wanted to smack herself for asking that

question.

“I told you I’d take care of you.” He hadn’t actually said those words, but he seemed to feel the implication had been heavy. “You’ll get to see more tomorrow in daylight. It’s late. We usually go to bed a lot earlier than this.”

He came over to her side and opened her door. Before he untied her, he took her shoes. “Wouldn’t want you to run off now, would we?”

After he’d untied her, he turned his back and went up to the front porch. “Coming, princess?”

Veronica stepped gingerly out of the truck and slammed the door. It was hard to see in the dark, even as big as the sky and as bright as the moon. She stood in the dirt by the truck, looking off into the night, wondering how far she’d have to go to reach rescue. She took a few tentative steps toward the unknown blackness and stopped, afraid to go farther in bare feet.

“Better than an electric fence,” he said, as if she were an unruly poodle.

She took a few more steps away from him. The fear of what she’d encounter, what might slither over her foot or bite her, or what broken glass or rusty nail she might step on, was enough that she wouldn’t go far, but his words had made it impossible for her to stop yet. Was she really more afraid of walking on the ground without shoes than of this man? So far, yes. That answer might be different later when it was too late.

“What are you going back to?” he taunted. “A motel room until the money runs out? Then where? On the streets? In a ditch? Under a bridge? Giving blow jobs in back alleys to buy groceries?”

She turned back toward him but didn’t move from her spot. “Will I be doing that here?”

Luke looked thoughtful. “I haven’t decided what you’ll do, but I can promise you’ll love every second of it.”

Something low in her stomach twinged against her will at that statement. She turned back toward the blackness and took another couple of steps.

“There’s nothing for you out there. There *is* something here. If you give it some time, you’ll see that.”

Aside from the tying-her-up part, he wasn’t acting like a crazed kidnapper. He wasn’t roughing her up or pushing her around or yelling or cursing at her. He seemed content to wait for her to step into the house of her own accord, but she wasn’t sure she could do that.

Tears started to stream down her cheeks. “Give it some time? Just accept this? I didn’t come here freely. You could do anything with me, and I’m

supposed to be happy about that?”

There had to be a phone in his house. And if there was a phone, there would have to be an unguarded moment where she could call the police. But he was right. What was she going home to? Were the police going to give her a nice roof over her head and food? They wouldn't give her anything. But Luke might kill her or rape her. But did she really think those things were unlikely back in the city with nowhere to go? What about when the money ran out?

“What about the guys who work for you?” she asked.

“What about them?”

“They'll tell someone.”

He laughed. “No, princess, they won't. We speak the same language. They'll take my side. So save yourself the trouble of resurrecting any high school acting technique. It won't do any good.”

It took another twenty minutes before she could make herself turn toward Luke and the house. He leaned against the post on the porch, his arms crossed over his chest as if he had all the time in the world. When she started moving toward him, he turned and headed inside.

He flipped on the lights as they went through the lower level of the house.

“What am I going to wear?”

“I've got some clothes upstairs that will probably fit you.”

“Whose?”

He was silent for a few minutes as if he were fumbling for a way to tell her. “The last woman who lived here.”

“Did you kill her?”

“No. Get off this killing kick. I'm not a killer.”

“Are you a rapist?”

His eyes raked over her. “Probably by your definitions, but not by the definition of any woman who's ever been in my bed.”

“What happened to her? Did you let her go?”

“I don't want to talk about Trish.” His voice came out clipped, and she dropped the subject.

Luke stopped at a bathroom tucked at the back of the house. He pushed it open without turning the knob, and Veronica realized the latch didn't catch.

“This is the only bathroom with a tub.” He sat on the edge of the claw-foot tub and fiddled with the knobs, holding his hand under to check the temperature. “Come here.”

Veronica froze in the doorway. “Why?”

Hard eyes locked on hers. “Come. Here. Don’t make me ask again.”

She took a couple of tentative steps into the small room. When she was close enough, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her over to the tub. “Tell me if the temperature is okay. Too hot? Too cool?”

The toughness leached out of her as the realization of how much danger she was in finally registered. “I-it’s fine. But, I-I can’t take a bath here. The door doesn’t latch, you could come in, and…”

He stood, towering over her. He must’ve been six feet five and solid muscle. “When you’re finished, you’ll put on the bathrobe hanging on the back of the door.”

She looked down at the tile floor. “Please, I-I can’t.”

“Honey, we’re in the middle of bumfuck in case you haven’t noticed. I’m about ten times stronger than you. I could have you at any moment I chose, no matter what you started out wearing or what you were doing, so get in the goddamn tub. I know you’re tired and exhausted and stressed, just soak for awhile, and I’ll make us some food.”

He mercifully left her then.

She sat on the toilet lid while the water ran, and finally shut it off when she couldn’t stall any longer. She heard clanging about in the kitchen. She’d have to bathe eventually. If the door didn’t latch, it didn’t latch. Did she believe she was going to be able to go long here with all of her clothes on? She’d seen the way he’d looked at her in the diner that first day. He’d no doubt been planning to take her even then. Losing her job was just an excuse for him to take advantage of a bad situation.

Finally she pushed the door shut and peeled her clothes off. She took a washcloth from a basket on the floor and wet it to wash the dirt off her feet, then she sank into the hot water, careful to keep her wrapped arm out of the tub. Whatever plans he had for her, he hadn’t lashed out in anger when she’d run. Even after she’d kneed him in the groin, he’d only subdued her struggling. He’d tended to her wounds. How bad could he be? And he wasn’t repulsive, at least, which was much better than she would have gotten on the streets.

Something deep inside her rose up, growling over the fact that she’d rationalize and stop at anything short of killing him. He couldn’t do this to her. Whatever century he was living in, she wasn’t his chattel.

A soap dish with homemade peppermint soap had been attached to the

edge of the tub. She lathered up and closed her eyes, breathing in the scent, trying to calm her heart rate and form a plan. She jumped when the door was pushed open and rushed to cover herself.

Luke stood in the doorway in jeans and bare feet, his cowboy hat, boots, and shirt long gone. “That’s a syndet bar so you can use it for your hair, too. It’s got goat’s milk and coconut oil in it. It makes your hair soft.”

If he’d been using the soap for that purpose himself, he was an excellent advertisement for it. She flushed and looked away. “Don’t look at me.”

“I’ll see you soon enough.”

The tears started again, but he ignored them.

“I’m making burgers, so be quick about it.” He shut the door softly behind him.

Her legs shook as she stood and pulled the drain on the tub. Whatever he planned to do to her, she wished he’d just do it. The anticipation was scaring her more than whatever he intended. She dried off with a towel from the basket and then put the bathrobe on. She wanted to put her normal clothes back on, but she was afraid he’d stop being nice. His kindness might be a mask, but the longer he wore it, the longer she lived.

Except for tying her up in the truck, he hadn’t been cruel to her. He’d let her use the bathroom, given her a snack, patched up her scratches...

She tied the belt as tightly as she could, even though she knew it wouldn’t stop him. The old hardwood floors creaked as she made her way into the kitchen. It was a throwback to the past, with appliances that looked like they were from the fifties and a green-and-white tile floor. The walls were a bright, sunflower yellow, and there were green gingham curtains on the windows. It was what she imagined a farmhouse kitchen would look like.

“Sit.”

He brought over the burgers and some chips and sodas.

“Eat.”

“Stop barking orders at me.”

He arched a brow. “I saved you from starving in a ditch, I’ll bark all the orders I want. Now eat.”

Veronica stared at the burger. Every tiny demand she gave into was one step closer to... something. She didn’t know what, exactly, but it felt that each time she did what she was told, they moved further along some plan known only to Luke. A plan to rebuild her? To unmake her? Part of her thought he might not kill her. What would be the point? If he were a serial killer,

wouldn't she already be locked in the basement?

"I'm losing patience, Veronica." His voice had dropped a register, and it was the first time he'd spoken her given first name.

"What if I say no?"

"Then I'll spank you." There was no hint of teasing or amusement in his voice. The statement had been matter-of-fact as if it were an obvious conclusion that any thinking person would reach. What did you do with a woman who didn't eat her burger on command? Of course you spanked her.

She gawked at him, her mouth dropped open. "Excuse me? You'll WHAT?" Like hell he was going to spank her. She'd fight him until he killed her.

"You heard me. Eat your burger. There's no need for things to be unpleasant."

"Let me just say, you're about the creepiest little fucker I've ever met."

"Big fucker," he said around a mouthful of burger.

"What?"

"I'm the creepiest *big* fucker you've ever met. I'm six and a half feet tall. No one uses the word *little* when describing me. Eat."

She sat for another minute trying to determine if he meant the threat. The look in his eyes said he did. Was refusing to eat when she was hungry really worth dying over? Veronica took a bite. It was the best burger she'd ever eaten, and not just because she'd been eating cheap food for a week and had only had chips and a coke for the last ten hours.

"Now, you will call me *Sir*."

"Excuse me?"

He sighed. "Ronnie, you're making me tired. I've had a long day. If you interrupt me every time I speak, we'll be up until the roosters start. And they'll be starting in about two hours."

"That's before dawn."

"Welcome to the ranch."

She went back to her burger, trying to ignore the company and the fact that the way he was treating her, though offensive, was having a fucked-up effect. She was sure if—no when—he hurt her, it would snap her back to reality, but for now, his low voice, good looks, and semi-barbaric ways were sending her spiraling back into fantasy world.

"You'll have chores here. You'll also be cooking for me and the guys. You'll keep the house tidy, and you'll tend to the garden in the backyard. We

don't sell the produce; it's just for us. We don't eat a lot from the grocery store, some snack foods here and there and soft drinks. Most of our meat, eggs, and dairy comes from here or our neighbors and our produce comes from the garden. The growing season is short so we also have a pretty big greenhouse. Any questions?"

"I'm not going to be your happy domestic slave. I don't live to serve men." In real life she had barely been able to stand Joe as her boss at the ad agency. And she'd never called Joe *sir*. Her first two years at the agency it had been a woman, but then she'd run off to Australia with her boyfriend. The fact that Veronica would be the only woman here, waiting on them all hand and foot, caused an indignant rebellion to rise up in her. She didn't know how long she could play nice with this psycho.

"All right, get in the truck. I'll take you back to the city and you can die in a ditch or turn to prostitution and drugs to dull the horror of it all."

Would he really take her back to the city? If he meant it, she wanted to take the offer and get away, but his forecast of prostitution and drugs felt too true and close to the mark to take the bait. It might not be any better out there.

"Don't *you* intend to use me like that?"

"When the time is right, and I feel you're ready to be a good slut, absolutely."

She cringed at the way he spoke to her, rough and calloused like his hands. "What you've done and what you obviously plan to do is wrong."

"It's wrong to feed you and give you shelter and productive work?"

"That's not what you're doing."

"Isn't it?" He took his plate to the sink. "See you in the morning, princess."

Veronica was left alone in the kitchen with only the grandfather clock in the other room for company. She couldn't believe he'd left her unattended. Of course she wasn't going to run away without her shoes, but there had to be shoes somewhere in this house. Or a phone.

She scanned the kitchen, but all she found was a place where a phone used to hang on the wall. Searching the lower level didn't produce a phone either. She winced every time she stepped on the wrong wooden board, causing a loud creak to sound throughout the house. Luke leaned over the upstairs railing.

"If you're looking for a phone, I only have a cell, and it's locked in my safe in the bedroom."

So much for that, but she still had the other plan. She'd have to wait until he fell asleep. Even as she thought it, the prospect of actually making it back to New York sounded awful. So far he hadn't harmed her. What would be her fate in the city with such limited resources? Though by this point she could stand the humiliation of going back to Joe and begging for her job back, if the job still existed. She could see a credit counselor and get her life back on track.

If the slow downward spiral from her penthouse to the apartment with the ugly brick view hadn't changed her thinking, the past week of genuine fear for her ability to survive much longer the way she was going had. Jimmy Choos, Manolo Blahniks, and all the other frivolity seemed like just that.

She turned the knob of the door for the bedroom he'd assigned her. She was still confused that he hadn't thrown her down and raped her.

A silver, antique full-length mirror stood in one corner of the room. The wallpaper was a light blue-and-white stripe. The furniture was painted white: a chest of drawers, a vanity, a night stand, and a full-sized bed. The carpet was light blue to match the wallpaper.

Veronica guessed there was hardwood underneath. For a crazy second she wondered if the carpet covered evidence of something gruesome. The closet, also white, was filled with sundresses for the summer, both long and short, as well as jeans and sweaters for the winter. But no shoes. Not a single pair of shoes was in the closet or under the bed. A chill went down her spine. If she'd had any doubts before, now she knew—Trish had been a prisoner as well.

THREE

Veronica waited until she heard the even hum of breath from her captor's room that indicated he'd fallen into sleep. She prayed he was a deep sleeper. She was careful to stay close to the walls, so the hardwood wouldn't creak. But when she turned the knob and pushed it open, the door gave a loud groan. He turned in his sleep, his breathing pattern interrupted. She stayed frozen in place, barely breathing until his pattern resumed. Then she crept into the room. If there were no women's shoes, she wasn't picky. Luke wore shoes. She'd just take some of his.

The moonlight came into his windows and fell over his face. Damn him and that face. That face had already made her hesitate a few times because something inside her responded to him. His mere presence did everything to her that her every sexual fantasy had done, but she was smart enough to know that the men she invented in her mind didn't exist—couldn't exist. She'd wasted enough time figuring that out.

She hadn't been out with a man since college. The whole thing seemed pointless. Men slowed you down. They complained when your career was going better than theirs. They wanted you to pop out babies and make sacrifices for the kids because aren't women all supposed to be maternal? Even in New York, you didn't have to peel through too many layers in a man to find the caveman underneath. All the equality and supportiveness on the surface was window dressing.

After her second abortion, Veronica had found a doctor to tie her tubes. He'd been against it at first, but given his conservative leanings and her past history of killing the unborn, he'd decided it would be best if she didn't get

pregnant again. Smart doctor. Following that episode, she'd switched to women doctors for everything. Fuck the patronizing bastards who would give a man a vasectomy at nineteen but felt a woman couldn't know her own mind until she'd already had children or turned thirty-five.

For a fleeting moment, Veronica wanted to go downstairs to the kitchen, take a knife, and lop off the dangerous part of Luke Granger. While he hadn't hurt her... *yet...* she'd seen the perverted wheels in his head turning, and he'd admitted as much. She wasn't going to think about the brief inappropriate wetness she'd felt between her legs as the word *slut* had tumbled out of his gorgeous mouth.

Perhaps worse than that, he'd decided she'd be free labor around the house. He didn't seem intent on paying her. And even if he would, he hadn't given her the choice to refuse the job.

His boots weren't on the floor, so she went to check the closet. Behind the dark wooden doors, were his clothes and a large safe, but no shoes. Could he have put his boots in the safe? He'd put his cell in there. To be that meticulous... How many times had he done this? No matter what he said, Veronica didn't believe he hadn't killed Trish and whoever else had been before her. This behavior was too pathological.

Somehow on the trip, she'd convinced herself that he was attracted to her and wanted to help her, and maybe the way things were out on the ranch didn't translate to more enlightened relationships between men and women. Perhaps he thought he was helping her, but since she was too stubborn to accept help, he'd had to take drastic measures—like an intervention with a drug addict.

She slipped past his bed to go back to her room when his hand shot out and grabbed her, pulling her back onto the bed with him. Her bathrobe bunched up around her thighs as he flipped them so he loomed over her. His hand slid up her thigh and between her legs, his fingers teasing just over her clit for a moment. It was enough to confuse her—to make her unsure if she wanted him or not. Even if her body did, she didn't. She hated him. He was the embodiment of why she didn't trust men. Weren't they all savages under the civilized exterior? Wouldn't they all do whatever they could get away with and rationalize it?

Luke Granger had decided he could keep a slave on his ranch and save some money. And past experience without getting caught proved his point. He sat up then and put her over his knee. It happened so fast she couldn't find

the words to protest before her robe was up around her waist and his hand was coming down hard across her bare bottom.

She squirmed and struggled against him, screaming at him to stop. Indignant. Pissed-off. Humiliated. Scared. The threat of him was a reality now. He grabbed her wrists in one hand, the non-spanking hand. She would have bitten him, no matter the cost, if she could have reached him.

“Let me go you fucking bastard. I hate you. You are a sick motherfucking psycho who should be locked up!”

He ignored her screaming and kept spanking her until she'd reached her pain threshold. Her cursing and yelling turned to begging.

“Luke, please. I'm sorry, please.” She didn't know what she was apologizing for. She'd say anything to make him stop. It hurt too much for pride to get in the way. In her mind, she reasoned she could just let go of it for one second to make him stop this, then she could reclaim her identity in the light of day when the pain had faded.

“You don't come into my room unless I send for you. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.”

“Yes what?”

She recoiled and resumed struggling, not yet ready to give in to the next step in her degradation.

“My hand isn't even tired. I can keep going.”

Just the threat was enough at this point. “Y-yes, sir.” If he didn't kill her, she'd jump off the balcony. “This is why I hate men. No one hurt me. But any one of you could have done what you're doing now. Isn't that enough reason to hate and not trust? How do I know when a man looks at me like you did in the diner that he isn't planning to act on his fantasies? I don't. None of you can be trusted.”

He'd gone to stroking over her skin where he'd struck her. She tried to pull away when his finger dipped between her legs.

“You're wet. Dripping.” He practically growled when he said it.

“Stop it.”

“No. Say ‘Sir, please stop groping me,’ and I'll think about it.”

“Never.”

Another sharp slap landed on her ass.

“Sir, please stop groping me,” she whispered through her tears. She was glad they were in the dark, because her face must be the color of a

maraschino cherry.

He gathered her in his arms and held her, stroking her hair... *comforting* her.

“Please just kill me if that’s what you’re going to do. Don’t do this on top of it.”

“Shhhhh. The first week or so will be the hardest, after that you’ll be happy with me.”

He was insane. Completely certifiable if he thought she could ever be happy *obeying* him, being demeaned and degraded by him, reduced to a *thing*—not even a real person anymore.

“Was Trish happy?” she asked, her tone accusatory, but the answer he gave wasn’t defensive or the one she expected.

“Very.”

“Were you?”

His voice changed. Veronica was surprised when it came out choked. “Yes. You look a lot like her.”

And did both of them look like his mother? Because that was in the serial killer handbook. Mommy issues. But she was far too wise to say that thought out loud.

“Go back to bed now. I’ll let you sleep in since we were out so late.” He kissed the top of her head and she went back to her room, thankful at least that she had a room away from him. The memory of his lips pressed against her forehead seared into her brain, keeping her from sleep for a long time.



SUNLIGHT CAME in through the windows and balcony door, but Veronica rolled onto her stomach, taking the pillow with her to cover her head and block out the light. She wasn’t yet awake enough to remember where she was.

Luke smacked her across the ass, not hard, but still degrading. “Get up, and make breakfast.”

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, as if she’d woken into another dream layer and if she concentrated hard enough she’d wake back up in the crappy apartment she’d been evicted from, or better yet, her penthouse. Being so tired, it was still possible to imagine that everything from losing the

penthouse, onward, had been nothing but an ugly nightmare. After all, there was sun shining in her room. That had to mean penthouse.

What was the more likely scenario? That a Big Deal ad executive had gotten into such bad credit card debt she'd become nearly homeless and had been kidnapped by a rancher, or that all of that was a nightmare that mixed in a few inappropriate sexual fantasies? When she took the pillow away from her face and opened her eyes, it would be her penthouse with the spectacular view of the park.

The pillow was ripped away. She heard it hit the carpeted floor.

“Now, Veronica. It's nine a.m. That's practically sunset around here.”

Oh God. She hoped he was kidding. The sound of his voice made her think that was unlikely.

She rolled back over and pulled the covers over her head. A second later, he'd ripped the blankets off her. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of a belt zipping through belt loops. Before she could react, he slammed the strip of leather against the mattress, so close to her leg she felt the air whoosh. She scrambled out of the bed, still wearing the bath robe from the previous night and crouched next to the night stand.

“I-I'm not making you and your sweaty pigs breakfast.”

Somehow the sound of boots on carpet was as intimidating as they would have been on hardwood. He snapped the belt. “Oh really? I *will* use this on you. I'll strap those legs and then make you wear a short dress so the guys can see you've been a bad girl.”

She held her hands over her head in a defensive gesture. “Okay, okay!”

Luke went to the closet and pulled out a short sun dress. “It only gets chilly at night right now, so you'll wear this today.”

She balked at being told what to wear, but with the belt still in his hand, it was a battle she was willing to let go. He sat in the rocking chair in the corner of the room.

“Get dressed.”

“Leave.”

He snapped the belt again, and she struggled with the knot on the robe.

“There are underthings in the drawers. I prefer no panties, but I'll let you make that call today.”

“Please don't do this.”

He rolled his eyes. “Princess, you're in my castle now. You'll do what I say when I say. Pleading and begging isn't going to save you. All I want to

do is look at you. Is that so bad?"

Veronica opened the drawers to find bras and panties. The panties were her size, but the bra was a size too small. She didn't want to think about the fact that she was wearing some dead woman's underthings and that most likely another unfortunate woman would wear these after her.

She slipped the panties on underneath the robe and heard Luke's *tsk tsk* behind her.

"I take it back. It'll be two rough weeks for you. It was optimistic to say one."

She shot him a dirty look, and kept her back to him when she slipped the robe off her shoulders and squeezed her breasts into the bra.

"Come here."

She paused, considering her options. She could say no or stay where she was and get hit with the belt, or she could walk over there to him. Either way he'd get what he wanted. She gritted her teeth and walked over to where he sat smugly in the rocking chair, his legs spread as wide as possible in such a chair.

He pulled her close so that she was standing between them, then he ran his hands over her, over the lines of the panties and over and around the bra, cupping each breast. She looked away as his rough fingers slipped under the lace.

"It's a little snug. What size are you?"

"36C."

She shuddered against him as he leaned in and trailed his tongue over the tops of her breasts. He pulled the cups of the bra back and rubbed the newly exposed flesh.

"You've got lovely nipples."

"Can I get dressed now? Please?" she said, trying to block out the feelings of arousal.

"Please *sir* can I get dressed now," he corrected.

She parroted back the phrase he wanted to hear only because it was the quickest route to getting clothes on. She wouldn't let him control her body like this.

He took his hands off her and nodded, and she scurried back to the bed and slipped the dress over her head. It was a better fit. She took a step back as he stood and moved toward her. He pointed at the door.

"Now go. Make breakfast. We're starving."

She turned toward the door and jumped when he landed a playful swat against her bottom.



THE KITCHEN'S long counter was lined with brown eggs that weren't quite the pristine quality of the grocery store and sliced bacon that stayed cold in a bowl of ice.

"There's biscuit dough in the fridge. I'll teach you how to make it, but what's chilling right now is ready to go. Just roll it into balls and put it on baking sheets," Luke said as he came up behind her. "Come." He took her hand and led her to the back patio, which was covered with trellis work and grapes. On the patio was a long wooden table with six chairs. "Right before the eggs are done, you can ring this bell for us. We like them scrambled." He pointed to indicate a sturdy wooden beam in the ground with a large bell with a rope attached.

"And if I refuse to be your house slave?"

"I'll whip you with the belt until you're more agreeable. And I'll do it in front of the ranch hands. You want to test me on that? I can ring the bell and bring them all in for a show. They'd be eager to watch that pert little ass get whipped."

Veronica shook her head quickly, knowing he'd do it. If he'd gotten away with doing this once before, she didn't want to think about the kind of men he employed, or how they might get off on her pain and humiliation. It was easier to just make breakfast.

"That's what I thought. You'll be making two meals a day for all of us, but the evening meal will just be the two of us. I'll show you the garden after breakfast."

Oh yes, the garden. She'd forgotten about her gardening duty. The joke was on him. She couldn't even keep a potted fern alive.

Standing on the back patio barefoot in a sundress, getting ready to make them all breakfast was the old-fashioned stereotype, minus one element. "I hope you don't plan on getting me pregnant."

"Don't be silly. You'd be next to useless to me pregnant."

A horrifying thought hit her and she couldn't stop the question from flying out of her mouth. "Did Trish get pregnant?"

“Yes.”

Before she could ask anything else, he'd turned and headed out toward the cows, that ominous *yes* hanging in the air. What did that mean? She'd gotten pregnant, and he'd killed her? Veronica took a couple of tentative steps into the backyard trying to get her breath to come normally. She couldn't get pregnant; that risk was gone. But that wasn't the problem; it was the idea he'd kill a woman over something like that.

The grass was soft and well-manicured. She jumped at a low whistle, and turned to see a man that looked maybe fifty, a touch of gray starting at his temples. He was good-looking, but nothing like Luke. She mentally berated herself for that thought. For either of those thoughts.

“Well, ain't you a pretty thing? I coulda swore you was Trish for a minute. You like that grass? It's sod. We put it in for her. She was the damndest woman. Couldn't get her to wear shoes for nothin' hardly.” So Luke *hadn't* stolen her shoes? Or was that just the story he'd sold the ranch hands when he'd broken her down too far to protest the lie?

Veronica took a step back when the guy walked toward her, his hand outstretched.

“I'm Will. I won't bite ya, honey. Luke would have my ass. I'm in charge of the dairy side of the operation. We don't have as many cows for that, but Luke likes fresh dairy. We sell the extra. I'm also in charge of mowin'.”

She tentatively shook his hand. “I'm Ronnie.”

“Ronnie?”

“Short for Veronica.”

He nodded. “Now that I'll believe.”

She jumped again when she heard a squawk. She barely moved out of the way in time before a chicken could peck at her feet.

“Betsy's hungry. You'll be in charge of that. I'll show ya where the feed is.”

“I-I thought it was just a cattle ranch.”

“These are Luke's personal hens. Just enough for eggs for all of us, sometimes some meat, but usually we trade for that.” Several other chickens made their way out of what looked like a little red house nearby. They weren't as brave and curious as Betsy. Will kept talking. “Hens are also good for the garden. We're all natural and organic out here. It's better for the soil, better for the animals, better for us.”

She wondered if he was also in charge of marketing.

He hefted the bag of feed out of a nearby shed. “They’re free range so they’ll eat bugs and grubs. This is just some extra we give ’em, so not too much. Ya hear?”

Sensing Will wasn’t about to touch Luke’s *property* made her a little more comfortable around the other man. “What did he tell you about me?”

“The boss? He said you was homeless and needed a place to stay and some work. And we needed some help for around the house. Luke had a housekeeper come in for awhile, but it was still tough.”

“Did he tell you he took me against my will? That he kidnapped me to bring me here and treat me like a slave, and god only knows what else he has planned?”

A dark smile lit Will’s face. “Oh, he said you was given to melodrama.”

“I’m serious. He tied me up and brought me here in his pickup truck. Against. My. Will.”

“So you wasn’t homeless?”

“Well, I... kind of... It’s not like I was living under a bridge with some vagrants.”

“But you woulda been if Luke hadn’t brought you here...”

“Are you not listening to me? He’ll *hurt* me.”

“Nah he won’t.” Will took some of the feed and put it in Veronica’s hand. “Just scatter that out, and they’ll come runnin’.”

She scattered the feed and the chickens raced over on their skinny legs, clucking and pecking at the feed around her. She would have been amused, if not for the conversation she was in. She had to get through to this Will guy and get help.

“He *hit* me last night.”

Will broke out into a full-bodied laugh. “Honey, spankin’ ain’t the same as hittin’. You don’t got a mark on ya.”

Veronica’s mouth dropped open. “Yes it is. You can’t just run around hitting a woman like that.” *Unless it’s consensual*, the dirtier part of her brain supplied.

“Whatever you say dumplin’. I need to get back to work, and you need to get your cute little ass back in the kitchen and make us some breakfast. We’re about to pass out from the hunger.” He pulled a sad face.

He was already out of shouting distance by the time she could come up with a retort. They really were going to just treat her like one of the animals.

On her way back to the kitchen, she passed the garden, and a small man-

made pond with a family of frogs around it. She shrieked when one of them hopped over her foot. If Luke wasn't going to provide her with shoes, the least he could do was not have chickens and frogs running amuck. In the city, not once had she been forced to encounter an amphibian or farm animal.

Veronica sighed when she reached the kitchen. She was getting pretty hungry, herself. And it was practically brunch by now. She almost felt sorry for the guys out there working on an empty stomach. Almost.

She rummaged through the cabinets and drawers for the things she needed and put some bacon in a pan and put the biscuits in the oven. While that was going, she set the table. There were six chairs, so she set six places, unsure if they would all be used. Then she put out some jam, butter, juice, and that milk would have to be last. It was in a large, clear, glass jar and had probably come straight out of a cow. It wasn't white like the milk she was used to, but had a yellowish tinge and a line of something thick at the top that looked like cream. She wasn't entirely sure it was good. She took a whiff. It didn't smell off, but what did she know? Her milk came from a sealed plastic jug in the refrigerated section of the grocery store.

In the city she'd gone out a lot, and eaten frozen dinners even more, but at least she could make a basic breakfast. That simple skill might keep her out of trouble for awhile.

Fifteen minutes later, she gritted her teeth and rang the bell, then she finished up the eggs and brought the food out to the table. The eggs had been a little strange—red spots in them. Was that normal? She was afraid she'd look foolish for asking so she'd just cooked them up.

If she hadn't been so hungry herself, she didn't think she'd have the will to demean herself in this way.

She'd already fixed her plate with a biscuit and strawberry jam, some eggs, bacon, and orange juice. She wasn't about to touch that milk. It probably wasn't even pasteurized. She was already eating when the men arrived. If she was going to slave and cook for them, she'd fucking eat whenever she damn well felt like it. Unless Luke gave her that scary look again and ordered her not to.

"Will tells me you've met him," Luke said as the guys came up. "These other two are Jake and Robert." He didn't seem put off by her eating. If anything, he seemed impressed by her healthy appetite.

"Ma'am," they said with a nod, tipping their hats. Robert was about Luke's age and tall with a deep tan and sun-streaked blond hair. Jake had

dark hair like Luke's, but blue eyes, in place of Luke's inscrutable dark brown.

This was surreal.

"Is this everybody? I set six places. There were six chairs."

"Trish always thought the table looked uneven with five chairs," Robert said.

Luke's face darkened.

"Uh, sorry, let's eat."

"Where's the maple syrup?" one of the guys asked.

Veronica looked up. "I-I didn't know. There aren't any pancakes or waffles."

"Ya made biscuits," Will said. "This is Vermont. Maple syrup with breakfast may as well be a state law."

"I'll get it," Luke said, scooting his chair back. "Finish your breakfast, Ronnie."

The men mostly ignored her during breakfast, instead talking about things she couldn't begin to fathom, speaking about machinery and tools she'd never heard of and what needed to be done before dark. She quietly observed them to see who might prove to be an ally. Who could get her off Hell Ranch?

Even as she thought it, she wasn't believing it. Despite the Neanderthal treatment, this place wasn't hell—at least not yet. The sun was shining and a breeze was blowing. When she finished eating, while the guys were talking, she watched the clouds as they lazily rolled by in the enormous sky. Part of her wanted to lay in the grass under it, but it probably wasn't on Luke's list of things for her to do today.

"Ronnie, we'll have lunch about three thirty. Just soup and sandwiches is fine. It doesn't have to be anything big since we're eating breakfast so late," Luke said. There was no condemnation there, just a statement.

"Sure, *dear*," she said, sarcastically. He was, after all, speaking to her as if she were his little farm wife who lived to do her part with the laundry and the baking.

Everyone dropped their forks.

"Sir," Luke said.

"Nobody else here calls you *sir*."

"That's because nobody else here is my piece of ass."

"I'm not your piece of anything." She turned to the others. "He has me

here against his will. You're all accessories to kidnapping. Kidnapping is a felony. You're all going to prison when you get caught." She spoke slowly, careful to enunciate for the lower IQs in the audience.

"She's feisty. Good job," Jake said.

They all went back to eating and Luke raised an eyebrow at her. "Sure, *sir*," he said, not about to let it go.

"I'm not saying that."

"Who wants to see Ronnie get her ass blistered?"

The guys looked up, lecherous expressions on their faces.

"Sure, *sir*."

Veronica got up from the table and retreated to the kitchen. She gripped the edge of the sink for support and let the tears fall. Luke was a fucking monster. There was no way she could live like this, and it was only going to get worse.

A few moments later, the kitchen door opened and banged shut. She didn't turn around, but she knew it was Luke. Somehow in the space of a day, she already knew the cadence of his steps.

"How can you treat me like this?"

He moved behind her, his hot breath on her ear. "How can you like it so much?"

"I don't like it. I hate it, and I hate you."

"Lies like that aren't very becoming on a lady." He slipped his hand under her skirt, pushing past her panties. She wriggled against him as his fingers pushed inside her, a gasp slipping past her lips. "You're wet. Let me tell you something about yourself, Veronica. You're in the girl's club I like to call 'methinks she doth protest too much'. Your indignant behavior over the slightest perceived gender inequality makes it almost certain that inequality is what you masturbate to at night."

He'd started pumping his fingers in and out of her. Against all reason and despite her fears about a grisly end, she moved with him.

"So this is all about my irritation over the stupid door at the diner?" she said.

"And you look like her."

Couldn't leave off that important point.

"If you were so into her, why did you kill her? Because she got pregnant, and you didn't want a baby?"

Luke moved his hands away and spun her around so hard she almost

slipped. His eyes were angry when they met hers. “Okay, I’m done with that. Not that this is *any* of your business, but Trish died in childbirth. The baby was stillborn. I lost them both in one night. I *loved* her. I didn’t kidnap her, and I didn’t kill her. If you think I’d kill somebody that looks like her, you’re crazy. Bring her up again at your peril, princess. I’d love to spank that lovely ass again today.”

“I’m sorry.” Veronica looked away. She couldn’t be sure if his story was true, but if it was, she felt like shit. Though, it still didn’t excuse the way his mind had apparently snapped when he’d taken her. “Do the guys know you took me the way you did?”

“Yes. And not one of them will go against me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

He nodded. “These men have been with me for the past ten years. They’re my ranch family. They’ve got my back, and I’ve got theirs. If I robbed a bank, they’d help me hide the money. If I blew up a building, they’d deny it under torture. If I killed some people, they’d help me bury the bodies. So give up.”

Will came in, then, with the juice and milk, followed by Robert with the butter and jam.

“Are we interruptin’ somethin’?” Will asked. “We thought we better get this stuff back in the fridge.”

“No, it’s fine. I was just about to show Ronnie the garden.”



LUKE DIDN’T ASK for dinner until about seven o’clock that night, which he claimed was very late given how early they had to be up in the morning. Veronica didn’t see the appeal in keeping this kind of schedule, or all the work involved. The late morning and afternoon had been spent cleaning, doing laundry and hanging it on the line, making lunch for the guys, and watering the garden, which thankfully was so late in the growing season that the plants were too hardy for her to kill if she followed Luke’s maintenance schedule to the letter.

She’d picked several small tomatoes that had ripened on the vine for the sandwiches. After lunch she’d lain out in the grass, watching the clouds float above her, shifting into new patterns and shapes and merging together and

splitting apart. Even when she'd been in the penthouse, the sky hadn't been like this. There had been too many buildings around.

Dinner was burgers again, more for expediency than anything else. Luke had showered while she'd cooked them on the grill out back with the last bit of light from the sky. When he came down again in just a pair of jeans, his dark brown hair still dripping water down his back, she tried not to stare. It was too wrong.

Twenty-four hours ago, she'd been tied up with ropes in the cab of his truck. There were still rope burns on her wrists, and a bandage on her arm from her escape attempt.

"What about the website?" She tried to sound casual about it. If she could get online, she could get out of here. Though even after such a short period of time, she felt less than excited about the plan. She didn't want to go back to the city, living in a motel she barely felt safe in until she ran out of money. She didn't want to go back to eating Ramen noodles and pork and beans. If he wasn't violent with her, would it be wrong to just stay?

"We'll work on it this weekend."

"Where's the computer?"

"Don't even think about it. It requires a network password, and I'm the only one who knows it."

"Did you go to college?" she asked. His manner of speech was relaxed, but still educated.

"I went to business school. I was going to open a tractor supply store a couple of cities over, but my old man got sick and asked me to take over here. I reasoned that it was a business, so I could still use the degree. And he wanted to keep it in the family."

Veronica picked over her burger, suddenly sullen. She shouldn't be making polite conversation with him and getting to know him like she'd been hooked up by an internet dating site. What had happened to her *women are people, too* philosophy? It seemed to have floated away with the clouds.

By dinner time, she'd worked up the nerve to hold a frog—out of curiosity more than anything—and had checked on the chickens in the hen house. It was hard to fight fresh air, a big sky, good, clean food, animals, and a cozy house. It was too contradictory to where her life had been just forty-eight hours ago when she hadn't known if she'd be eating in a month or where she'd sleep or if she'd be safe.

"Ronnie, in the end, everybody's a slave."

“Don’t.”

“I mean it. Do you really think anyone in this world is free? Everything is a hierarchy. Were you free when you worked for the ad agency?”

“Yes.” But somewhere deep down she knew it was a lie, and that Luke was about to explain why.

He shook his head and took another bite of his burger. “You did good on the burgers. Eat yours before it gets cold.”

“I’m going to get fat.”

He laughed. “Not with all the work you’ll be doing here.”

She picked up the burger and took a small bite. He gave her a disappointed look, not impressed with the effort.

“You weren’t free there,” he said. “You had to work for money to pay your bills to live. Working wasn’t an option you did just because you liked it. You were a wage slave. Just because it’s packaged up like free will doesn’t mean it’s the recipe for happiness. What about your debt?”

“What about it?”

“How much do you owe?”

“Close to two hundred thousand,” she mumbled.

He let out a low whistle. “Damn, woman. In some parts of the country, that’s a house.”

“I know.”

“Well, you’re free of that for now. I mean, I’m not about to call them up and say I have you.”

Veronica looked up slowly from her plate as the realization that the crushing debt that had weighed on her couldn’t be collected if they couldn’t find her. Freedom. Or freedom after a fashion, yet somehow this seemed like a robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul scenario.

“You don’t have bills here. I’m not going to fire you. If you disobey me or I’m dissatisfied with your work, I’ll just punish you, but you’ll have a place to sleep and you won’t ever go hungry.”

She hated the nonchalant way he spoke of punishing her, the way he continually reiterated the dynamics and power structure of their relationship. But it wasn’t enough for him to stop there.

“I rescued you. And very soon you’re going to show me how grateful you are for it.”

She crossed her legs, trying to push away the arousal his words created, spoken in that rumbling, gravelly tone. She’d meant to fight him more, but it

had been so much easier to distract herself with the list of things he'd given her to do. But she'd pushed that out of her mind almost as soon as she'd seen it, as if she were forcing her brain to reboot. It was less scary to just cook the meals and do the laundry so when he came back to the house he didn't take his belt off.

That thinking made her sound like a battered wife, but so far he hadn't lashed out for no reason. Maybe he wasn't that crazy. She startled when his hand moved under her skirt, stroking her thigh. The words he'd spoken still hung in her mind. She'd wanted to be the girl who fought and clawed and screamed, the girl she'd thought she was that day in the diner when she'd acted as if he were some country bumpkin beneath her notice.

If things had been different, if she were still that Big Deal ad executive with a penthouse without a drop of debt, she would have fought harder, but he was right. There was nothing to fight to get back to. The only real fear was that he might kill her or harm her, but God help her, she believed his story about the previous woman. Veronica didn't even care that he'd taken her to fulfill the deluded fantasy of bringing the woman he'd loved back to life. All she cared about was that she didn't have creditors hounding her and the fear of homelessness hanging over her head.

She knew that one way or another, her body would be forfeit to someone, better Luke than random nasty men driving past *those* street corners.

"Okay. I'll do what you want."

He laughed. "That was never in question, princess. The only question was would it be the easy way or the hard way? I've broken horses. I have never ending patience with women."

After dinner, he took her into the living room. "Sit."

She picked a spot on the sofa and sat, unsure of what was coming next. She'd assumed they'd be going to bed soon. She wasn't sure if she'd be joining him or not. The idea tied her stomach in knots.

"I want to show you something." He pulled out a box with some old VHS tapes. Veronica hadn't seen anything but DVDs in years. It was an anachronism as if she'd fallen through a hole and had been transported back to the eighties.

From the couch, she could see that they had the labels on them that meant they weren't commercial videos bought from the store, but either things recorded off the TV or home movies. He thumbed through them and pulled one out and popped it into the VCR.

He went to sit on the stairs where he had a good view of Veronica, but none of the TV.

“Aren’t you going to watch?” she asked, still not sure what she was about to see.

“No. I can’t watch it. I need to watch you watching it.”

He stood for a moment to flip the overhead lights on. Before, the room had been lit only by a dim floor lamp. He tossed her the remote.

“Push play and don’t take your eyes from that screen, no matter what you see.”

Okay, now he was starting to scare her. It hadn’t occurred to her that giving in and saying she’d do what he wanted might speed up whatever his plan was. While he might not kill her, whatever he would do might have taken longer to work up to if she could have managed the will to fight him more, but a part of her had been afraid he’d get tired of her attitude and toss her out. It would be like biting the hand that was feeding her. The very idea that she didn’t want her kidnapper to throw her out where she’d be subject to the whims of the elements was enough to make her stomach turn over.

She pressed the play button. There was a woman on the screen. She was naked, on her knees—a brunette like Veronica. Ivory skin like Veronica. When her face rose to the camera, Veronica could see the resemblance—it was eerie. Trish. There was someone else on the film. A man in black pants and riding boots. A riding crop dangled casually from his hand. Veronica couldn’t see his face, but then he spoke.

“I want you to crawl for me,” Luke said.

She began to crawl in slow, long circles across the floor, running the length of a large oriental rug, revealing a brand on her hip that looked like the image on Luke’s business card. He followed, hitting her across the ass with the riding crop, leaving red welts as she continued to move across the floor. Finally, he stopped her.

“I want to look at what’s mine. Show me.”

The woman stopped crawling and sat back on her heels, her legs spread wide. There were a few tears sliding down her cheeks from the crop, but the look in her eyes when she looked up at him was pure adoration. She loved him.

“Show me, slut. Show the camera. I’m going to show this to the guys later. Would you like that?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Of course you would, you little whore. Now show me.”

Her face went red as she spread her legs wider, parting the folds of her labia with her fingers.

Veronica looked away, too uncomfortable watching this with Luke watching her, wondering if he could tell how aroused she was becoming, wondering if it would seal her fate, terrified she'd end up branded like the woman on the screen.

“I said don't take your eyes off the screen,” Luke said. It was the same tone he was using on the film.

She forced herself to look back at the video, afraid of what he might do if she defied him.

The Luke on the screen continued. “How badly do you want to finger yourself?”

A whimper.

“Beg me. You know how I like my sluts to beg.”

“Please, Sir. I need to come.”

“I know you do, sweetheart.”

Another whimper. “Please...” Her finger edged closer to her clit and he smacked her hand hard with the crop, drawing a scream from her.

“Very naughty, dear. We don't touch ourselves without permission, do we?”

“N-no, Sir.”

“Crawl to me, show me how sorry you are.”

This must have been something they'd done in the past, because she seemed to know exactly what he wanted. She slunk over to him on her hands and knees like a beaten dog. Her tongue darted out to slowly lick the length of his boot.

“Good girl,” he said when she'd finished ingratiating herself to him again. “You can touch yourself now, but if you don't come hard enough, there will be punishment.”

“Turn off the video,” the live, in-person Luke said from the shadows of the stairs.

Veronica pushed the button on the remote. She looked at the floor, scared of whatever was coming next, embarrassed he'd watched her watch him and her doppelganger engaged in something kinky. It was the kind of thing she'd suspected after he'd spanked her in his bedroom the previous night—and seeing the upstairs playroom while cleaning had sealed the truth. It was the

kind of thing she would have fantasized—with him as the star—if she hadn't been so tired and scared.

The room was across the hall from the rooms she and Luke slept in. She'd discovered it while cleaning but had largely tried to block it out of her mind. It had a large black box on one end with a padlock on it, video equipment, a leather sofa, a pole that looked like a stripper pole, a few pieces of dungeon equipment, and of course the rug the girl had been crawling on.

A long silence stretched between them as Veronica waited, tense—she wasn't sure for what. An order? His hands on her? A question? Would he demand she tell him in minute detail how that video had made her feel? She didn't know if she could even put it into words for herself. If he *made* her do something like that, it would make the fantasies okay.

She'd fought against it, so strongly. What she'd seen happening on that screen—it would never happen that way for her. Of all the sex she'd had, it had never been pleasant, never like her fantasies. It hadn't even been good vanilla sex. It was just bad, start to finish, while she'd prayed it would end soon. She'd been dry, and it had hurt, but she'd kept going out with men, kept trying, like some nymphomaniac that pathologically had to fuck even though the act brought her no satisfaction. She couldn't stand to be disappointed again.

Had that been the start of her masochism? That tiny thread of pain that had accompanied her every sexual encounter? Without an orgasm, it had been the one thing she could count on. Comfort in the discomfort because of its familiarity.

“Go to bed, Veronica. I'll see you in the morning.”

Her head jerked up, and she chanced a look into his eyes. What had he seen on her face that was making him send her away? Had he changed his mind about what he was going to do with her? She should be happy about that. And she was, but her face was flushed, and the space between her legs was throbbing so hard she wasn't sure she'd be able to walk straight. Crawling to her room sounded like a more feasible option, but she forced herself to stand.

“G-goodnight, Luke,” she said. He hadn't moved from his spot on the stairs.

He held her gaze and shook his head in disapproval. “Goodnight, *Sir*.”

Something strange fluttered in her stomach at him still wanting the formal address. She didn't want to dissect it. “G-goodnight, *Sir*.”

He simply nodded his approval.

As she walked past him, he slid a hand under her dress to feel the wetness sliding down her thighs, then he let her continue on her way. She wanted to melt into the floor. If he'd had any doubt of her reaction to his perverted home movie, it was gone now.

FOUR

The only light filtering into Veronica's room was from the full moon. She'd held her breath when she'd heard him come up the stairs, both afraid he'd come into her room and afraid he wouldn't. If he came inside, she was scared of what he'd do to her, or make her do. If he didn't come to her, was he rejecting her? Something in that scenario was more upsetting than it should have been.

His footsteps stopped just outside her room, and an eternity passed before she heard him change direction and go into his own room.

She let out a sigh of relief, but then unexpected tears slipped down her cheeks and onto her pillow. She was mortified. She tried to console herself with the fact that it wasn't her fault. He'd *made* her watch the video. But it didn't help. She still felt dirty. Once they'd crossed that threshold and he'd known without any doubt the things that made her hot, turning away from her was too humiliating. He'd somehow found her lacking.

The throbbing started between her legs again, and somehow the embarrassing thing she'd just experienced, mixed with the video into a new fantasy in her mind, with Luke's nasty voice in her ear whispering awful things while she rubbed her clit.

She jumped when a doorknob turned; her hand stilled under the covers. A shadow fell over her, and Luke entered the room through the balcony. She was afraid he'd notice if she jerked her hand away, so instead she pressed it flat against her mound, hoping the blankets would camouflage what she'd been doing.

He flipped on the light and stood over her. Before she could protest or

find a way to covertly move her hand from between her legs, he ripped the blankets away to reveal her fingers underneath her panties and a nearly transparent T-shirt she'd found in the drawer. Her nipples must be erect and clearly visible through the shirt as worked up as she'd become.

"Did I give you permission to touch yourself?"

"N-no, Sir."

"Were you thinking about what you just saw down there?"

She hesitated and then slowly nodded.

"Speak," he said, as if he were training a small dog.

She wanted to argue and protest, to yell and curse at him. She wanted to throw a bedside lamp and watch as shards of glass cut the side of his face. Instead she said, "Yes, Sir." Her breath came out labored when she spoke.

She started to move her hand away.

Luke's eyes were hard. "No. Now that you've been caught, I want you to leave your fingers buried in your pussy. I want you to be very aware of what I caught you doing so you can't deny it later."

He retreated to the rocking chair in the far corner and sat, keeping his eyes on her. "Is this the first time you've had fantasies like this?"

"No, Sir."

"Take off your panties, spread your legs, and finish."

Veronica bolted off the bed and ran for the door. She turned the knob, but Luke's hand pushed the door closed, his weight pressed against her.

"You can't run from me, princess. Where would you go?"

"Please, I can't do this."

"Tell me why."

She choked the words out. "I can't give in. I don't want to be that girl."

"You *are* that girl. The only way you'll ever be satisfied is to embrace it."

"No."

"Yes." His hand stroked over her bottom, then before she could protest again, he slid her panties down. "I don't care if you're not Trish. You're close enough. You want the things she wanted. You're not going to run from me. You will do everything I ask of you. You will *be* her."

His words seemed to fall over her, hypnotizing her, taking her will.

"Do you understand?"

She wanted to scream *No!* She wanted to dig his eyes out of his head so he couldn't look at her the way he did, making dark things come alive inside her. She didn't want to be so twisted that she didn't care that he saw another

woman when he looked at her, that some part of her wanted him to touch her anyway.

“Do you understand? You will *be* her.”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

He pressed her against the door with one hand while the other hand fumbled with his pants. For one terrifying moment she thought he was going to rape her, but then she heard the belt ripping through the loops. Suddenly that was more terrifying—especially in the frenzied state he was in.

“Please, I’m sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*,” he mocked. “If you were sorry, you would have said, ‘Please, I’m sorry, *Sir*’. I’m going to beat that fucking title into you.”

“P-please, Sir, I’m sorry. I’m sorry, please don’t hurt me.” *He’s fucking crazy*. “Why didn’t you just leave me to die in a ditch?” She was sobbing so hard she wasn’t sure if any of her words sounded like words any more. Out loud, they sounded like a string of hysterical shrieks.

She flinched when the belt hit the floor, buckle first. Luke scooped her up and carried her over to the bed, sitting against the headboard with her still wrapped in his arms. He held her cradled against him, his large, rough hand stroking through her hair.

“Shhhh, it’s all right, Trish. It’s okay, baby. I won’t hurt you. Would never hurt you. I love you.”

Veronica knew he wasn’t playing a role. Something in her terror had penetrated the haze he’d been in. Now he seemed stuck in a flashback, convinced she was Trish. She couldn’t stop crying, and he didn’t stop reassuring her that everything was okay.

After a few minutes he slid out from under her, covered her with the blankets, and turned the light off. But he didn’t leave. Instead, he moved back to the rocking chair.

“Go to sleep, Ronnie.”

She wondered if he realized he’d called her Trish. The look in his eyes told her he knew exactly what he’d said. Though he may have had the best intentions with regards to her welfare, Veronica couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t kill her to exorcise the specter of the woman he’d lost.



THE ROOSTERS JOLTED Veronica out of a dead sleep. Her eyes went straight for the rocking chair, half afraid she'd find Luke sitting there with a big knife and a crazy gleam in his eyes.

Against all odds, she'd fallen asleep before he'd left the room. She'd been afraid that if she closed her eyes, she'd never open them again. Even considering the kidnapping and everything that had led up to that moment, it was the most unhinged she'd seen him. Before he'd called her Trish—even while he was ranting that he wanted Veronica to *be* her—she'd been able to lie to herself. Rationalize.

There was a bathroom between their bedrooms with a toilet and a standing shower. She took a quick shower, thankful Luke had already gone out to work, and slipped some jeans and a T-shirt on.

When she got to the kitchen, there was a list of instructions for the day and a menu. Breakfast was going to be butterfly pork chops and homemade blueberry muffins. She hated pork, but the last thing she wanted to do was upset Luke further by debating the menu. With her luck, Trish had loved pork.

There was a knock on the kitchen door; it swung open before she could answer. It was Will.

He held up a thermos. "It's startin' to get a little chilly out in the mornin'. Luke said he made some coffee."

On the opposite counter, an industrial Bunn coffeemaker kept three fresh pots of coffee hot. He filled the thermos and started out the door.

"Will, wait."

He paused. "You need somethin'?"

"If I tell you something, will you swear not to repeat it to Luke?"

"Now, honey, I can't keep secrets from the boss. Luke is like a brother to me. How would it look if he couldn't trust me?"

"*Please*. He might hurt me if he knows I said something to you."

Will frowned. "I told ya he wouldn't..."

She decided to throw caution to the wind. The only way she'd get to tell Will was just to tell him and pray to God he saw the gravity of the situation and was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. "Last night Luke had some kind of meltdown. He thought I was Trish. I'm really scared of him. You have to help me."

Will avoided her eyes. "He was real hurt about that. When she died, he almost lost the ranch. He wouldn't get outta bed. We had to pick up his slack

and between that and feedin' ourselves, it was a rough few months. Did he hurt you?" Even as he said the words, Veronica knew he wouldn't believe it if she said that he had.

She wasn't sure how to answer. She didn't want Will privy to the thing that had almost happened between her and Luke. That was too private, and in many ways too humiliating. What had most scared her was when he'd taken off his belt and then called her Trish, proving he'd left mental health a long time ago.

"No, but he seems unstable. You didn't see him last night."

Will set his thermos down and went to the cabinet to get a coffee mug. He poured a cup and handed it to Veronica and led her to the kitchen table. "Sit and drink this. You need to calm down before you hyperventilate. I don't know what happened with you two, but Luke's not crazy. You can take my word on that. I've worked with him day in and day out for years and years. He had a rough patch after Trish died, but he's not crazy." The ranch hand seemed to be in denial about the situation, as if saying it enough times would make it true.

"Why won't you help me get out of here?"

"Just sit and talk to me for a minute." Will sat at the table and nodded to the chair opposite from him.

Veronica sank into it. "How long ago did she die?"

"A couple a years now. I never seen him so over the moon for a girl before. And when that baby was comin', I never seen him so happy. Usually he was all business about the ranch. Didn't have time to bother with no woman, even when we suggested he settle down to take a little of the load off us. You know what with the cookin' and basic homestead stuff. That's why I don't think he'll hurt you, no matter how he got you here. You remind him of her. He never coulda hurt her."

"And that could be a bad thing. What if he snaps and hurts me because he can't stand to look at me anymore? Sooner or later he'll realize that I'm not her. All I can be is a painful reminder."

"He knows you ain't her."

"Are you sure about that? Because last night, he didn't."

The ranch hand looked like he might waver, but then the kitchen door opened, and Luke walked in.

"Will, you taking a break?"

Will raised his thermos. "Just came for the coffee. It's too close to

breakfast for a break.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Robert and Jake are bringing the new cattle in today. They got some good deals at the auction.”

The ranch hand took one last uncertain look at Veronica and Luke, then he headed out the door back to his work.

When they were alone, Luke crossed his arms over his chest. “Why haven’t you started breakfast?”

“I-I was about to.”

He sighed and sat at the table across from her. “I’m sorry I scared you last night. I don’t know what came over me.”

“You thought I was her.”

“I got lost inside my head for a minute. I know you’re not her.”

“But you wish I was.”

“Do you want me to lie, Ronnie? I took you because you look like her. You know that. I’m sorry I lost control last night and that I scared you. I heard part of what you said to Will.” He nodded over to the open window. “I was standing on the patio, and the voices carry out that window. I’m not crazy. I know who I am. I know who you are. And you and me aren’t finished. It’s going to happen, princess. I’ll do damage control with Will. You make breakfast.”

There went her only shot at help. Because if he talked to Will, he’d probably talk to Jake and Robert, too. By the end of the day, she’d look like the crazy one.



AFTER LUNCH, when the garden had been checked on, the chickens had been fed, and most of the household chores were done, Veronica wandered to the end of the yard where the grass ended. From there, dirt stretched out with barns and pens until the ground turned to green again at the start of pasture.

She liked to think she would have protested more loudly about the work she wasn’t being paid for in any other circumstance, but she’d seen off in the distance that the men worked harder than she did. Of course, they were being paid. Luke had made it clear he’d take care of all her needs. It grated that she didn’t have her own money, but what was she going to do with it? Get into more debt? She wanted to believe she’d learned to be more responsible, but

her recent cutbacks had been out of sheer survival necessity and the fear of going hungry.

And if she started spending money with her name attached to it, the creditors would line up at the door. She'd started to see herself as part slave, part fugitive, and the fugitive part made her wary about demanding her rights to a paycheck that debt collectors would just swoop in and take. Luke was right. Paid or unpaid, with so much debt, she was a slave, and there didn't seem to be an exit ramp in sight.

The work made the time go by faster, and it wasn't as if any of the men stood over her with a bull whip. Even if they'd wanted to, they didn't have time. Ranch life was hard. In the end, she had the easier end of things even without being a natural at gardening. Luke had given her a list of things to check for on the leaves.

Veronica was starting to suspect that people without green thumbs lacked knowledge, not magic. Gardening was something of a crapshoot and something of a science. The more you knew, the less gambling there was. But an outsider wouldn't know that. They'd put something in the ground, it would die, and they would assume they just didn't have the magic touch.

She stared at the sharp division between thick, green grass and dirt. She hadn't ventured this far before without shoes. Even the idea of walking in grass without shoes had seemed like a treacherous activity only a few days ago. Who knew what bacteria and parasites were in the ground? She took a few steps onto the warm dirt and then continued on, wondering if she was allowed out this far.

From a barn a few yards away, Veronica could hear a cow making a horrible, distressed sound.

"Hold him!" Luke shouted.

She raced to the barn door to see what was going on. A young steer was being held down while Robert clipped part of his coat away on his hip, then Luke raised a hot branding iron and seared its hide. Smoke and the smell of burnt flesh filled the air.

"No!" She couldn't help the protest. Luke pulled the branding iron away and gave her a look that made her fear she'd be next.

Veronica turned and ran back toward the house, trying to erase from her mind what she'd just seen. He'd taken that thing to Trish and marked her like common cattle. He'd never hurt her? The scarred flesh on Trish's hip from the brand he'd given her was proof to the contrary.

“Ronnie, stop!”

Luke’s footsteps pounded behind her, but she kept running. Finally he overtook her, and she was in the grass, panting and struggling to get away from him. His gloved hands held her in place. “Stop it!” he shouted.

She was crying so hard it was difficult to form words. “People use ear tags now. You don’t have to brand them. Do you know how cruel that is?”

He moved off her and let her sit up while he picked stray bits of grass out of her hair and off her dress. “You sound like one of those PETA people, or the lawmakers trying to phase out branding. That’s their endgame, you know. I forget you’re from the city and think food comes from the grocery store.”

“It *should* be phased out. I’m not the one with the problem, here!” She couldn’t stop seeing the calf struggling while Robert held him down and then the cry of pain when the hot iron hit its mark.

“It doesn’t hurt them as much as you think. That cry is more from fear and shock than pain.”

“How would you know? Are you a cow whisperer?”

“I’ve branded hundreds of cows. And I’ve branded a human. The danger comes in getting it too hot so it damages the tissues under the skin, or in not getting it hot enough to kill the nerve endings. Then it hurts for a long time. But like I said, I’m a pro at this. I’ve got a professional branding heater that regulates the temperature out there. I know what I’m doing. It doesn’t hurt them. And it didn’t hurt Trish.”

Veronica thought she might be sick at the casual way he spoke of pressing a hot iron to the flesh of the woman he supposedly loved, to say nothing of all the poor cattle. If he’d loved Trish, and Veronica was a dim replacement, what hope of safety did she have with him?

“I don’t brand them for the purpose of hurting them,” he said. “It protects them from theft and getting lost. They wander a lot when they graze. Sometimes my cattle get mixed in with other people’s cattle. They cost too much to lose like that. This is my livelihood, Ronnie. This ranch has been in my family for four generations. That’s been our cattle brand for the same time period.”

“Tags,” Veronica said, still not willing to let it go.

“Tags come off. Sometimes the cows do it; sometimes hustlers do it. Brands are permanent.”

At least in his own mind, he seemed to think his actions were justified, but the idea of him doing that to a human being when he had no practical

rationalizations, made her feel like she was suffocating in a small cramped place, even though they were out under the open sky with plenty of air.

“What about Trish? There’s no justification for making her...”

“She asked for the brand.”

Veronica’s eyes widened, not ready to believe him. What woman in her right mind would ask to be hurt and mutilated like that? Perhaps Trish had been as insane as Luke. Those two had been made for each other, cut out of the same cloth of crazy.

Luke pulled his gloves off and gripped her chin, forcing her eyes to his. “No, Ronnie. She *asked* for the brand. She knew what it meant, what it signified.”

“That she was no better than cattle for you to use or slaughter at your whim?”

The slap across her cheek knocked the wind out of her.

“You’re a monster,” she said, holding a hand to the warm, red mark he’d no doubt just left on her. “I don’t believe anything you have to say.”

“You had that coming. I’m tired of the way you twist things.”

Veronica scrambled back a few feet. He sat in silence for several minutes. Finally he looked over at her. The disgust in his eyes made her recoil worse than the slap had.

“That brand means something to me, to my family. Anything with that brand on it is mine until the day it dies. She wanted to be mine. I know the way you think. You have to understand that, no matter how much you deny it.”

“I’ll never be yours,” she said, her voice laced with contempt.

“You *are* mine.”

“No.”

“We’ll see.” He stood and scooped her up, going back to the barn with her kicking and screaming in his arms. Her mind blanked, not allowing her to think about what his intentions surely were.

Two other cows were in a pen, waiting their turn. Robert stood in the middle of the barn. His eyes widened when Luke threw Veronica to the ground.

“I’m going to need you to hold her down.”

She looked up at the other man, pleading in her eyes. Now he’d seen how crazy Luke was, somebody had to help her. “Please, don’t let him do this,” she whimpered.

“You appeal to me, not him, Princess. I’m the one who owns you. Do you see the big *G* on the branding iron?”

Robert raised one of the brands out of the heater, and she nearly went mad from panic seeing how bright red the iron was, then he laid it back down in the burner.

She turned to Luke from her sprawled position in the dirt. “P-please, Sir. You can’t do this to me.”

“Can’t? Don’t tell me what I *can’t* do with my property. That won’t play in your favor.”

“I’m sorry.” The tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Are you mine, Ronnie?”

“Y-yes, Sir,” she said, hoping verbal surrender alone would end the frenzy that had started in him again. If he did this to her and she survived it, she’d show the mark to Will and make him feel guilty forever for walking away and leaving her alone with Luke in the kitchen. He could have taken her out of here. Between the mean streets of New York and this, she finally knew which fate was preferable: not this one. Luke was the door with the tiger behind it.

He grabbed the dress and ripped, pulling the fabric apart, leaving her in her underwear. She wasn’t even wearing a bra—the ones in the drawer were so tight she’d finally given up on them. But she was too upset by what was about to happen to her to be concerned with the ranch hand seeing her half naked.

“NO! Please, please. You don’t have to do this.”

“I mark what’s mine. Robert hold her.”

The ranch hand studied her for a minute. “I’m not sure about this, boss.”

Veronica made another attempt to plead her case. “You said Trish asked for the brand. Maybe that’s true, but I’m *begging* you not to do this. Please, I won’t defy you again. I belong to you, please. I’ll never say I don’t again.” She was babbling, repeating herself, unable to stop the endless litany of pleading. Words that had seemed so hard to say a few days ago spilled from her mouth in a desperate bid for safety and protection.

“I also didn’t kidnap her. Face it, sweetheart, there is a lot about our situation that is different.”

“She’s not Trish,” Robert said.

“I know she’s not Trish! Why does everyone keep saying that? But she may as well be.”

Her face heated when he slid two fingers underneath her panties. “She’s so wet right now. Do you want to check for yourself? She was born for this.”

Veronica chanced a look back at Robert. The expression on his face had changed from pity and uncertainty to pure, animal lust. He was lost to her as an ally now. Apparently her body betraying her with arousal, no matter what *she* wanted, was enough to count as consent in his book.

“At the deepest core of her being, all she wants is to be owned and dominated. She wants to come, bucking like a wild horse. You didn’t see her last night. She’s not Trish, but she looks the same and she’s wired the same. She should be marked the same. I need this.”

Veronica changed tactics. “I’ll never forgive you. I’ll hate you if you do this.”

“No. You won’t. You’ll feel like you belong to me, and it will be that much easier to surrender to the things I’ll make you do.”

She wished now that she’d masturbated for him the previous night like he’d asked. If she had, things might not have escalated to this point. All she’d had to do was obey—appease him a little. It didn’t matter if it was right or wrong. The only thing that mattered was surviving his special kind of crazy until she could get away. A job at a strip joint was sounding better and better, but who would hire her with a cattle brand on her hip?

Robert sat in the dirt beside her and put her head on his lap. He trailed fingers through her hair in an attempt to comfort her while she cried. “Just try to be still. It’ll be over in a few seconds.”

How could he go along with this?

“Are you going to be still or are you going to try to fight, because I can’t guarantee it won’t hurt if you thrash around. And you’ll mess up the design.”

Inside, her heart was trying to escape its cage. He was really going to permanently mark her like one of his cows. She couldn’t believe she was lying in her underwear in the dirt, being held by some ranch hand, waiting for a branding iron to strike her skin.

“Are you hearing me, Ronnie?”

“Y-yes, Sir.” She turned to look at him again, the resignation starting to fall over her. “Do you promise I can handle it?” She wasn’t sure it mattered what he said, but she was so terrified she’d take any comfort she could get.

“If your concern is pain, don’t worry. Trust me for one minute. If you don’t trust me not to harm you, trust that I’ve been doing this long enough to know how to do it. Remember what I said. Brands that hurt are either too

cool or too hot. I know what the right temperature range is. Trust me.”

How could she trust him? After everything he’d put her through already, extending an ounce of trust to this man was stupid, but what choice did she have?

A moment later, the hot iron struck her skin. She tensed, expecting horrible pain, but it was shockingly minimal. He held the iron to her skin for a few seconds then pulled it away. She turned to find a look of satisfaction in his eyes at having marked her.

Relief and endorphins flooded her as he picked her up and carried her back toward the house. Once they reached the grass, he laid her down and applied an ointment to the brand, then he covered her with her ripped dress.

“W-what are you doing?”

“I’m letting you ride out the endorphin rush out here. And I’m going back to work. Don’t forget dinner by six thirty.”

Veronica’s head fell back on the grass as she looked up at the sky that went on forever. She felt like a cloud, detached from her body, floating up there in the big bright blue. Her breath came in and out in slow, measured sounds that lulled her like the hypnotic waves on the beach. Her college drug experimentation had been limited, but this was almost like being high. It was definitely an altered state. She couldn’t remember ever being this relaxed before as the breeze brushed over her face. The leaves on a nearby apple tree became the most fascinating things she’d ever seen.

A small group of butterflies fluttered around in her line of sight, and she couldn’t be sure if they were even real. When they fluttered off, she felt she’d become one with the tree, the grass she lay on, and the fluffy clouds. She felt open like the sky.

FIVE

When Veronica woke, it was to a burning sensation, but it wasn't the brand. It was the sun she'd fallen asleep in. She looked up to find herself lying in Luke's shadow.

"I didn't hear the dinner bell."

She scrambled to get up but felt dizzy from the heat. He caught her before she fell.

"I'm sorry, Sir. Don't be mad. I didn't mean to..." Why was she apologizing to him? Because she was scared. He'd literally scarred her for life while she'd begged him not to.

"It's all right. You've never had an endorphin rush like that before, have you?"

She shook her head.

"Then I shouldn't have left you alone."

She winced as he scooped her up and carried her back to the house. Her hip was sore from where the brand had struck her. "It hurts."

"It'll be sore for quite a while."

"You said it wouldn't hurt." She was thankful he'd covered her with her dress or a lot more of her would be sunburned.

"I meant it wouldn't hurt in the way you thought it would. You were expecting searing, agonizing pain, like a small surface burn only a lot worse, but brands don't work that way. It's not torture, even though it looks like it to outsiders. Not if you do it right."

When they reached the house, he sat her at the kitchen table and poured her a tall glass of water. "Drink. You're dehydrated."

She drank the water down while he inspected her. He pulled the dress she'd been clutching away to leave her in her panties, covered in dirt. Her arms, shoulders, and face had gotten burned in the sun. The rest had been protected by the dress.

"I'll be right back."

He hadn't yelled at her or done anything bad because she hadn't made dinner. He returned a few minutes later with a spritz bottle that looked like it had water in it.

"Close your eyes tight and lean your head back."

She was too drained to argue or ask questions, but she wasn't prepared when the strong scent of vinegar hit the air. He sprayed her face, arms, and shoulders until she felt like a salad. Then he patted her face with a paper towel to stop it from dripping.

"It'll help your sunburn," he said. "You can open your eyes now. Would you like to see your brand?" He said it conversationally as if she'd gone to a trendy body modification shop and selected the design herself. In reality, it was an ugly reminder that he could do whatever he wanted with her, and she didn't have the means to stop him.

She didn't know if she ever wanted to see it, but she said "Yes, Sir" to keep him happy.

Luke took her hand and led her upstairs. "I want you to take a cool shower and get cleaned up while I make us something to eat. It'll have to be grilled cheese and tomato soup tonight. What I had planned for you to make is too involved for this late."

"T-that's okay." She was just glad he wasn't punishing her for falling asleep in the backyard.

When they reached her bedroom, he stood her in front of the full-length mirror, turning her to the proper angle to see the brand. She thought she might pass out again when she saw it. It was dark red against her pale skin.

"It looks scary when it's new. When it heals it'll look something like what you saw on the video, okay? Just leave it alone." He brushed the hair out of her face with his fingers as if he were soothing her. She couldn't be sure if he saw Trish when he watched her reflection in the mirror.

Veronica looked again at the brand. If before she'd had even the smallest hope she'd ever be allowed to leave the ranch, that hope was gone, now. With an identifying mark like this, his crimes were painted across her skin, dark and angry—almost bragging: I did this. She stared at the G with the steer

horns coming out of it that marked her as Luke's property.

She didn't know what to feel. She knew what she was supposed to feel: rage, violation. Instead she felt blank except for the throb between her legs. It started whenever he walked into a room now, whenever he came near her. Part of her would cringe away, tense, afraid he'd touch her, but another part needed him to. When she looked at Luke again, he was staring at his mark, an unapologetic smile curving his lips.

"This is wrong. I didn't ask for any of this. You do know the difference, right?"

"I saved you," he said simply, still convinced anything he did to her was okay because she was going to end up on the streets anyway. "Run along and get in the shower. I'll bring you something to wear."

She drifted to the upstairs bathroom in a fog. Maybe she was in shock. Or maybe it was the low-level constant buzz of arousal she'd felt from the moment she'd entered his presence—something she'd ignored as best she could until Luke had pointed it out so many times. Her face burned—more from embarrassment than the sunburn—over Luke so casually sliding his fingers inside her panties in full view of the ranch hand. She'd been too afraid at the time of what he was about to do to her, but now in the house, she didn't think she'd be able to look at the guy at breakfast tomorrow.

A few minutes later, Luke came in with a white cotton nightgown in his hand. The gown had thin straps and was a thin enough material that it would leave little to the imagination.

Veronica tried to cover herself. He arched an eyebrow and put the gown down on the counter.

"How long are you going to be so shy around me?"

It seemed ludicrous with what was the equivalent of his family crest burned into her hip and all he'd seen of her already, but she couldn't help the natural inclination to protect her modesty.

She expected him to leave the clothes and go. Instead, he pulled her arms from her chest and ran his fingertips over her nipples and the full, roundness of her breasts, as if testing their weight. His hand roamed across her flat belly and to the mound between her legs. He stroked her already swollen clit, and she spread her legs as her hips arched up to meet him.

"The brand makes such a difference in you. You know you're not going anywhere, now. Better to just open to me. Give in. We aren't in the city anymore. There's nothing you have to fight for, here. I'm going to be inside

you tonight. So get used to that idea.”

A tear slid down her cheek as he rubbed her harder. Despite everything, her orgasm was building. It was confusing and exposing. She never had orgasms *with* men. It had always been later, on her own. She’d faked more orgasms than she’d wanted to admit to. Even the ones who had tried to touch her in just the right way had left her cold.

But then, no one had touched her like Luke was touching her. He touched her like she’d been brought into the world solely for his use, like her entire existence was meant to please him. The proprietary way he stroked her was clearly the only way she could come.

Luke didn’t ask *is this okay? Is this how you like it?* He touched her the way he liked it, and she was forced to run along behind him, panting and hungry for more.

He pulled his hand away from her.

“Please...”

“I need to make us some food. Take your shower, and put the nightgown on. No panties or I’ll be very unhappy.”

As soon as he’d pulled the door shut, her fingers slipped between her legs to finish. The door opened again, his gaze causing her to shrink back like a violet. “And no touching yourself. You only masturbate for an audience from now on.” He stared her down until she took her fingers from her clit. Then he left her.

For an audience? Did he mean him or him and the guys? Robert hadn’t seemed shocked when Luke had touched her in the barn, and he’d known about Trish’s brand. The threat on screen about showing the video to the guys that had gotten the woman all hot and bothered hadn’t just been dirty talk. No wonder no one wanted to help Veronica. They wanted a piece of the action.

When she got to the kitchen, Luke was sitting at the table, his legs sprawled out, looking relaxed and expectant. Behind him, the sandwiches sat on the counter wrapped in aluminum foil and paper towels to keep the heat in longer. The soup simmered on the back burner, bowls and spoons already on the counter. Iced tea was poured and on the table with a couple of lemon wedges from the lemon tree in the greenhouse.

There was a darkly erotic glint in Luke’s eyes. “How hungry are you, princess? What are you willing to do to be allowed to eat?”

She didn’t know if he’d really let her go to bed hungry if she didn’t do whatever he wanted. She’d always had the suspicion his punishments would

be more direct and terrifying.

Veronica looked at the floor tiles, unable to maintain eye contact for long.

“Answer me, princess.”

“I-I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Come to me on your hands and knees.”

There must have been resistance on her face because he said, “Don’t think, just do it.”

She crouched to the ground and crawled over to him. She was painfully aware of what had happened in the barn each time she moved, the ache radiating through her hip. Inexplicably, the reminder that she belonged to him made her hotter. Crazy or not, it was hard to be near him and be anything but aroused for long. He was too beautiful in that rugged way. She stopped when she was between his legs. He unzipped his pants and his cock sprang free. Her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

“How many men have you sucked?”

The question took her off guard. “I... um...” If she told him the truth, she’d sound like a virgin. None of the men she’d been with had inspired the activity. In her fantasies it had seemed hot and exciting—helpless in an erotic way. In reality it was too demeaning. She’d never been able to be the Cosmo girl who could successfully pretend she liked or wanted a cock in her mouth.

“How many?”

“I don’t do that.”

“Well, you seem excited enough about doing it now.”

She blushed and was thankful he wouldn’t be able to see it for her sunburn.

“How many men have you fucked?”

It had been awhile, but in college... She did the math in her head.

“And I want the real number. Not the number women give men to appear more virginal. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

“Thirty-four.”

He smirked and spread his legs a little farther. “I knew you were a slut. Well, don’t just stare at it.”

Veronica inched forward and ran her tongue over the shaft. His hand tangled in her hair and he pulled hard, jerking her face up.

“I know you can do better. Pretend it’s the only thing you’re getting for dinner. And no teeth.”

She may not have ever sucked a cock, but she’d seen it done. It wasn’t a

great mystery—she'd just never felt compelled to pretend she liked it. But Luke didn't care if she liked it or not. He was going to get off in her mouth either way. That thought sent an electrical zap through her stomach as she took him into her mouth.

His hand moved to the back of her neck and he pulled her in closer, going deeper. When her gag reflex activated, she instinctively relaxed her throat to let more of him in.

“That’s good, princess. Surprisingly good, actually.”

When he came, he held her in place so she could do nothing but swallow the thick, hot liquid. Then the kitchen door opened. She jerked away, and some of his cum slid down her chin and neck.

“Stay down,” he ordered as he zipped up, pointing at her as if she were a disobedient dog.

She kept her eyes on the floor, unable to look up at the person who'd come in.

“Sorry, I left my hat on the counter after lunch,” Will said. Footsteps receded to the other end of the kitchen, paused a moment, then came to stop a few feet from her. Veronica could just see the tips of his boots.

“Luke told me he branded you, honey. I’m real sorry I missed that.”

“Do you want to see it?” Luke asked.

Veronica looked up in time to see the hungry expression in the ranch hand’s eyes. “You know I do. Don’t tease me.”

Luke nudged her with his knee. “Be a good girl and go show him. If thirty-four other men have already seen you naked, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

She wanted to melt through the floor.

Will let out a low whistle. “Filthy little thing.”

“Yes,” Luke said. “She’s been holding out on us.”

Veronica forced herself to walk the few paces to Will, unable to meet his eyes. She could feel her nipples pebbling against the material of the nightgown and knew without looking that his gaze must be drawn to them. When she reached him, she turned away and lifted the nightgown to show him the mark, aware he'd get a view of much more without panties.

“That looks real nice. It should heal up good. She’s our good little cow.” He stroked the back of her neck.

“My good little cow,” Luke said. “You only touch her if I’m around.”

Then Will’s hands were on more private areas, cupping and stroking her

bottom—as if that were an invitation. She looked over at Luke, but the heated look he gave her made her wither and wouldn't let her pull away from the groping hands. She felt Will's wedding ring slide against her flesh and wondered what his wife would think about this.

He moved his hands to her front and pulled her flush against him. His erection strained through his jeans, pressing between the cleft of her cheeks. "You feel that honey? That's how bad I want inside you. Maybe the boss'll let me one day soon."

He pressed a finger inside her, and she wondered how far Luke would let him take this. "Jesus, she's wet."

"Fantastic, isn't it?"

Veronica closed her eyes and imagined it was Luke's finger inside her, not bothering to think about why that was all wrong, too. She rocked against him, not resisting as he pushed deeper inside, exploring her body like it was his instead of Luke's.

"That's enough," Luke said when the ranch hand had taken her to the brink. "Her first orgasm at the ranch is coming from me."

"Well, hurry the hell up," Will said. "Now I'll have to fuck Frieda." He let go of her and the kitchen door banged shut on his way out.

Luke went to the stove to pour the soup and bring the sandwiches.

"Sit and eat your dinner."



AFTER THEY'D EATEN, Luke leaned back in his chair, his fingers laced behind his head, watching her. She felt like an experiment.

"Will really likes you," he commented. "So do the other two."

Veronica stared at her empty soup bowl, wishing there was still something in there to distract her. She tried to keep her voice steady when she spoke. "A-are you going to share me?"

"We'll see."

"Did you share Trish?" Every time she mentioned the other woman's name, she feared he'd have some kind of meltdown, but he remained stoic.

"Often. She got off on it. I think you'd get off on it, too."

She didn't reply. Anything she said would damn her in some way. The ranch hand had felt how wet she'd gotten. She'd been thinking about Luke at

the time, but did that matter? Luke had been watching, which had only aroused her further. That assessing stare of his as he dispassionately observed another man running his hands all over her, knowing she'd submit to avoid his wrath. It had started that deep longing she'd begun to feel for him.

He'd been intent on building a new Trish since he'd seen Veronica in the diner, and she'd fallen right into it. The part of her that wanted to fight and hate him and everything else with a dick had been beaten down by the carnal part that wanted to surrender. In all her sexual encounters, no one else had made her want to surrender, or kneel, or beg. All Luke had had to do was take her shoes, put her in a dress, and shove her in the kitchen with a group of men to wait on. She didn't want to think about what that said about her.

Veronica looked up to find him still staring at her in that assessing way. She wished she could know what he was thinking, or how much of her own thoughts he'd guessed.

His chair scraped back against the linoleum. "Wash the dishes, then come to my room. I want you naked."

Her heart was in her throat as she watched him leave the room. She filled the sink with warm, sudsy water and tried to make washing the dishes take as long as possible. The feminist on her shoulder insisted she must be offended and feel violated even over the dishes, to say nothing of anything else that had transpired. She should make another escape attempt, even in the dark without shoes. All she had to do was make it to another person. The evidence that would lead them to her kidnapper was burned into her now.

Whoever might know and respect Luke Granger, his family, their ranch's history—there was no denying who that brand belonged to. On her other shoulder was her slut side, the part of her that had tried and tried to be satisfied, now faced with the embodiment of all her sexual fantasies, no matter how wrong. It was the wrongness that made her so wet and hot to begin with. If the things she'd thought about were tame and family friendly, they wouldn't make her come so hard.

Her hands felt around in the soapy water for the next dish, but they were all on the counter now, drying. She pulled the plug to drain the water and dried her hands.



“VERONICA, sweetheart, do you believe it’s wise to keep me waiting?”

She’d shed the gown in the hallway before coming in. Luke leaned against the headboard of his bed, a white sheet draped carelessly over his tanned, naked body.

“N-no, Sir.” She’d give anything to get rid of that weak stutter he caused every time she got scared.

“The dishes took twenty minutes. With the little that was there to clean, it shouldn’t have taken longer than ten.”

He pulled the sheet away to reveal his belt—or one of them—lying across his stomach. His cock was hard and ready to go again. She wasn’t sure if it was over the prospect of beating her or fucking her. “Go across the hall into the playroom and kneel in the middle of the rug. When I get in there, I want your forehead on the rug, and your arms stretched out in front of you, palms up.” When she hesitated, he said, “Now.”

She waited in that position in the other room for what felt like forever. Every time she heard floorboards creak outside the door, she tensed. But each time, nothing. Finally, when she thought she’d faint from the fear, the doorknob turned and he stepped into the room.

“That was twenty minutes, Ronnie. Do you see how much time that is?”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

“I’m going to whip you with the belt for making me wait so long. I’ll be lenient and only give you ten. Thank me for that kindness.”

“P-please, I’m sorry, Sir.” She cringed as he circled her, stopping behind her where she couldn’t see him.”

“Begging won’t help you. Take your punishment and learn from it.”

“You’re a motherfucking psycho,” she said.

He jerked her back by her hair. “What was that?”

“You heard me. You are a sick fuck and everybody here knows it. The only reason you feel normal is that the guys who work for you are sick fucks, too. Do you want to ask again who hurt me? You, them, every cretin in the universe who’d even have the fantasy, let alone act on it.”

His eyes flashed. “Don’t get high and mighty with me. You have the same needs I have. Don’t act like mine are vile while yours are enlightened.”

“Trish consented. You *took* me. I never said I wanted this with you.”

“Your body said it.”

“That doesn’t count.”

He flipped her onto her back, straddling her, inches from penetration, but

instead, he pushed a finger inside her.

“So fucking wet. Tell me to stop, Ronnie.”

She looked away, her hips bucking against his wriggling finger.

“Please...”

“Please what, princess? Please stop? Please keep going? Please treat me like the livestock I am?”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you isn’t stop. Fuck you sounds like an invitation to me.” He’d found her g-spot. No matter how much she wanted to stop him, her body craved the way he rubbed that little place inside her. When she didn’t protest, he withdrew his fingers. “Get back in the position I told you to be in.”

She scrambled back onto her knees. “Would it have made a difference if I’d said stop?”

“Guess you’ll never know. That brand on your hip is going to be sore for at least a month. It should be a good, constant reminder of who owns you. Stop and think about that little twinge of pain the next time you want to open your mouth and say something smart.”

She shrieked when the first lash landed on her bottom, sending a lick of fire across her flesh, strangely more painful than the branding. She tensed before each blow, terrified he’d slip and hit the brand, but he didn’t. He was silent as he meted out the punishment, the only sound in the room her sobs. By the time he’d finished with her, she only wished those nerve endings could die like the ones the brand had burned away. But then he rubbed over her welted bottom.

“Get up on your hands and knees,” he snarled in her ear.

Veronica raised up on all fours and then he was inside her, pounding her so hard she couldn’t catch her breath. She was convinced she couldn’t come this way, but the orgasm nearly ripped her open from the inside, tearing a scream from her throat.

She crumpled to the floor, still shaking when he pulled out of her. Luke rolled onto his back and pulled her against him. He was quiet for a long time.

“Are you on birth control?”

Brilliant time to ask.

“My tubes are tied.”

He sat up, startled. “Why?”

“Why not? I don’t want babies.”

“Good.”

She knew he was thinking about Trish.

A few minutes later he got up and left the room. She waited, but when he didn't return she went to his room. When she opened the door, he stopped her.

"Sleep in your room. My room is for good sluts that know their place."

"You're really mean."

"Give me one week, Ronnie. One week without resistance, doing anything I ask without question or begging or name calling and yelling. One week without fighting me. You might be surprised by how kind I can be, but my favor must be earned."

Veronica didn't reply. She just stomped off to her room and slammed the door. Once in bed, she tossed and turned, Luke's *Give me one week, Ronnie*, bumping up against Joe's *Give me anything, Ronnie* from the day she'd lost her job.

Everything inside her rebelled at the thought of submitting completely to Luke. It would be admitting he'd broken her, or giving him permission to do horrible things to her just because it turned her body on. But what if? Hadn't he already shown her glimmers of kindness? Wouldn't it be better if she had more of that, instead of the belt and the brand?

Would he have branded her if she hadn't said what she'd said about Trish?

SIX

Veronica woke with a pleasant soreness between her legs, and a less pleasant soreness on her hip. The previous day's emotional and physical roller coaster came crashing back to her like a bad hangover. The last words Luke spoke to her the night before still hung in the air.

She couldn't stop thinking *Please be kind to me. Please help me survive this*. Like a mantra over and over in her head, as if he could hear her if she thought it enough. As if he might care.

He couldn't let her go now, not with plausible deniability. She struggled to find a way to give in to him, to erase her mind and just be her body, which seemed to know instinctively how to please him and submit.

She thought back to the day before, lying in the grass after he'd branded her, the feeling of bliss like everything was right with the world. Everything and everyone was in its place. Everything was as it should be. Life was a rich, interwoven tapestry of which she and Luke were only tiny threads. Nothing was a big enough deal to fight over. When you became everything and everything became you, what was there to dispute? Everything just was. She wanted to go back to that moment and live there.

As she showered and made breakfast, she tried to find that quiet space inside herself that didn't cling and claw and fight and scream, that just drifted and merged with the clouds. That just ate and breathed and slept and fucked and everything in between any of that was just noise.

At breakfast, she was still trying to find this place when Luke said her name.

"Ronnie, come here."

She looked up, the flood of fear she'd pushed away coming back in full force. It wasn't what he said. It was the way he said it. That voice. It was ruthless and unrelenting. Anything said with that voice would bring her the greatest pleasure, the greatest pain, or the greatest humiliation. Most likely all three. She wanted to run from that voice and never look back. The only problem was that while she was running, she was likely to circle back and run toward it again—his inexplicable pull on her was that strong.

She scooted her chair back and went to him. His hand, ran over her bottom through the sundress she'd put on.

“Are you wearing panties?”

The men stopped eating, forks clanging against plates as they fell. They looked at her, waiting. It didn't appear odd to them that the question was being asked. They just wanted to hear the answer.

“Yes, Sir,” she said, finally killing the stutter. It could still come back. It was early yet.

“That disappoints me. Take them off.”

What was the point? Nothing she did would ever be good enough. She'd never be Trish, even if she followed his orders to the letter every moment for the rest of her life.

Where had that come from? She pushed past the urge to fight him on the panty issue and turned to go inside.

“Take them off here.”

If she begged him, he'd only humiliate her worse. He might punish her. *Just give in. Whatever he wants. Just do it.* He'd said the first week or so was the hardest. Had it been hard for Trish? Even if he hadn't taken her against her will? Was it something Veronica would have had to push through either way?

She wanted him. She wanted to live out every filthy fantasy she'd ever had with him, but she couldn't get past the fact that she hadn't come here freely. She almost had. In that park when she'd been so desperate for anything to make her life better and he'd given her one more chance to go with him, what if she'd just gone, with no ropes or terror?

What if she'd taken the work as just a matter of course? What if they'd agreed that room and board was sufficient pay for a few household chores and meal preparation? What if he'd seduced her and she'd fallen under his spell? Would it really be easier to go down the dark and gnarled path he was taking her down?

“Veronica...” His voice had taken on that edge again. It was the way he sounded only a few moments before consequences.

She balanced with one hand against the table and lifted the dress to reach the top of her panties and took them off without thinking it through. She was about to go back to sit down—a wildly optimistic choice—when his hand covered hers, stopping her.

A look passed between him and the guys, and as if they’d done this all before, they stacked the plates at the far end of the table, where the extra chair sat. Trish may have decided on six chairs to keep the table even, but each day, that last empty chair at the end of the table felt like the place for the ghost of his former lover.

Luke grabbed Veronica’s wrist and pulled her closer, so that she was half lying on the table on her stomach. Her dress was scrunched around her waist, displaying her lower half to the men. Jake got up from the table and made his way over to her. He was the only one of them who hadn’t yet seen her in some state of undress.

He ran his fingers over the welts the belt had left. “Poor thing,” he said. “What did she do to deserve this?”

“She kept me waiting.”

“Let me borrow her for a little while. I’ll soften her up for you. She just needs someone to be gentle with her. You’re too intimidating. Remember how Trish was at first?”

“No. If you’re soft, you just teach her to manipulate.”

Veronica gritted her teeth, willing herself not to scream at them for talking about her like she was a lamp or chair or not right there, leaned over the table on display.

Jake still stroked gently over the welts, eliciting a small whimper from her. She winced when he pressed a finger inside her ass.

“We don’t have time right now,” Luke said. “There’s too much work to do. Tonight we’ll play with her.”

“All of us?”

“Yes.”

Jake removed his finger, and Veronica let go of the breath she’d been holding. Then he smacked her over the still-painful welts and pulled her dress down.

She spent the rest of the day fretting over what all of them playing with her meant. Just when she was trying to test what would happen if she didn’t

fight him, Luke had to go and introduce new things.

Lunch went off without a hitch, the men too wrapped up in the day's chores to mess with her. She waited on them, and brought them their food, and cleared the table when they went back to work. She checked on the garden and made a note to tell Luke about some holes in some of the bell pepper leaves. She'd fed the chickens and done laundry and cleaned the house.

Around five thirty, Luke came in with a package wrapped in white paper—meat from one of his cattle. “It's stew meat,” he said, putting it on the bottom shelf of the fridge. “Make shish kabobs for dinner, for all of us on the grill. The skewers are in the top draw on the left side of the stove, and here's the list of the veggies to pick from the garden for them.” He passed a piece of paper to her. “The only other thing you need for your part is pineapple, and Robert's gone out to the store to grab one and the other things we need. Don't look so terrified. We're just having a little party tonight.”



THE *LITTLE PARTY* turned out to include party trays, S'mores, a big bonfire, and a lot of alcohol. The more they drank, the more worried she got. The shish kabobs had been a hit, and nothing dirty had happened yet except for the occasional grope, but she could tell they were just getting warmed up. The grill had been brought to the far end of the yard where the bonfire had been started. For S'mores and *ambiance*, Robert had said after his second beer.

Music played on a battery-operated boom box nearby. Bales of hay had been pulled around the fire to sit on, and before the alcohol had flowed too freely, Jake and Luke had brought out a large wooden cross that looked more like a giant X the way it sat, except that it was leaned back a little, not straight up and down. They'd secured it into the ground with stakes. A large pile of rope sat beside it, which gave her flashbacks to the night Luke had taken her. She shook the thoughts out of her head.

Will sat beside her, his hand rubbing her thigh underneath her dress, exciting her in spite of everything. He wasn't bad looking. Nobody here was as rancher-of-the-month hot as Luke, but nobody was a troll, either. “You look scared, honey.”

“Of course I’m scared.” She was about to be the centerpiece in some kind of orgy. Veronica didn’t think straight men routinely liked to get naked in front of each other. It must be why they were packing away so many beers. “I don’t like this with alcohol. Luke is already scary enough. I don’t need him drunk.”

“He can hold his drink. Don’t worry. He’s not a mean drunk. If anything, as nervous as he makes you, you’ll like him this way.”

Speaking of the devil, Luke swooped in, then. He pulled Veronica to her feet and swung her around to the music. “I’m tying you up, sweetheart.” His tone was light, but still somehow scary.

She didn’t quite believe Will’s description of drunk-Luke as less intimidating. The only one who wasn’t drunk was Will. He must be the designated driver—or the one designated to pull the others off her if they got out of hand. Physically, he was strong; they all were. They had to be for that kind of work, but was he strong enough to protect her if she needed it? And would he?

“Why isn’t Will drinking?” she asked, needing to confirm her hope.

“Safety. If you need to be cut out of the ropes for some reason, do you want to trust I haven’t had too much to drink to do it without slicing you open?”

At least Luke could hold his drink enough to have that rationale.

“Why aren’t *you* drinking?” he asked. “I need you loose and relaxed.”

“I don’t drink. Not since my freshman year of college.” It had taken exactly one year to realize why drunk was only fun the night before.

Wheels were turning in his head, but Veronica had no idea which wheels. Was he going to hold her down and force her to drink out of a funnel? He could make her drink if he wanted her drunk.

“Put your arms over your head like this.” He raised his arms to demonstrate, which made him look ridiculous. Yeah, he was a bit silly drunk.

She rolled her eyes but did it, and he pulled her dress over her head. There was a bite in the air that caused her nipples to harden, but the bonfire so close kept the worst of the chill away.

Luke’s mouth closed over one of her breasts, sucking on it while Robert watched with a leer on his face.

“We should milk her,” he said.

Veronica’s eyes widened and she hoped the men were all too drunk to remember any of this in the morning. She looked for Luke’s reaction. It was a

raised eyebrow.

“She’s not pregnant,” Luke said.

“It doesn’t matter. I saw it on a website. All we have to do is give her hormone shots, and keep trying til we get there. She’s already branded, we may as well milk her, too—keep the theme alive.”

“You are a freak,” Luke said as if he had room to talk with his playroom and video cameras, but the look in his eyes said he thought the idea was just the right level of degrading to be hot. “Have you even tasted breast milk? As an adult?”

“I have,” Will said. “When Frieda was pregnant. I got curious.”

“And?”

“It’s sweet. Not bad. It depends on what you feed her, though. It can taste sour if she eats too much onion and garlic.”

“No onions and garlic, then,” Luke said as if he were actually considering it.

Will turned red in the firelight.

Luke noticed. “What aren’t you telling us?”

Will ducked his head. “After the baby was weaned, I made her keep producing milk for me for a couple of years until she finally got fed up with it.”

“What do you think, princess?” He cupped her mound, his fingers slipping inside her. “Survey says, yes. The idea makes our little slut hot.”

She flushed and turned away.

“What do you think, Jake?” Luke asked.

“I think it’s disgusting. I’m not drinking it.”

“More for us, then.”

“You know what they call them?” Will asked, too into the idea to let it drop now. “Milk maids.”

“Hot,” Robert said.

“I still think it’s nasty,” Jake said.

“And we said you didn’t have to participate,” Luke said. “Help me tie her up.”

Jake put down his beer and followed them to the big wooden X. The two men positioned her on her back, leaning to press against the wood.

“Careful with her brand,” Luke said.

“It’s not even touching the beam, she’s fine.”

Veronica’s face flamed as they spread her legs wide to tie them down,

exposing her more than she'd ever been exposed for any of them. Even in just firelight it was humiliating. Robert and Will watched from a few paces back. Jake helped tie her up, but once she was secured, he stepped back and let Luke go to work.

"This is going to look like a crack-addicted spider's web, with me doing this drunk," Luke said.

"Doing what?" Veronica asked, her curiosity overcoming her fear and embarrassment for a moment.

"Japanese rope bondage. He learned it a few years ago. If he's doing the fancy rope work, you're going to be there for awhile," Robert said.

Robert wasn't kidding. Half an hour later, Luke was just finishing up the knots. He'd wrapped ropes intricately around both of her arms, keeping it as loose as possible around the sunburned areas. On her legs he wasn't so lenient. Then he tied ropes around her upper torso, and her breasts. The constricting nature of that much rope tied with that much time and complexity made her panic.

"Shhhh," Luke said, stroking her hip. "Deep breaths. This is why I wanted you relaxed. Will can cut you out fast if necessary."

"I have a problem," Veronica said, once her breathing was back to normal.

"Yes?"

She flushed and lowered her voice. "I have to pee."

Luke started to laugh.

"I'm serious. I really have to go."

He shrugged, unconcerned with her discomfort. "So pee."

Her eyes widened. "I hope that's a joke. I can't just *pee*."

Luke's expression darkened. "You can and you will. We are far from finished with you and there's no way I'm undoing all this work so you can take a piss. It's just pee. Do it."

She shook her head and glared at him, her lips set in a firm, defiant line. "I can't." There was no way she could be exposed like that and pee in front of them. It was too degrading and awful.

Robert, who was proving to be the most dangerous instigator of the group, came closer. "This, I have to see."

Within a couple of minutes, all four of them were standing around her, arms crossed, amused looks on their faces—just waiting for it.

"I'm not doing it," she said.

Despite the alcohol that had lightened his mood, Luke's face was stern. "Ronnie, what did we say about you making an effort and seeing how much nicer I could be?"

"I don't care. Be mean, beat the shit out of me, but I'm absolutely not doing it. I'd rather die." She didn't really mean that, she only said it because she didn't think he'd do it, at least not the killing part. He was too giddy with all the perverted things he could make her do to end it all now. The big box of videos he had of Trish said it had been a long time since he'd done all of this, and he wasn't about to end the party now.

"You'll do it. You won't have a choice." Luke turned to one of the guys, "Jake, go get the bong out of the shed."

Veronica jerked her head up at that. They had a bong? When did they have time for recreational drug use? She'd seen the amount of work they had to do, though they did seem to sometimes stop about a half hour before dinner time. Still, she'd never smelled it on any of them.

"You're getting her high?" Jake asked.

"Oh yes."

"Doesn't that defeat the purpose? If she's too stoned to care, it's less fun."

"I'm only relaxing her enough so that she'll let go, not enough to kill the impact on her."

Jake disappeared behind the hay bales and came back ten minutes later with the bong, ready to go. Luke lit it and held the mouthpiece up to her mouth. Veronica preferred to be a little stoned for this, so she chose not to fight him and inhaled.

"Okay, that's plenty, maybe a little too much."

She relaxed. She knew they'd succeeded in their goal when they let out whistles and catcalls. Then she felt the hot, wet stream trickle down her leg.

When she realized what she'd done, the tears started sliding down her face. Luke moved in next to her ear. "Don't let them get to you. They're just fucking with you. They're drunk as hell and won't remember it in the morning."

The small gesture caught her off guard. "What about Will?"

"Well, you know about him and Frieda. He's probably the freakiest fucker here. Nothing fazes him, so don't worry about it."

Robert came up with the water hose and Veronica cringed, afraid he was going to hose her down like some prison movie, but he was only cleaning her

off with a light mist.

Luke seemed to have sobered up as he approached with that predatory look in his eyes. Despite the discomfort since he'd tied her to the wooden beams, and despite the other men looking on, her mouth watered when he unzipped his pants. However sober he appeared, he had to still be buzzed if he was casually dropping trough in front of the others.

“Beg me to fuck you, sweetheart. I want the guys to hear how sweet you sound when you beg me.”

Veronica's heart beat harder, and the relaxation that had hit her with the marijuana faded as everything came into hyper focus. If she didn't do as he requested, he might beat her and then force her. She needed to feel at least the illusion of consent. It was impossible to fight him with the ropes tied so tightly around her, especially outnumbered as she was.

Her real choice wasn't whether she would consent or not. The real choice was whether she would try to separate herself from the event, try to hover outside her body or if she would connect and feel and accept what these men would do to her. The latter was a terrifying idea that every cell in her body bucked and rebelled against, but the former... if she separated she might become so lost she never found herself again.

Veronica closed her eyes and forced the words past her lips. “P-please, Sir, fuck me.” When she'd said it, the throbbing need began between her legs.

“In front of my men? You dirty slut. Do you like being watched, Ronnie?”

“I-I don't know.”

It wasn't as if the idea of his ranch hands in some kind of circle jerk around her hadn't entered her filthy mind, but she hadn't thought they'd actually act it out. She wasn't sure she could handle the reality when she couldn't control the outcome.

“Do you want to find out?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

Luke looked back at Robert. “What did I tell you? Do you trust my judgment now?”

Robert tossed back another beer. “Sure, boss. I trust everything you say right now.”

Luke stepped out of his pants, and Veronica licked her lips. He was hard and ready, but he still lazily stroked his cock, watching her. He finally filled her inch by agonizingly slow inch. He trapped her gaze in his as his hand dug

into her brand.

“Ow!”

A slow smile. She wouldn't have guessed a rancher would know anything about the art of subtlety or innuendo, but the pain and grip on her hip hadn't been accidental. When he entered her, he wanted her to remember which one of them she belonged to.

He stroked gently over his mark. “Shhhh,” he murmured, trailing wet kisses over her neck. He began to move in a languid pace, dragging out her torment, while his men chanted and egged him on in the background. Mortifyingly she'd gotten wetter when he'd gripped his mark and hurt her, the tinge of masochism coming out to betray her just like her cunt had.

Robert got impatient. “Hurry up. I want my turn.”

“You'll get your turn. You might want to stay sober enough to get it up.”

“Fuck you, Luke.”

He just laughed and continued to piston in and out of her. Veronica had moved past the embarrassment point. The boom box had run out of batteries and died, leaving only the crackling bonfire and the chirping crickets. The night felt unreal and ancient, and when she looked up, the stars seemed to beckon her to join them. It was like the day before when she'd lain in the grass, floating on the endorphin rush from the branding.

Whatever was happening wasn't about doors and misogyny and rights and indignation. It wasn't about which gender made more money or if men objectified women too much in bikini contests. It was pure, raw animal lust that reached inside her and flipped something low in her gut.

He gripped her hip again, jolting her out of the state she was in, dragging a whimper from her throat and her attention back to him.

“Who do you belong to? Whose mark do you bear?”

“You... y-yours,” she panted.

Then for the second time with him, she came. The men shouted and whistled and catcalled, adding to the surreal nature of the moment. Luke pulled out and finished by hand, leaving a trail of cum dripping down her stomach.

“Next!” He pulled his jeans back on and zipped up, then went to sit on a bale of hay, his dark eyes never leaving her.

Robert stalked her, purpose in his gaze. A tear slid down Veronica's cheek and she closed her eyes. A calloused thumb brushed it away.

“If you don't want me, I won't fuck you, darlin'. I'm not a rapist.”

Was Luke? Yes, no, maybe... but... it hadn't felt that way while he was inside her. She'd chosen to be there for the experience instead of disconnecting, and she felt more high from the rush than the drugs they'd given her.

Had there been a single moment in which she hadn't wanted Luke's hands on her? She'd been afraid he might kill her or hurt her, but afraid he might fuck her? She couldn't remember. She might have protested his ownership of her, but her body had known its master the moment he'd gotten close enough for her to get a whiff of his aftershave.

Veronica's attention snapped back to the naked, erect man in front of her, so strong and muscled and tan, with sun-bleached streaks of blond in his longish hair. Then she remembered he was waiting for some sign of consent.

"Really? Y-you wouldn't just t-take me?" She wasn't sure she believed the nice-guy act. Maybe he was setting her up for punishment.

Would Luke be angry if she refused his friend?

Robert shrugged. "Luke just pays me, and we're friends, but he doesn't own me. I want you though. I *really* want you." He stroked her side, then his fingers drifted down her hip and between her legs.

Neither her mouth nor her body protested when he slid one finger—and then two—inside her, pumping in a slow, easy rhythm. His mouth found the side of her throat and he kissed her softly there.

He whispered in her ear. "If you don't stop me, I'm going for it."

She didn't stop him. But she didn't come, either. Nor had she been as wet as she'd been with Luke.

When Will's turn came, he didn't ask, he just took like he had the right to her because Luke had granted it. She came bucking uncontrollably against him. The same pattern followed with Jake. Though Jake was gentle, making her come against his fingers before he ever penetrated her with anything else, he hadn't asked for permission.

Her eyes went to Luke to find a dark, satisfied smile on his face. Did he know Robert was the only one she hadn't come with? Did Robert know? Was he offended? Was she going to be punished for it?

A look passed between Robert and Luke that she couldn't decipher and didn't know if she wanted to. A manipulation had happened, and Luke had proved his point.

The guys ignored her now, drinking and talking amongst themselves as if she were no longer there as the fire died down.

Veronica's arms and legs were sore from being tied up so long. Luke took a warm, wet wash cloth and washed her, then he untied her. When he was finally finished, her arms went around his neck, too tired and weak to grip very hard, and he helped her back into the house, leaving the others behind.

Neither of them spoke as they went up the stairs. Veronica's head was too full. Even if Robert and Luke had orchestrated it as some sort of fucked-up object lesson, it still troubled her. The men who had taken without waiting for an invitation had made her come. The one who'd shown consideration and asked permission, hadn't.

Her lack of protest after the option had been granted with Robert, had been a tacit consent, but it had amounted to pity sex. The kind she'd had with every *is this where you want me to touch you?* man she'd been with in the city. She hadn't said no to any of the others, including Luke. Perhaps that was a kind of tacit consent as well, but if she'd said no, even if she'd cried and panicked, she couldn't be sure if any of them would have stopped.

No, that was wrong. When she'd had a breakdown in her bedroom the other night over the forced masturbation, he'd stopped and rocked her and comforted her. He'd thought she was Trish at the time, but still, she could reach him. His love for Trish reigned him in. His former lover was now Veronica's guardian angel.

When they arrived at the top of the stairs, she turned toward her room, needing to fall back into a blank sleep so her mind wouldn't be so busy and troubled.

"Veronica."

Her hand was on the doorknob when he said her name.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Come. You're sleeping with me tonight."

She shouldn't have felt a thrill at being invited into his room like it was dinner at the White House, but she couldn't help it. Her body was eager to please him and didn't care what her mind thought about any of it. Being invited into his bed to sleep meant he was pleased with her, and as much as part of her cringed and resisted, another part was his.

SEVEN

Luke showered while Veronica made breakfast. She was startled when Robert came in the back door. He didn't appear to have a hangover—a seasoned drinker.

She blushed and turned back to the frying pan. “I didn't make enough for you. It's your day off. I t-thought it would only be me and Luke today.”

Luke came downstairs then, wrapped in a towel. He arched a brow.

“I don't like the plan,” Robert said, aiming his words at the boss. “I don't want to be the good cop. I want her to come for me.”

Veronica's breath caught in her throat.

“Let her have breakfast first.”

Her hand shook as she put the food on plates and took them to the table. When she went to get the milk from the refrigerator, Robert eyed the glass jug, and a lascivious smirk lit his face. He hadn't forgotten the previous night's conversation. When she glanced over at Luke, his face betrayed nothing. She could still hope he'd forgotten the milking idea and that Robert wouldn't bring it up. It was too degrading to contemplate. Somehow worse than the branding, even.

“Eat, Ronnie,” Luke said.

It was hard to concentrate on her food with Robert leaning against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest, waiting for her to finish so he could have the thing he'd probably lost sleep over, the thing he'd probably jerked off in the shower over. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to be aroused over the idea. There was something so wrong with her. She ate more slowly to prolong her unmolested time.

When her plate was clean, Luke said: “Go to the playroom. Take your clothes off, and be in the position for punishment.”

Her eyes widened. “B-but I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Do what I asked. We’ll be up in a minute.”

Veronica bit her tongue to keep from arguing with him and took her dishes to the sink while the men discussed ranch stuff that was far outside her expertise. They were still engrossed in their discussion when she ascended the stairs to the playroom.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened and the men came in. Luke sat on the leather couch, his legs sprawled open in a casual sort of way. Every time he sat like that, she wanted to crawl over to him and perch between his legs, waiting for permission to give him pleasure. She tried to shake that image out of her head and the arousal it brought with it. Robert stood over her, the tension coiled tightly inside him.

“She’s all yours. Do whatever you like with her,” Luke said from across the room.

She tensed when the edge of a riding crop stroked gently across her bare bottom, followed by a sharp snap against her skin that drew a grunt from her.

“I’m not pleased with you,” Robert said.

She wanted to appeal to Luke. Surely he was the only one who had to be pleased with her. After all, it was his initial on her hip. But since he’d given permission, it seemed Robert’s displeasure was his by proxy.

“If you didn’t want to fuck me, you should have said no. Why allow it to happen and not give me your pleasure? You gave it to the others. You withheld with me. Why?”

She remained quiet, unsure if the question was rhetorical and even less sure she could manage a response that wouldn’t just piss him off more.

“Answer him, Ronnie. You need to say it out loud. We both want to hear it.” Luke leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees.

“I couldn’t come,” she said, her eyes shut.

Robert circled her, allowing the crop to trail along her exposed flesh as he went. She shuddered each time it moved to a sensitive spot: between her legs, over her ass, across the brand. “At least I got to be there when you were marked.”

Any hesitation the ranch hand might have felt over helping brand her had dissipated completely to leave behind the horny lech who’d go as far as Luke would allow.

“Tell me why you couldn’t come, darlin’.” His voice was low and soothing as if he were trying to calm a spooked mare. But that voice didn’t fool her, she knew the freak that lay behind it.

She was silent for several seconds until the crop came down hard against her ass.

“You better tell him,” Luke said. “He’ll switch to the cane if you don’t. Have you ever been caned, sweetheart?”

She shook her head against the carpet, holding back tears. “No, Sir.”

“I’m told it’s extremely painful. The kind of pain that takes your breath away and makes you want to die until it passes. It would be much easier if you answered the question.”

The crop came down again—harder than the first time—causing her to cry out and grip the edge of the rug. “P-please don’t.”

“Answer! Why couldn’t you come?” Robert asked again. His voice had gone scarier.

“You didn’t make me.”

“Is it the only way you can come? If we make you?”

She cringed at his tone, fearful he’d hit her again. “I-I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Roll onto your back.”

Veronica rolled over, her eyes still shut. On her knees with her forehead on the carpet, she’d been able to stay in a space inside herself, in the room but not totally there. On her back, with no way to shield her facial expressions or hide her tears, she felt more exposed before them.

She shivered as the crop gently caressed her face, her neck, down between her breasts, then between her legs.

“Open your eyes, slut.”

When she hesitated, the crop came down over her most private area. She shrieked and her eyes shot open.

“That’s better. Now come for me.”

It was the scene in the bedroom with Luke a few nights ago all over again. Except this time, both of them watched her. She wasn’t sure what it was about this that was harder than anything else she’d endured since she’d come to the ranch.

She turned to Luke, her lower lip trembling. “P-please, Sir...”

“Why are you appealing to me? He’s the one with the crop in his hand.”

“But your brand is on my hip. You’re the one who owns me. You can

stop him.”

Luke smirked. “You say it at the most convenient moments.” He stood and crossed to the black toy box then turned the dial on the combination and opened it.

“Stand,” Luke said, as he rummaged through the box.

She struggled to her feet and when he’d found the items he was looking for, he led her to the metal pole that looked like a stripper pole but sturdier and larger. He pressed her back against it and wrapped ropes around her torso, tying them securely around her so she couldn’t get away, but leaving her hands free.

Next he took a long, dark strip of cloth and blindfolded her. “I think you know what’s going to happen, Ronnie. You’re going to masturbate for us, or you’re going to be in a lot of pain. Do you want that?”

“N-no, Sir.”

“The choice between pleasure and pain shouldn’t be such a hard choice, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He pressed a ball gag into her mouth and secured the offending straps around her head. Being blindfolded had been almost a blessing, but being unable to plead with them was a special kind of hell. What if she was really hurt? What if she couldn’t beg for mercy? She believed Luke would come to her aid if things went too far... if she could communicate with him. She heard his footsteps move back across the floor and the sound of leather creaking as he sat, no doubt watching her with smug satisfaction.

“Finger yourself like a good slut,” Robert said, his voice hard and demanding. Gentle Robert was long gone.

Veronica whimpered around the gag, and the crop came down across her thighs causing her to jerk in her bonds. She was surrounded by and immersed in a melting pot of sensations. The soft cloth over her eyes, the wetness of her tears and between her legs, the burning warmth of her skin where the crop had fallen, the scratchy ropes, the cold, hard pole pressed against her back.

“I can switch to the cane if you need more motivation.”

“I think she needs a taste of it before she can know why she wants to avoid it,” Luke said.

Footsteps receded. The toy box opened then shut with an angry snap.

Veronica tensed. She tried to beg, but words wouldn’t form around the small rubber ball in her mouth. There was no way beyond her pathetic,

muffled mewls to elicit pity or mercy.

A sharp slice went through the air next to her ear. She would have hit the ground in a panic if not for the ropes holding her in place against the pole. A moment later when the cane sliced the air again, it connected with her upper thigh.

Her breath left her for a minute, taking her ability to scream with it, but the tears came harder, slipping past the barrier of the blindfold. She didn't have to be asked again. Her hand went between her thighs, rubbing herself as if her life might depend on it—she wasn't sure with the cane in the mix. She spread her legs and pressed harder against the pole as she worked her clit.

“Use your other hand, too. I want those fingers in your cunt. I want you to feel how wet you are. I want to hear it.”

Robert had moved closer as he spoke. She didn't hesitate at the new demand. She didn't care anymore how it looked or that they were watching her. She finger-fucked herself, moaning around the gag while she feverishly rubbed her clit with the fingers of her other hand. Her hips moved, bucking against her own ministrations.

“That's it,” Robert said. She could practically hear the smirk.

His mouth kissed and suckled at her breast while his large hand closed over the other, rubbing and squeezing. “We are going to milk you like the dirty little cow you are.” She whimpered as he sucked harder, as if he could somehow cause lactation with just dirty talk.

Veronica jerked when she felt something cold, greased, and metal slide into her ass.

“Relax, and open.” It was Luke's voice next to her ear. Robert continued to play with her breasts while Luke gripped her throat with one hand in a proprietary way as he worked the phallus inside her ass. “We're going to be using this hole, too, sweetheart.” When she tensed, he said, “I'm just preparing you. It won't be today.”

For the first time she was glad for the gag. With only whimpers and stifled moans, she didn't have to come up with useless protests.

Luke gripped her throat tighter, his mouth at her ear. “Come,” he snarled.

She orgasmed around her fingers while the two men continued to stimulate her ass and breasts. When she finished, Luke untied her and carried her to the couch. She heard zippers being unzipped and pants hit the floor. She was positioned so that she straddled one of them. She didn't even know whose cock she was on until Luke said, “Ride him until you come again.”

Robert helped her raise and lower herself, but finally, growing impatient, he flung her down on the floor and entered her from behind. She whimpered and panted around the gag as another orgasm built. Then Luke ripped the gag off her mouth and shoved his cock past her lips, his hand grabbing her hair, holding her in place as she sucked, half gagging on him.

The second time she came, the tears poured out of her like they would never stop. It was too much sensation to contain and too many confusing emotions. Robert and Luke finished inside her at almost the same moment, as if they'd done this before. They both pulled out, and Luke carried her to the couch, holding her against his chest, petting her hair and rocking her.

“Shhhh,” he said. He took the blindfold from her eyes and wiped the tears from her face. After she'd settled, he said, “Go lie down in your room for awhile. I'll come get you a little later. Robert and I have some business to discuss.”

Somehow she knew the business was her.

She flushed and looked away from the other man as she crossed the floor and went back to her room. When she'd shut the playroom door, she heard their muffled voices, but as much as she tried, she couldn't hear anything specific.

Finally, she gave up and crossed the hall back into her own room. She stood for a long time in front of the antique mirror, running her fingers over the welts on her thighs and bottom. Then she got under the covers and tried to relax.



“WAKE UP, PRINCESS.”

Veronica scrambled to sit. She couldn't believe she'd dozed off. She'd only meant to rest and recharge, trying not to think about her morning, or the internal struggle that had accompanied it.

Luke sat beside her, stroking her hair back from her face. “Let me look at your welts and check on your brand.”

She pulled back the covers, finally past the point of shyness over him seeing her naked. He'd behaved so much as if it were his natural right, that she was beginning to forget it wasn't. She'd almost started to believe that it was—that the permanent mark he'd burned into her hip had caused her to

forever forfeit all rights over her own body. It was as if, along with killing nerve endings, the brand had killed a few brain cells, the ones that might be in charge of charming notions like independence and gender equality.

He ran his fingertips over the welts. “Are they sore?”

“A little.” But not as much as the brand. He rolled her over to inspect that next.

He pulled a syringe from a bag, and she struggled to get away. He pressed her down, pushing against her back so she couldn’t squirm out of his hold.

“W-what is that?” A million horrible possibilities entered her mind. One of them seemed completely insane. Why would he get her hooked on drugs? But then why would he do anything else he’d done? Because he could. He was already living on the wrong side of the sanity tracks.

“Hormones. We talked about this.”

No, they hadn’t talked about it. He’d talked about it with his snickering band of ranch apes while she’d been hoping it was just the alcohol talking. Apparently not. Once Robert had brought up the idea and Will had given personal experience, it was a done deal. The men must have been discussing hormone shots in the playroom.

“I-I don’t like needles.”

“Then you won’t like this. Be still or I’ll tie you down for it.”

“P-please Sir, don’t...” Her voice closed off as if she were afraid to give more than a token protest. Pre-kidnapped Ronnie would be so disappointed.

He lifted her chin and captured her gaze in his. “Be a good girl, Ronnie. It’s our day off. I’ll take you for some ice cream if you’re good for me.”

The condescension in his words didn’t matter. The prospect of leaving the house was too novel and exciting. Veronica buried her face against the pillow, unable to look at the sharp needle as it came closer to her hip—thankfully the one that wasn’t sore already from the brand.

She dug her fingers into the pillow at the sharp burn and sting as he delivered the hormones, the pain warring with the humiliation of what he was preparing her body to do for him.

He stroked her flank when he was finished. “There, now that wasn’t too bad, was it?”

“N-no, Sir,” she said, afraid of what result any other answer might bring.

He rolled her onto her back then to play with her nipples. He had to know the hormones wouldn’t work that fast. It wasn’t a magic potion. It seemed more likely it would take weeks or even months, but maybe he was

establishing a ritual between them. He pulled on her nipples, rubbing them between his fingers, then he sucked on each one for several minutes while he massaged the sides of her breasts with his large, rough hands. Despite his ultimate purpose in all of this, her hips arched up, begging for attention below her waist.

Luke pulled away. “You’re going to give me milk like a good little animal, aren’t you?” She closed her eyes against his scrutiny. He stroked the side of her cheek. “I’m going to condition you to want to give me what I want. By the time your body is ready, the idea will arouse you so much, you’ll happily let me milk you every day.”

Maybe a part of her sick, twisted mind already wanted to. After all, she’d been wet the night before at the party when the topic had first been broached, and she was sure she was wet again now. As if reading her thoughts, his big hand moved between her legs, rubbing against her opening, a broad smile on his face.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

He returned with a vibrator and shoved it inside her. Then he went back to his goal of training her body to give him milk. As he suckled on her breasts and rubbed and stroked them, the buzz of the vibrator worked its magic and made her come again.



AFTER LUKE FINISHED WITH HER, he allowed Veronica to shower and get dressed again. After sex with the two men, she needed to clean up. She picked a sky-blue cotton dress that fell just below her knees and briefly hated herself for wondering if the choice would please him.

When she descended the stairs, Luke was wearing a pair of jeans, cowboy boots—which she’d learned they just called *boots*—a T-shirt, and a cowboy hat—which going with the pattern, he probably just called a hat.

“What about my shoes?” With shoes she could run. She tried not to let the hope show on her face. Although she found herself deeply aroused by the things Luke and the ranch hands did to her, she couldn’t stop trying to get away. She didn’t know what she’d do once she escaped. She couldn’t think that far. If she let herself think that far, she’d have to deal with the hopelessness of her life. The debt, the dwindling bank account, the fear. But

Luke could still do anything to her. She needed to remember that.

“You won’t need them, it’s a drive-up place. We’re staying in the truck.”
So much for that. She tried not to look too disappointed.

“Come here.”

When she came closer, he pulled her onto the couch with him and snapped a metal cuff around her ankle.

“What’s this?”

“Insurance,” he said.

She wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean, but she didn’t think she liked the glint in his eye. He released her then. She’d gotten only a few steps to the door when an electric zap shot up her body. She crumpled to the ground, shrieking so loudly she could barely believe the noise had come from her own mouth. She convulsed a few more times, then lay still, disoriented and terrified.

Yes, Luke could do anything.

He stood over her, a small remote in his hand. “If you try to signal for help in any way, I will push the button, and I won’t push it just once.” The shock cuff made even the idea of branding seem like child’s play.

She cringed when he helped her to her feet. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“So, you aren’t still planning your escape? It’s only been a few days. As much as you rant about how you don’t need a man, I figured you’d still be plotting and waiting for your opportunity.”

Veronica looked at the ground, giving him all the information he needed.

“If I thought I could trust you, I wouldn’t need it. I’m not going to prison for rescuing you.”

No, he’d go to prison for forced labor, false imprisonment, rape, and battery. The next to the last charge she wasn’t sure she believed. In spite of everything, she wanted his hands on her, his cock between her legs—or in her mouth. She didn’t want to be caned or whipped or electrocuted or given injections every day, but the rest...

They didn’t speak on the way to the truck. He opened the door and helped her into the passenger side, and this time she didn’t have a smart retort for him about her ability to open her own doors. She was just glad there was a part of him that could be nice to her. When she was strapped in, he slid his hand up her thigh and smiled when he didn’t find panties. She still couldn’t understand why she’d made that choice today.

“You’re learning,” he said. He pulled her dress back down and got in on

the other side.

During the drive to the ice cream place, she eyed the remote. It peeked out from his shirt pocket, appearing nondescript and innocent.

“When we get back home, are you going to take the cuff off?” She held her breath, waiting for his response, hoping he wouldn’t leave it there with the option to electrocute her anytime he wanted.

“Of course. I don’t like using it. It’s a bit cruel.” At least he knew that. At least he had a line in the sand somewhere that he’d prefer not to cross too often. “I just don’t want to go to prison. You understand that, don’t you, princess?” He brushed a stray hair behind her ear, then turned his focus back to the road.

“Yes, Sir.” She didn’t dare bring up the point that he wouldn’t have to fear prison if he hadn’t kidnapped her, and even then he wouldn’t have needed to fear it very much if he hadn’t ordered her around, prevented her from leaving, and... all the rest.

The trees passed by them in a blurred strip of green as they drove down back road after back road. She stared out the window. “You wouldn’t have to worry about me trying to escape if I wasn’t so afraid of you. I-I mean, I don’t hate the ranch completely.” She chanced a glance over to find a grin inching up his cheek, but his eyes were on the road. Smug, self-satisfied bastard.

It was hard to hate the ranch with the animals and the garden and open sky, and his nice house and good food. It was hard to hate sexual pleasure. It was hard to hate the little comforts he gifted her with even while he demanded so much from her.

A hand came to rest on her knee, pushing back the edges of the skirt to stroke her leg. “I told you the first week or so would be the hardest. You’ll settle in. You’ve already softened so much toward me. I don’t think you realize how much. You don’t complain about your chores anymore. When I come near you, you lean into my touch more times than you pull away. And your body is so soft and yielding.”

Her face heated at his words. She wanted to yell and fight, but the remote in his pocket made it safer to remain silent. *Pretend that’s why, Ronnie.* It was easier to tell herself that the stifling of her rebellion was because she was afraid he’d push the button, or because a man who would brand you like cattle even while you begged him not to might do anything.

His hand moved from her thigh, and then his fingers threaded through hers. He brought the back of her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her

skin.

“I take care of what’s mine, princess.”

Somehow the derisive pet name had turned into an actual term of endearment over the course of the past few days. She tried not to respond to his lips against her hand or the words as they rumbled over her, but the fight was pointless. If he’d stopped the truck and taken her in a field somewhere, she’d be up for it. She’d be wet and pliable and yielding. She’d surrender to him out in some wheat field like a rutting animal. Veronica pressed her thighs together, trying to soothe the ache between them.

If he was so sure she was his, he wouldn’t have put a shock cuff around her ankle. If he wasn’t sure, then maybe she wasn’t his yet. Maybe she was still hers.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled up to an old-fashioned drive-up restaurant that seemed to specialize in ice creams and milkshakes. A teenaged guy came up to the window as Luke rolled it down. “I just want a chocolate milkshake. And what do you want, sweetheart?”

“The same,” she said, not wanting to have to pick from the menu while her heart was fluttering in her chest so hard it made it difficult to think. Part of it was the sweet way he spoke to her in front of the teenager, like they were a couple on a normal Sunday afternoon jaunt. Part of it was over the introduction of a stranger who might help her if only he thought she needed it. And then part of it was the fear of Luke’s wrath coming down if she tried anything, angrily pressing that button until she went unconscious while he peeled rubber to get out of there.

He squeezed her knee while the guy went to get their shakes. “You could have had anything off the menu,” he said, still sounding like a boyfriend—doing funny things to her brain and heart.

“Nobody can screw up a chocolate shake,” she said, feeling awkward and weird like she was on a first date. Some insane part of her brain decided she was. But it wasn’t the kind of first date young girls giggled and daydreamed about.

The guy came back a few minutes later with their shakes, and Luke paid him then started the truck. She didn’t want to go back to the house yet. Even with the fresh air and people around her and plenty of chores to keep her busy, she missed being out.

“Are we going back home now?” Why had she called it home? If the look on his face could be trusted, Luke had caught the slip as well.

“Not just yet. I want to show you something first.” They drove for a long time in silence until he pulled onto a dirt road with a state park sign. They went down the road for a few more miles until they came upon a large lake.

For an insane minute she thought he was going to drown her. Maybe he worried the boy at the drive-in restaurant had been suspicious, and she’d proven too great a liability. She was about to beg and plead her case when he spoke.

“Don’t look so spooked. The weather’s about to get too cool for this. No one’s around. Let’s skinny dip while it’s still warm enough to enjoy it. He took a key from his pocket and bent to undo the cuff around her ankle, then he came around to the other side of the truck to let her out, peeling his clothes off along the way.

She tried not to drool over his physique, but every time she looked at him naked or half-naked, something low inside her responded in a primal sort of way she couldn’t deny. It was the kind of way that knew nothing of cell phones or television or takeout or society. That part of her wanted things to be simple in the way they weren’t in the city. The ranch was hard and at times scary, but it was simple. She’d yet to even see the computer he’d promised to show her. For all she knew it was just a laptop locked up in his safe. It seemed most likely at this point.

Veronica didn’t resist when he pulled her dress off and let it fall into the pile of clothing he’d created.

Her teeth chattered when they got into the water. Luke’s eyes went straight to her breasts as her nipples became hardened points.

“Give it a minute, you’ll get used to it,” he said, trailing his fingers over her breasts and moving in to kiss the side of her neck. It seemed to be Luke’s mantra about everything. If something was uncomfortable, she’d get used to it. This was the only way the female of the species ever could have survived... by getting used to everything.

He swam out a little way, and she followed him. When they were far from the shore, he said, “If you didn’t trust me, you would have gone for the shore and the keys in the truck, not followed me out here. Do you know how at my mercy you are right now?”

Her blood ran colder than the water, but she forced herself to hold onto her bravery. “I’ve been at your mercy since you took me.”

“Good answer. Now tell me you trust me.”

Veronica balked at the request. Of all the things he could have asked her

for—all the dirty and degrading things—it was this thing, this small verbal acknowledgment that she couldn't give him. It felt like losing everything—like selling her soul.

He raised an eyebrow and waited. “I haven't drowned you, yet. We're alone in the middle of nowhere. It would be easy. How long do you think it would take them to find you? From what you told me that first night, nobody would be looking. It could be years. Certainly long enough for that brand to decompose off your body. And then what link would there be to me?”

She started to swim at a feverish pace toward the shore, desperate to get away, to lock him out of his truck and just drive forever.

He easily caught up with her in a few short strokes. It was obvious he swam a lot when he could get away from the ranch. “Tell me.”

“Tell me you trust *me*,” she countered. He clearly didn't. Men and their double standards.

“That's different. You could send me to prison.”

“You could take my life. You just got finished laying it out point by point. The stakes are bigger for me.”

He nodded. “All right.” He moved them closer to the edge where he could stand, but she couldn't yet. Before she could get much of a breath to hold, he pushed her under.

In the first few seconds, she panicked, thinking he'd finally crossed the last line. Maybe the story he'd just painted sounded safer. Dimly in the back of her mind, she didn't think he'd drown her. She believed he was only screwing with her, trying to scare her and intimidate her into obeying his earlier request. But what if she was wrong? He'd already shown edges of crazy with the episode a few nights ago when he'd called her by the name of his former lover.

In a moment of self-protective madness, Veronica reached between his legs and started stroking his cock. Pleasuring him was the only currency she had to work with. A part of her recoiled at the act, especially under the circumstances as she struggled to hold her breath. His hand loosened on her shoulder and she came up, gasping for air. Then his lips were on hers, his tongue in her mouth.

He pulled away. “Don't stop touching me.”

The thought hadn't crossed her mind; she was too desperate to keep him happy so he wouldn't push her under again.

“Take a deep breath,” he said.

Veronica shook her head, her eyes widening. “Please, Luke, don’t push me under again.”

“What did you call me?”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” How could she be expected to remember titles when he was scaring her like this?

“Tell me you trust me and mean it.”

“I can’t.”

“Take a deep breath, then.”

She wanted to lie to him and give him the words he wanted, but he’d know she was lying. She took a breath and he pushed her under the water again. She stroked his cock with one hand, while she played with his balls with the other, still hoping she was reaching him and he saw the value of keeping her alive, while privately she fantasized about murdering him. This moment was perhaps the most degrading, while he held her life so precariously in his hands and she pleased him to appease him—to keep breathing.

A few moments later, he came and pulled her back up. She took in gulps of air.

“If I wanted you dead, it would be so simple. Tell me you trust me or we’ll do this until the sun sets.”

“You can’t force someone to trust you!” she shouted. Her survival instinct had fled in the wake of her anger. Let the fucker kill her. What difference did it make at this point? She was his slave. No better than one of his animals. He’d slaughter her the second her continued existence became inconvenient for him. Fuck him and every man on that ranch.

“Then just say the words. Tell me you trust me not to harm you.”

Why did he need to hear it so much? Had Trish trusted him? Was it part of the charade of her being his dead lover? If Veronica said it, they could leave, maybe. Despite her anger, despite being at the end of her rope, she didn’t want to go under again, and with him spent, she had nothing else to barter with.

“I trust you not to harm me, Sir.”

“And eventually, you’ll mean it.”

She thought he was going to push her under again, but he helped her out of the lake, instead. He took a blanket from the truck and wrapped her up in it until she was dry, then slipped her dress back on over her head and helped her into the truck. He locked the cuff back around her ankle and then put his

own clothes back on.

She was crying, trying to wipe the tears away before he could see them when he got back in the truck.

“I didn’t hurt you out there.” There was the slightest note of regret and guilt in his voice. If he thought he could rationalize now and make her believe it, too... he really had lost his mind past the point of return. The thought made her even more afraid.

“You scared the shit out of me,” she said, her tone bitter. “I get it. You’re all powerful. You can stop lording it over me. You know I’ll do whatever you want to stay alive.”

He started the truck and eased it down the dirt road. “I want everything, Ronnie. Not just your body. I want your soul, your every thought and desire. I want it all. By the time I’m finished, you’ll give it to me.”

“Or you’ll drown me?”

He pulled the remote out and raised an eyebrow. “I don’t want to use this on you.”

She shut her mouth and looked down at her hands. If he didn’t want to use it, it was a simple matter of just not using it, but she didn’t dare give that thought voice.

They drove in silence for a while and he finally said, “You’re so like her. Just *be* her, please. Be Trish.” His voice cracked.

This time the glimpse of vulnerability didn’t make him seem as crazy and unhinged, just sad. So terribly sad. And broken. She wondered if he fully comprehended how wrong his actions were, or if he was just so desperate to bring back a ghost that he couldn’t see anything else but Trish. Veronica was a casualty in his quest to work magic to transform her into another woman, and he didn’t seem capable of understanding what he was doing.

Sympathy and hate warred within her. She wanted to escape him, but at the same time, it hurt her that when he looked at her, he saw another woman sitting there. What would it be like for him to look at her and see *her*? To want *her* instead of a passing specter? Instead of the phantom that sat in the sixth chair at the table for their morning and afternoon meals.

“Would you have taken me if I didn’t look like her?”

“No,” he said. There was a conviction in his voice that she couldn’t deny. At the very least, he believed it.

The admission only made her more confused. In a sense he *had* rescued her. In her thoughts of escape and freedom, she’d tried not to think about

what she'd be going back to. If he hadn't taken her where would she be by now? In a soup kitchen line? Sleeping under a bridge if she didn't make it to the shelter in time, or if they were too full? What about when winter came? The only thing that had put her in a warm bed with food in her belly was her resemblance to Luke's former lover. He couldn't have victimized her otherwise, but he wouldn't have saved her.

They stopped at a four-way stop sign and he turned to her, his eyes so dark and intense she wanted to find a way to hide under the seat or just disappear for a few minutes.

"I'm not kidding, Veronica. You will *be* her. Or else. You'll make me forget you aren't her. I'm not going back to before I found you. You will love me and obey me and submit to me, and you'll do it with that look of adoration Trish used to give me or I'll never stop making you regret wearing her face." His voice had risen as he became more intense. "Am I getting through, here?"

"Y-yes, Sir. I'll be her. I swear. I'll do whatever you want." *Just don't be crazy. Please don't be crazy. I need something safe to hold onto.*

A Sheriff's deputy pulled up at one of the other stop signs and for a moment both Luke and Veronica froze. The wheels spun in her head. If she could get the cop's attention as they passed ...

"Do it and you might not survive to tell your story. How much of this do you think you can take?" She looked over to see the remote in his hand. The look in his eyes said that whatever brief moments of guilt or regret he felt, he'd do whatever he had to do. "Eyes on me."

Hesitantly, she looked at him. Then Luke stepped on the gas and lurched past the police officer. When they'd passed, she turned in her seat to see the cop go in the opposite direction down the road they'd been on—toward the lake. She wondered if the lake was his destination. Maybe he'd just gotten off work for the day and wanted to fish or swim. What if their timing had been just a little different? What if he'd discovered them in the water?

"Do you think he's going to the lake?" she finally asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"What if he'd caught you while I was underwater? Would you have killed me even though it wasn't my fault?"

His only answer was silence. Finally he said, "Going out was a bad idea."

EIGHT

They didn't speak about the trip again. But when he took her to the playroom that night, the only thing in her head was his demand that she be Trish. She wondered if the afternoon had sobered Luke up, if it had brought home how dangerous the game he was playing with his freedom really was—how easily it could all go wrong. How easily he could be caught. For now, his community thought he was a law-abiding citizen, but how close would he come to unraveling that fiction?

She was finished fighting him. If being his former lover was the only way to stay safe, that's what she'd do. She'd hide in plain sight.

As soon as they arrived home, he disappeared out to the barns, doing God only knew what. Without a list of chores, she went to the living room and pulled out the box of videos. She watched them until he came back inside hours later. When the door clanged in the kitchen, she hurriedly took out the tape and put the box back where it was, darting to the couch to look through a five-year-old magazine on the coffee table.

With the videos, she'd been studying her role. Could she look at Luke with that same look of desperate longing? Could she convincingly fake it? If she'd been the one he'd met first, could it have been real? If things had happened very differently, of course. There was a lot to find appealing in Luke Granger. He was good-looking, hard-working, had his own business, smart, stable—with those isolated psychological exceptions—sexy, kinky. Yes, if she'd been first, she would have looked at him with that helpless devotion. And she would have meant it.

What she had instead was a twisted shadow, and Veronica found herself

jealous of a dead woman.

“What are you thinking about?” Luke asked.

“N-nothing, Sir.”

She didn't resist when he pulled the dress over her head for the second time that day and took her upstairs to the playroom. When he'd shut the door behind him, he cupped her breasts and stared at them with a mixture of lewdness and anticipation.

“Within a few months, these will have milk.” He rubbed his thumb over one of her nipples, causing it to pucker and harden. He bent to drag his tongue over one of the hardened points then suckled at her breast, massaging and kneading like he had when he'd injected her earlier with the hormones. “Tell me you're my cow.”

Veronica looked away. It was too demeaning.

“Trish...”

“Please don't call me that.” It was hard enough pretending. To hear the other woman's name was too hard.

“Trish would have said it. She would have done anything no matter how dirty or degrading just to please me.” He wiped the tear off her cheek. “Say it,” he whispered.

“I'm your cow, Sir.”

“That's right.” His hand drifted between her leg and she rubbed her clit against him. He moved closer, his mouth at her ear. “When your body starts doing what it's supposed to do, we'll milk you every day. You'll start to get aroused every time your breasts get heavy with milk. You'll beg me to do it to you like a good little milk maid. And it'll hurt if I don't. I might tie you up and let the pressure just build until you beg to be treated like an animal.”

Despite intentionally being called by another woman's name, despite the humiliation of what he'd made her say and what he said to her, his words and touch were getting to her. No matter how wrong, Luke was the only man who could make her feel like she was on fire and cooling off in a stream at the same time.

He backed her against the couch and ordered her to sit and spread her legs. She did as he requested while he moved back over to the video camera to turn it on. Since the early tapes of Trish, he'd upgraded to digital. Her mind raced at all the pornographic websites on the Internet. The sharing possibilities of her sexual disgrace were limitless.

“Rub your cunt for the camera,” he said, as he lined up the shot. His

words could be as calloused as his hands, but the way he looked at her along with the low growl of his voice made her want him anyway.

She didn't hesitate this time to touch herself, even though he was making a video record of the event. There were already all the videos downstairs. Would someone who watched this one know she was a different woman, or would they just assume they were watching the same girl they'd seen before? If there was already someone who looked so much like her on camera, did this make any difference? She allowed herself to pretend she was the other woman. This could be just another video—one of many and something she got off on.

"I'm going to show this to the guys," he said, and she knew he wasn't bluffing. "Look into the lens and tell them how much you want to give them milk. Will especially is looking forward to it."

Veronica felt the blush travel over her. Not just her neck and face, but her whole body, flushed from humiliation and excitement.

"Say it. I can tell how aroused you are. When they watch this, they'll know, too. They'll know what a filthy whore you are."

She looked at the camera, allowing herself to fall back into the fantasy of being someone else, hiding inside Trish where it was safe. "I want to be your cow. I want you to feed on me."

"Every day," he prompted.

"Yes, every day." She whimpered as she got closer to orgasm.

"Rub those pretty tits for us. You need to prepare them so they'll be ready when it's time. Use both hands, sweetheart."

She didn't want to take her fingers away from her clit when she was so close, but she did what he asked, rubbing and kneading her breasts, pulling at her nipples and squeezing as if she were trying to milk herself. She jumped when a buzzing vibrator was pushed deep inside her, then Luke stepped out of the way so the camera wouldn't miss anything the guys might want to see.

His chuckle was condescending as she worked herself over, drawing a deeper blush from her. "Frieda might want some milk, too. Will you let her drink from you?"

The question caught Veronica off guard, but she was so aroused, that the idea of Will's wife milking her as well sent another surge of lust through her. She wasn't sure if Luke was bluffing or if it might be possible that Will's wife could know about any of this, that she might actually take milk from her breast. But she gave Luke the answer she knew would please him. The one

Trish would have given.

“Yes, Sir.”

The buzzing stopped and Luke replaced the vibrator with his mouth, lapping at her until she came undone against his tongue.

Later that night, he put her in a chastity belt so she wouldn't touch herself without him. She went to her room, expecting to be invited into his, but waiting for the invitation. *Remembering her place*, as Luke had called it. The words made her cringe at the same time they excited her. They made her angry while they made her want to surrender.

“Goodnight, Princess,” he said, going to his own room.

“D-did I do something wrong?” She hated the neediness in her voice. Why should she care if he wanted her to sleep in his room? She could be happy to be left alone, to have her privacy and space.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... c-can't I sleep with you?”

“Not tonight. I need to update the website, and I want you to go to sleep now. Maybe tomorrow.”

Veronica lay in bed for what felt like hours while sleep eluded her. She wanted him to want her in his bed overnight no matter how wrong that desire was.



MORNING CAME TOO SOON. Veronica was barely awake when Luke rolled her onto her stomach and the needle slid into her hip.

“Ow!”

His large, rough hand stroked her back. “Shhh, you're okay.”

She was still half-asleep when he unlocked and removed the chastity belt. He rolled her back over, immediately going to work on her breasts.

“Finger yourself until you come, slut,” he growled in her ear.

That voice. It awakened everything inside her whether she wanted it to or not.

When she'd started touching herself, his mouth latched around one nipple. In the beginning the idea of being milked had sounded disgusting, perverse, even. And definitely demeaning. But the more orgasms she had while he told her how he was going to make her give him milk, and the more

attention he paid to her breasts, the more she wanted to give him what he craved.

When she came, he bit down on her nipple. The pain shot a bolt of need straight between her legs, making her come that much harder. He stopped suckling and helped her out of the bed to get ready. He was true to his word about centering all her pleasure around when he was fondling her breasts. She couldn't separate orgasms from that part of her anatomy any more.

Before Luke, she hadn't really liked to have her breasts touched. She didn't get why so many women became aroused by it or why it felt good to them. Her breasts had just been there—pretty to look at, but that was all. Now it seemed they would become almost essential to her pleasure.

As she stood in front of the closet, Veronica said, "Did you milk her?" She was afraid to say Trish's name for fear of how he might react. But they both knew who she was talking about.

"No," he said.

Suddenly the idea was more appealing. It was something different, something that made *her* different. No matter how much he might pretend, he hadn't shared this with Trish. Somewhere deep inside, Veronica hoped it would give her a chance to be seen. For her. The thought troubled her and she pushed it quickly away. If she wanted him to see her and be pleased with her, did that mean she didn't want to escape him anymore? And if she didn't want to escape him anymore, did that make her broken?

Luke left her to go to work while she showered and dressed. Downstairs, she found the list of chores on the kitchen table. This morning's breakfast was big. Ham and eggs and biscuits and gravy. Veronica's stomach flipped as she cooked, worried about how the men would act around her after the party on Saturday.

When breakfast was on the table, she rang the bell and sat down to eat. She was halfway finished by the time they reached the table. The way they leered at her made her wish she hadn't eaten so fast. Soon she'd be out of things to occupy her attention, and she'd be staring at her empty plate.

"Honey, come pour me some milk," Will said.

Veronica looked up, startled to find the men giving her knowing looks. Her eyes shot to Luke, questioning.

He nodded at her. "Do it."

She got up from her chair and took the bottle of milk and poured it into Will's glass. When she bent, she knew the low-cut dress Luke had picked for

her showed too much of her cleavage. It laced up in the front, and even though she'd pulled the laces tight before tying them, her breasts nearly spilled out.

When she set the pitcher on the table, Will pulled her onto his lap and untied the laces, causing her dress to gape open and expose her breasts. Her breath deepened as he stared at her erect nipples.

“Soon when I ask for milk, you'll offer me your breast like a good girl, won't you?”

She moaned as he took her nipple into his mouth and sucked, then his hand slid underneath her dress and he stroked between her legs. Veronica squirmed in his lap, aware the others were watching. Jake seemed disinterested—not yet on board with the milking concept.

But Robert just watched her, his gaze intense. “We're glad you're so excited about being our cow,” he said. “We all saw the video you made last night.”

Will released her breast and she buried her head against his neck. How could they have seen it so fast? They'd been working since early this morning.

“I emailed it last night,” Luke said.

When Will finished fondling her, he pushed her off his lap. She kept her eyes down as she started to lace her dress back up.

“No,” Luke said. “We want to look at them. You can pretend modesty when we go back to work.”

She blushed but left her dress hanging open. Robert grabbed her wrist before she could make it back to her seat. “What about me?”

He unbuckled and unzipped his pants to reveal an impressive erection. “I want to feel your wet little cunt gripping my cock. You got me all worked up squirming in Will's arms that way.”

Veronica, looked over at Luke, knowing even before she did it what his response would be. He just raised a brow at her and went back to his breakfast. Well, he wasn't going to forbid it. He hadn't strictly ordered it, either.

Robert backed his chair out and pulled up her dress. “Straddle me. Now.” He was almost as frightening as Luke when he got that look in his eyes. But she was glad for it. She hadn't come before Will had been finished with her. Her need was so strong now, she felt as if she was in heat. A thick, demanding cock was more relief than threat.

She whimpered as she sank down on him. He played with her breasts while she rode him. Fucking Luke's ranch hand at the breakfast table while the rest of them continued on with their meals was almost too surreal to accept. But she didn't have much time to think about it before another orgasm ripped through her.

As the last wave of her pleasure crested over her, Robert sucked and bit at her nipples, causing her to shudder violently in his arms.

While he amused himself with her, Will spoke. "I came up with a idea on how to make a milking machine for her. Robert said he can help put it together."

Robert let go of her nipple. "As long as I can still milk her by hand."

"Luke, what do you think?" Will asked.

Veronica wanted to hide her face in Robert's shoulder, but that impulse warred with the need to see Luke's reaction.

"I don't see a problem with that," he said as if it were the most normal thing in the world to talk about.

NINE

The milking machine was finished within three weeks. Once Luke had gotten the idea in his head about milking and drinking from her, he'd been a man possessed. He'd been religious about the hormones and massaging and suckling her breasts, never allowing her to achieve orgasm unless his mouth was latched firmly around one nipple. The guys had created a Frankenstein machine. Part milking and part fucking. It was a frightening-looking contraption that incorporated a bench for her to lie on her stomach. There were places for her breasts to be squeezed for milk, and two penetrating toys that would vibrate and drive into her repeatedly until she nearly went mad from the overwhelming sensations.

The feeling of being squeezed by the machine for milk was painful but also arousing. Without milk, it was going through the motions, but Luke was diligent, convinced that if he was patient, he'd get what he wanted out of her body.

Each night after dinner, Luke put her on the machine for an hour while he dealt with other things like making her list of chores for the following day and any bookkeeping or computer work he needed to do.

Before starting the machine each night, he lubed the parts meant to penetrate her. Then he turned it on a steady speed and left her alone. A strap around her waist secured her to the bench, making escape impossible. The only thing she could do was give in. Two months into this routine, the milk came.

Luke had brought his laptop into the playroom to work from the couch, a coffee pot plugged into the wall and a cup of black coffee in his hand. It had

been his pattern for several weeks as if he didn't want to leave her and miss it when it happened.

It started as a tingling and pressure, like pins and needles in her breasts. Between the machine and the vibrators working inside her, it was hard to isolate any one feeling from the whole.

Veronica writhed against the vibrating toys while she watched in fascination as the machine milked her, and the creamy liquid dripped into a glass bottle like the one in the fridge with the cow's milk. Luke unfolded himself from the couch and approached the machine like a big cat stalking prey. He turned it off and smirked at the bottle.

He watched her, sipping his coffee for a while, then he took the bottle off the machine and poured a bit into his cup. She watched helplessly as he raised it to his lips and took a gulp of the coffee with her milk in it. It was humiliating and arousing all at once.

"I normally like it black, but that's good coffee," he said, glee plainly written on his face at his success. "Let's find out if you taste as good from the tap."

She didn't fight him when he helped her off the bench and to the couch. As the time had passed between them, she'd given up the desire for escape. She'd become too addicted to the way Luke and his men touched her and too comfortable with a warm bed, food, and shelter. The weather had turned cold, and these were important things. It was too late for her to have another life, and despite what she was supposed to want, this one satisfied her.

Except on rare occasions when she especially pleased him and he invited her into his bed for the night, she slept in her own room. It had begun to bother her less. He didn't call her Trish now, but sometimes when he called her sweetheart or dear, she wondered which woman he saw. As the time had crept by, it had gotten harder to obsess over the point. The only thing that mattered was the way he made her feel.

He'd been mostly kind—only punishing her when she disobeyed him. The terrifying day at the lake became a dim memory and seemed as if it might have been a dream. He never brought it up again.

Luke's mouth descended on her breast and he suckled. He moaned as the milk began to flow down his throat. If she'd worried he might find the actual taste gross, the worry had been in vain. He drank from each breast until he'd drained her, which didn't take long.

"You'll produce more as time goes on." He kissed the tips of her breasts

and cradled her in his arms, then he went back and finished his work. That night, she slept in his room.



THE NEXT MORNING there was no injection. The break in the routine was startling, but not unexpected. Now that she was lactating, it wasn't necessary.

At breakfast, Will said, "I hear you're producing milk like a good cow."

Veronica looked down at her plate, her heart racing, the throb and ache starting between her thighs. Involuntarily, at her arousal, she felt the tingling in her breasts and then the milk as it seeped out and wet her dress.

"Go to him," Luke prompted.

She forced herself to get up from the table and went around to Will. He pulled her onto his lap as soon as she was in easy reach. Since the weather had turned colder, plastic had been put around the porch, and space heaters kept the area somewhat warm. She took her sweater off, and he pushed the thin spaghetti straps of the dress off her shoulders, eliciting a shiver.

A second drop of milk bubbled at the end of one breast and then the other, her body already knowing what was coming and anticipating the release from the bit of milk that had built up in the night.

"Milk them," he said. "The best cow is a cow that can milk herself."

Her face burned at his words, but her hands moved to her breasts to obey his demand. She massaged them and tugged and pulled on the nipples until milk began to come out and dribble down. The ranch hand moved in and licked up the liquid and then latched on to one breast to suck.

"Save some for Robert," Luke said. "She's not producing much yet."

Will forced himself to stop after a few seconds. He looked wistfully at her breasts. "I can't wait until her tits are heavy with the stuff. She'll beg us to drink from her to relieve the pressure. Freida was such a needy little whore when she was producing."

Veronica hadn't been nervous about Will not liking it; he'd drunk from his wife. But Robert only found the idea hot. To her knowledge, he hadn't actually done it. But when he tasted her, he was as pleased with the result as Luke and Will had been.

"She's so fucking sweet," Robert said.

Feeding the men like this made her feel a touch less human—more a

thing or animal and less a person. It should have distressed her more, but it was too easy to get lost in the pleasurable sensations, in someone else's satisfaction and happiness.

Jake watched the proceedings with a disgusted look on his face, as if the whole affair were spoiling his breakfast. It filled Veronica with shame, and she wished he'd just leave, but when Robert stroked between her thighs, she was so worked up and well-conditioned that she couldn't stop herself from coming against his fingers. Finally, he released her nipple and held her against his chest, stroking her hair. She was grateful for the comfort.

"Come on," Robert said to Jake.

"No, that's nasty. I don't know what's wrong with you guys. The other kinks are one thing, but... this crosses a line."

The ranch hand's judgment cut into Veronica, making her feel dirty. If everyone behaved as if it were okay, it could be okay here. Her world had narrowed to the ranch and nothing else. Her ranch, her sky, her ranch hands. But with the one hold-out, she was reminded how wrong everything that was happening was. It brought back who she'd been in the city. In the city she might have masturbated to an idea this depraved, but she wouldn't have actually done it. Would she? She wanted all of them to drink from her, to make what they were doing feel okay. If even one of them wouldn't conform inside the fantasy bubble, it would only bring reality crashing back in all its stark coldness.

"Just taste her, once," Will persisted. "If you hate it, we won't bother you again."

"Oh, fuck. Fine, bring her over here."

Veronica tensed in his arms as he closed his mouth over her breast and sucked. She expected him to immediately push her away in revulsion after a drop or two had hit his tongue, but he swallowed the milk and kept drinking. His hands tightened around her arms as he gripped her and fed on her.

When he'd had his fill, his mouth moved up to her throat to kiss and suck, and then to her mouth, where he kissed her with a passion he'd never shown with her. Before she could catch her breath, he picked her up and shoved his chair back. He pushed back the plastic flap and carried her to the grass and dropped her there.

For a moment she thought he was disgusted with himself and what he'd just enjoyed. Maybe he wanted to let her freeze. Surely Luke wouldn't let him keep her out there. She wasn't sure what was about to happen until she

heard his belt and then the zipper of his pants.

No one stopped him as he shoved her dress up over her hips and entered her from behind. She gasped as he filled her, driving into her in a frenzied state that had her tearing at the frozen grass under her hands for something to hold onto. The stiffness of his erection left no doubt to how much he'd enjoyed feeding on her, and that he'd do it again soon.

When he finished with her, he got up and went back to the table. Veronica pulled her dress down and rolled over, looking up at the sky. The ground underneath her back was cool and the air was chilly. The sky hadn't quite turned that endless gray yet. Despite the cold, it still had a sharp jolt of bright blue. There were no clouds.

"Veronica, come back inside. You'll catch your death out there with no shoes on," Luke said. The plastic around the porch muffled his voice, making him seem too far away to reach her.

She stayed where she was, pretending she hadn't heard him, looking up at vast expanse of sky. Of course he wasn't going to give her shoes—even now. Since it had turned cold, she'd been cooped up inside, the leftover outside chores she would have had falling to Will.

Luke still didn't trust her. He was never going to trust her not to run. She jumped when footsteps pounded toward her, then Luke bent and scooped her up to carry her back onto the porch where it was warmer. He put her back in her chair and went to his seat.

"Didn't you hear me yell at you to come inside? You'll freeze out there."

Veronica shrugged, still feeling surly about the shoes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I want shoes. I've been here for months. Don't you trust me not to run away?"

Luke went back to his breakfast, ignoring the demand and the question. "I've decided to make a change around here. From now on, you'll address the guys with respect. No first names. I only want to hear 'Yes, Sir' and 'No, Sir' out of you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," she mumbled. It was ridiculous and the wrong thing to focus on, but she felt as if she were being cast off. If everybody got the same title, was he saying she wasn't really just his anymore? The brand had finally healed to the point where it wasn't sore anymore. She wondered if even his brand meant anything between them, if everyone was to be called *Sir* at the ranch.

“Yes, Master,” he corrected.

Veronica looked up suddenly, her eyes going wide. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You heard me. Say it.”

She looked around the table at the ranch hands. They watched her, waiting to hear her say the degrading phrase. In all of the videos, Trish had called Luke, *Sir*. To Veronica’s knowledge none of the other ranch hands had gotten titles. Veronica had been his slave for months, what was verbal acknowledgment in the face of everything else? Still, an old part of her—from when she’d lived in the city—rebelled against the idea. Accepting she was his slave was a different thing from being his slave. Somehow the former was worse than the latter.

Calling him *Sir* had been difficult at first, but it was no different than a waitress or somebody working customer service. It hadn’t been too demeaning to force herself to say, even though it had been hard to get used to.

Luke stood and unbuckled his belt. The leather zipped through the loops so loudly it pulled Veronica out of her hesitation.

They were only words.

“Y-yes, M-master.” She’d rather say the demeaning thing than have him throw her down on the ground and beat her in front of the ranch hands.

Luke nodded and sat back down. He folded the belt and put it on the table, as if he wanted to have it ready should he need to call it into action.



SEVERAL DAYS PASSED, and Veronica was finally overcome by curiosity to taste her own milk. Luke caught her and whipped her for it, then lectured her for a good half hour about the evils of drinking or even tasting what belonged to him and his men. Despite the humiliation, she’d become aroused by his irrational demands.

As the weeks passed and her milk began to flow better, Luke changed her wardrobe. One Sunday, when the guys were off, he put her in jeans and a cupless corset to better support her heavy breasts. He circled her in the playroom, sizing her up.

“Since you’re our cow, I can’t have you covering those lovely tits up. We want to see them all the time. And we want easy access to your milk.”

In some way, it was a relief. Without fabric to cover them, they wouldn't chafe. It had begun to be uncomfortable with milk-dampened fabric covering her breasts. Luke had begun to rub some of her milk into her nipples after each feeding—it helped some, but as long as she stayed inside where it was warm, freeing her breasts to the air would help more.

Veronica sucked in a breath as he cupped her breasts in his hands, no doubt feeling the heavy weight, knowing how engorged they were. She was desperate to have him drink from her. Titles were nothing now. She'd do or say anything to get him to release the pressure. Now that her body had finally responded to his training and the hormones, Luke wouldn't allow her to squeeze any of the milk out herself. It had to be one of the guys or he'd punish her. After she'd tried to taste her milk, he'd installed cameras around the house so he'd catch her if she disobeyed.

Even after the cameras, she'd disobeyed once. She'd been too desperate to ease the ache. Her body had gotten used to a feeding schedule, and the men had worked later that evening than usual. Luke had easily convinced her that heavy pressure in her breasts was preferable to the searing pain of the cane.

"Please, Master..." Veronica rubbed her breasts against him.

"So eager to give milk," he said, swiping his tongue over one nipple, causing a drop of milk to drip from the other as if it were jealous. "I like that. Between the brand and this, you're hardly recognizable from when I first took you."

She moaned and arched toward him, too distracted from the physical discomfort to contemplate his words. "Please, please please. It hurts, please." Tears slid down her face.

"Not just yet." He wiped her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. "You've been such a good girl the past few weeks. So compliant and docile. I'm so pleased with you. Do you know how happy you make me, princess?"

He'd let her sleep in his room every night since she'd started giving milk. What he was doing should have upset her more, but it made her feel intimately connected to him, more dependent on him, more addicted to the myriad forms of release he could now offer her.

Release from the busy, loud city and the cramped feeling the place had always engendered. Release from her debt. Release from her fear of starving to death. And the physical releases he offered her when he fucked and fed from her.

She jumped when the door opened and Will walked in, followed by an

attractive, slim redhead in her early forties. The woman was dressed smartly in a black suit. She crossed the floor and sat on the couch, crossing her long, elegant legs.

“Good, you’re here,” Luke said. “Ronnie, this is Frieda.”

Veronica’s mouth dropped open. Will’s wife. Here. She looked away from the woman, afraid she might see the guilt. Not that it had been Veronica’s fault. Still, the wife of Luke’s ranch hand might not see it that way.

Veronica tried to cover her exposed breasts, but Luke pulled her arms down to her sides and shook his head.

“Can I get you some coffee?” he asked the other woman.

“Coffee would be nice, thank you.”

Luke crossed the playroom to pour her a cup. “Do you take it black?”

Freida gave Veronica a long, measured look, her eyes flicking to her breasts in a way that made Veronica blush. “You know I take milk.”

He smirked. Luke came back to Veronica and squeezed her nipple over the cup of coffee. She couldn’t help the sigh of relief that came with the slight ease of pressure. He passed the cup to the woman, and without turning around, he said, “Veronica, take off your pants.”

Veronica froze for a second, still trying to catch her brain up to the fact that Will’s wife was here and didn’t seem freaked out by any of this.

“Ronnie, do you want to be punished in front of company?”

“N-no, Master.” She looked at the rug, her face flaming at having to call him that in front of a stranger, but she was too afraid to leave the title off. She eased the jeans down over her hips and stepped out of them.

She was caught by surprise when Will came up behind her, his hands moving around to her breasts, massaging them but not doing enough to make the milk flow. Even though his hand hadn’t strayed between her legs, the arousal was high enough that a little liquid dribbled out of her breasts.

Veronica gasped when Will pushed her to her hands and knees and took her panties down. Freida’s expression remained stoic as she drank her coffee and studied Veronica.

She still couldn’t believe Will’s wife wasn’t angry. For months when Will had taken her or drunk from her, she’d thought of his wife and what she would feel if she knew what he was doing with another, probably younger woman. From the looks of things, Freida had known the whole time.

Luke and Freida talked on the couch while Will fucked her.

“How long are you going to make her give milk?” Freida asked.

“As long as I can. A few years for sure, but probably until her body won’t let her do it anymore.”

Veronica felt a surge of lust at his words. It hadn’t occurred to her that he might use her for milk for so long. The idea should have disturbed or repulsed her. Instead, it, combined with Will inside her, had her climbing frantically to orgasm.

Luke may have felt that the branding would make her truly feel she was his and accept it, but the branding had only been the first step. It was being fed from that had pushed her over the edge where the only thing that mattered anymore was having the relief that only Luke or one of his ranch hand’s mouths could give her.

“The poor dear,” Freida said. “But then, she won’t be as uncomfortable here. I had to work outside the home during all that. It was finally too much to deal with. I imagine her life is different.”

“Quite,” Luke said.

Veronica came, panting and moaning, unable to be quiet even with the man’s wife sitting right there. When Will pulled out of her, she dropped to her stomach on the rug and just lay there, breathing, as Luke and Freida’s conversation faded into a low hum of white noise.

Several moments later, shiny black boots were next to her face. Sometimes Luke wore them with black pants in the playroom. They were the same boots from the videos. He never wore them out of the house. Out of the house it was always his standard cowboy boots and jeans.

“Are you spent, sweetheart? Because if this is all too much for you, we can just let you go take a nap,” he said.

“No, Master, please.”

He knew what she needed, he was only tormenting her. If she went to sleep now, it might be another full day before someone sucked the milk out of her. She wasn’t sure she could sleep through the pain. She had to have relief now. She’d do anything if it would end in being milked. She didn’t even need a mouth. If he’d just put her on the machine she’d be happy. She didn’t care if Freida watched. Let her watch. The other woman had been Will’s cow. This wasn’t new territory in her world.

“I don’t know, I think maybe you should go on to bed,” Luke said, his tone amused.

She scooted her body closer to him and kissed his boots. “Please,

Master,” she whimpered. “I need to be milked. Please. You know I can’t sleep like this.”

“Lick, and I’ll think about it.”

He was showboating for the other woman on the couch, which made Veronica wonder if Luke had been with her. Well, weren’t they all a bunch of deviant swingers? But she didn’t care; the only thing that mattered was getting what she needed. She ran her tongue over the boot and up the side.

Luke chuckled. “When I met you that day at the diner and you were so rude to me for simply holding a door open for you, who would have thought you’d be a little bootlicking slut by the time I was finished with you?”

The question was rhetorical, of course. But instead of creating rage, it made her more aroused. How could she be so hot from being treated this way?

“Master, please. Just put me on the machine... anything.”

“I bet you’d like for Freida and Will to watch you get fucked and milked on that machine, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, Master.” She wasn’t sure anymore if she was lying, or if she’d merely been given permission to start telling the truth.

“No, I think you’ve been a good enough slut to get the real thing. Crawl over to Freida and ask her to drink from you.”

Veronica’s face flamed, but she did what she was told and crawled over to the woman still perched elegantly on the couch with her cup of coffee cooling.

“And, Veronica?”

She turned. “Yes, Master?”

“You will address her as Ma’am.”

“Can I give you some milk, Ma’am?” Veronica asked, knowing the desperation must be coming out in her voice.

Freida laughed. “She’s a slutty little milk cow, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Luke agreed.

Veronica caught Luke’s eyes, and for a moment she thought perhaps he saw her for her. Was she still Trish when he looked at her, or had this new direction in their relationship taken them somewhere where he could see her and want *her* even if it was all wrong and fucked up?

“Come here, dear, let me ease some of that awful pressure,” the woman said.

Freida’s mouth descended on Veronica’s breast, and she let out a

whimper of pleasure as the woman began to suckle. A moment later, her husband had joined her, his mouth closing around Veronica's other nipple and pulling the milk from her so hard it almost made her dizzy with relief.

Then another mouth was on her—Luke's—between her legs, sucking on her clit. So many mouths on her sucking, hands caressing. Moans of pleasure from her and from the two people at her breasts filled the room.

When the couple had taken all they wanted, they passed her back to Luke.

“She tastes wonderful. What are you feeding her?”

“Mostly what we grow or kill. I don't let her have a lot of junk. And we keep her mostly away from onions and garlic.”

“You can tell,” Freida said.

When Luke finished drinking, he picked Veronica up and carried her over to the machine. “You've been so good today, let's make sure we drain all the milk out so you can sleep more comfortably.”

On the one hand, he was rewarding her. On the other, he also wanted to display and humiliate her some more, and her body had forgotten how to be outraged about it. She didn't resist when he strapped her into the machine. He only had to apply lube to the anal toy. Her pussy was so wet it wasn't necessary for the other toy. He inserted the vibrating rods inside her and turned the machine on.

After that, she forgot about her audience. The sensation of being completely drained of milk while her cunt and ass were being filled was all-consuming. By the time Luke turned the machine off, she'd had another three orgasms. Sleep would be great tonight.

She was only vaguely aware of Will and Freida as they stood to leave. Long, feminine nails skimmed lightly down her back and over her ass.

Freida bent to whisper in her ear. “You were very good, dear. I haven't seen Luke this happy in a long time. You're good for him.” Then they left.

She wondered if the other woman thought Veronica had come here freely. She doubted Freida knew the true circumstances of her presence at the ranch. Did it matter anymore?

That night, Veronica slept peacefully in Luke's arms.

TEN

Veronica carried a load of laundry up the stairs late one afternoon. She usually folded it in the playroom because there was so much space on the floor to stack everything. It would have been better to take the laundry up in two trips, but she'd piled it all in the basket to make less work. She'd almost reached the top when her foot slipped, and she fell.

She let out a howl of pain as she struggled to stand. The laundry had gone everywhere, but she didn't care about that. Tears stung her eyes. She couldn't put any weight on her foot without screaming. *It's broken.* The panicky thought rose inside of her. It could be twisted or sprained or just bruised, but deep inside she knew.

What would happen when Luke found out? He obviously didn't trust her enough to give her shoes. He hadn't taken her out of the house since that one day with the ice cream and the lake—the day she'd tried to blot out of her memory because it had scared her so badly. If she could just erase that day, she could make peace with being here. Ironically, the one thing Luke had done to try to force her trust had eroded it.

He couldn't take her to the hospital. It was too big of a risk. They would separate them in the emergency room and she'd have a way out. He couldn't threaten her with the cuff because if they found it on her, he was done. And the brand on her hip was all the evidence anybody would need. Even if he just dropped her off at the hospital and left, and she didn't know how to get to his house... even if she hadn't known his full name, that brand was registered with the state. It would lead the police back to him.

Would he kill her? She hadn't been afraid for her life in months, but

now... What did you do with a lame horse? Wasn't that the kind of attitude Luke had been raised with? Didn't he see her as just another one of his animals now? They'd had a good run, and now he'd have to take her out back and shoot her?

The rational side of her said that was ridiculous. Luke would never do that. But would she have believed before she came here that he would have done any of the rest? When she'd sat in the diner with her coworker, watching him put away that giant breakfast?

The day leaving the lake, he hadn't answered about what if the cop had found him. If she'd been under the water, there was a good chance Luke would have kept her there to save his hide. He'd been adamant about not going to prison, which seemed funny for a man so comfortable with doing crime.

Maybe it wasn't broken. Or maybe it would heal okay on its own. She didn't have to do outdoor chores right now, just stuff inside. Nobody saw her except at meal times and Luke in the evenings. Maybe she could cover it long enough to heal a little. Then she could plead her case. If it was broken it could heal wrong and always hurt, or make her walk wrong or look strange, but at least she'd be alive. Assuming Luke didn't find her repulsive after that.

Veronica scrubbed the tears off her face. Ice. Whatever it was, ice might help. She crawled to the kitchen, unable to put even the smallest amount of weight on it without agony and pulled herself up on one foot next to the freezer to make an ice pack. Her foot was swelling fast. There was no way she'd be able to keep it a secret for long.

He'd know tonight. Even so, she couldn't stop herself from trying to hide all evidence that anything was wrong. After she'd iced it, she crawled back to the laundry to get it out of sight. Thankfully she didn't have to worry about dinner tonight. Chili had been going in the crock pot since after breakfast.

She made it to the couch and covered her legs with a blanket and read the five-year-old magazine Luke wouldn't toss.

The kitchen door clanged shut an hour later.

"Why isn't the table set?"

"I-I'm sorry, Master."

"Well, get in here." He stood in the doorway watching her, an irritated look on his face that she'd keep him waiting when he'd been out working so hard all day.

He watched her as she struggled to stand. She tried to mask it, thinking

she could force herself to step on the foot just a little, and he wouldn't notice. But when she tried, the pain shot through her sending her to the floor.

"What the hell happened?"

She cringed at his tone, and scooted away. "I hurt my foot. It's nothing, really. I'm fine. It's okay. I'll be okay."

"Let me see it," he demanded.

Veronica cried harder as she showed him. It was silly to think he wouldn't have noticed—even if she'd tried to walk normally and succeeded. It was too swollen.

He let out a low whistle when he saw the damage. "I'm going to get you changed and take you out to the truck."

"Please don't kill me," she blurted out, the panic edging out her pain. "I'm yours. Please. It'll heal. I'll get better." She'd started shaking and couldn't get the tremors to stop.

"For God's sake. Why would I kill you?"

"Well... I k-know you can't take me to the hospital..."

"Like hell I can't. Where else did you think I'd take you?"

Veronica wisely shut her mouth. If the thought hadn't occurred to him how close her freedom and his imprisonment were, she wasn't going to remind him of the risks.

"I told you I'd never kill anything that looks like her. Never hurt anything that looks like her. Did you not hear me when I said that? God dammit, do you think I'm a liar?" His voice rose as he spoke.

"N-no, Master. I'm sorry."

He carried her upstairs and changed her out of the corset and into a sweater, then he carried her to the truck.

The drive was quiet, and a part of her wondered if he was telling the truth about the hospital. Surely he had to know this could end badly for him. Why would he put himself at risk?

As if he'd read her mind, he said, "You're not going to tell them anything. I know what you need, Veronica. I may not have done it in a legal or moral way, but I gave you work to do and a safe place to live and food and clothes. You're happy with me. You know you are. I took you away from that shitty life you had. And I know how much you want me, how much you crave what we do. Your body tells me, and sometimes your eyes do, too. Think about all that when they take you back. Think about the fact that I haven't damaged you, or done anything you haven't ultimately gotten off on.

Think about the life you'd have to go back to if you turned me in. I know you aren't going to do it. What reason besides silly pride would you have to throw your life away?"

There was no fear in his voice when he said it. He wasn't trying to convince himself, he was already convinced. He truly believed she had a better life as his slave than she'd had in New York, where she'd only been a slave of a different type. In the city she'd been a slave of the impersonal debt hanging over her head and her job with the lack of people to reach out to for help. But despite his conviction, there were still things that didn't match the words he spoke.

"If you believe that, why don't I have shoes? It's winter."

He shrugged. "I like you that way. Vulnerable. Sexy. It's just because I like it. I didn't think you'd run. I haven't thought that for a while."

"But you haven't taken me out, not since that day..."

"God dammit, Veronica, do you WANT me to kill you?"

"N-no, Master."

"Then stop arguing against yourself and be grateful I'm taking you to a doctor instead of putting a bullet in your head. Fuck."

His knuckles were white against the steering wheel as he drove. When they passed the road that led to the lake, his gaze went that way, as if for one fleeting moment he considered taking her back and drowning her. Veronica held her breath, silently praying he wouldn't make that choice. Then he turned and went the other direction into town, and she released the air.

When they reached the hospital, Luke carried her to an empty corner and sat her down on a padded bench where she could keep her foot up. When he went to the front to sign in, the receptionist shoved a bunch of papers in his face attached to a clipboard.

Veronica sat quietly next to him while he filled out the paperwork. Under name, he wrote: *Patricia Walker*.

Once again she wondered at his sanity and how firm his grasp on reality was. How safe could she be with a man who didn't really know who she was? Or couldn't stop forgetting?

"Luke?" she whispered, afraid she'd get in trouble for calling him by his first name, but knowing realistically she was safe here with so many witnesses around.

He looked up. "Hmmm?"

She pointed at the name on the forms, unsure how to phrase her question

in a safe way. Thankfully, she didn't have to.

His voice was low when he spoke. "Part of the benefit to you in being kidnapped is that you no longer have to worry about your debt. You want to change that now with a paper trail?"

He was protecting her.

"But... it's insurance fraud." Like such a thought should matter to him in the face of kidnapping.

"I'm paying cash."

"Oh."

She looked down at her hands while he finished filling out the forms, occasionally asking her questions such as allergies that could put her in harm's way if incorrect. Wouldn't they know Trish was dead? Even if she looked enough like her and even if most of the people here weren't on a first name basis with Luke and Trish, wouldn't it come out that he was giving a dead woman's information?

They had to wait an hour before someone took her back. He held her and stroked her hair the whole time.

Alone in the hospital room, Veronica thought again about escape. She could leave now, easily. Anyone would believe her if she showed them the brand on her hip. Even if the cattle brand had been consensual, it would have been hard, if not impossible, to convince a normal person of that. She was home free if she wanted it.

But Luke was right, where would she go? She couldn't go back to the city where she could barely see the sky for all the buildings and crowds of people. It was too stifling. There was no space there. Everyone was shoehorned in too tight. Human beings needed space. It was hard to breathe there for all the people, all the noise and stress. She needed to see the sky to feel right.

And her body had needs now that even with fantasies she couldn't have foreseen. Sure, if she was free, her milk would dry up eventually, but did she want it to? The feeling of Luke drinking from her was exquisite. Beyond just basic survival, how would she go back to how she'd been? The answer was obvious. That door was closed. She couldn't go back. She'd changed too much. He'd softened all her edges so much that the real world would just snag and cut her.

Before she'd always seen herself as strong and independent. But how independent could someone who couldn't control their spending be? Had she spent out of loneliness? Unhappiness? She didn't know, but since coming to

the ranch she'd been free of it all. There had been no creditors calling, no bills or shopping urges. She'd been too busy with her list of chores to think about the mall.

Serving him and his men domestically and sexually should have broken her beyond repair, but in a weird way it had fixed what had already been broken a long time ago. Yet, sitting in the hospital room, surrounded by the normal people in the normal world, she was reminded of how wrong this all was. She'd been living in a haze, but in the hospital, the fog felt like it had lifted for a moment. Shouldn't Luke pay for this?

On the balance sheet, he came out ahead with all he'd given her, but something inside her screamed that he must pay.

A nurse came in, then. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Walker. The man who brought you in, is that your husband? Boyfriend?"

Master. Owner. World.

"Boyfriend," she lied. After all, she wore no ring. It was the most believable of the options presented. It was telling that brother or friend hadn't been among the assumptions made.

The nurse wrote something down on a clipboard. "I'm sorry to have to ask this, but when a woman comes in with a man, injured like this, we have to. Has he hurt you?"

"No!" The word flew forcefully out of her mouth before she could stop to consider her answer. Luke was tall and strong. With the work he did he was so strong. Once the immediate fears had died, he was a place of safety she could hide in. Giving him up suddenly felt like opening the door for the tiger to eat her.

Thoughts of ending up starving, giving blow jobs in alleys to barely scrape by, perhaps finding fetishists to sell her milk to, had her quickly defending her captor.

"Are you sure? Because, if he's hurt you in any way, we can protect you. We can get you to a safe house, and you can press charges. I know it might feel like life is over, but it's not. You can start again. People can help you."

She'd already started again. Luke was her do-over. Anything else was just moving backward.

Did her face show her inner conflict? It must if the nurse was pushing on what was supposedly a routine question. Had someone observed them in the waiting room? Had they seen timidity or fear on Veronica's face? Had they seen her pull back from him when she was afraid he might become unhinged

over the question about the name he'd written down? What other clues might they have seen? How much had her face given away? How much was it giving away now?

"I'm sorry, but this seems more than routine."

"I apologize ma'am. I usually have an instinct for these things. I could, of course, be wrong."

Veronica became angry. "Hell yes, you're wrong. Luke hasn't hurt me. You don't know what he saved me from. He takes care of me. We're paying good money at this hospital to be insulted this way."

The nurse looked flustered and ducked her head. "I-I apologize. The doctor will be in to have a look at you in a few minutes."

"Thank you."

The nurse excused herself, and Veronica tried to calm down, to stop the trembling that had started in her hands again. All the adrenaline and fear of the day was catching up to her.

Within a few hours she'd been X-rayed and poked and prodded. Her initial gut reaction had been right. She'd broken a couple of bones in her foot. Thankfully, the breaks were clean and they were able to put her in a boot and gave her some crutches with instructions to come back in six weeks so they could check how she was healing.

When Veronica returned to Luke, he didn't appear relieved or uncertain. He hadn't doubted her for a moment. He knew she was his. If anything, the look on his face was smug and a touch arrogant. She wished that look didn't make her so wet.

He wrote a check at the billing desk and helped her back into the truck. She hadn't taken the out she'd been given, but in six weeks she'd have another opportunity. Deep down she knew she wouldn't take that opportunity, either.

They'd been in the truck for about ten minutes when she finally worked up the nerve to ask the question that had been on her mind since he'd first filled out the forms in the waiting room. "Why would you fill out those forms with the name of a dead woman? Why didn't anyone notice?"

She'd expected somebody to at least say something.

Luke let out a long sigh. "Because nobody knows she's dead."

Veronica felt the cab of the truck getting smaller, the oxygen seeping out, leaving her in a vacuum. She felt like that first night when he'd kidnapped her, riding in the truck, feeling like death or torture was only hours away.

She cringed when he reached across the seat and touched her knee. “I didn’t kill her, Ronnie. She’d wanted to do a home birth. She hadn’t even wanted a midwife. She had a fear of doctors and hospitals, wanted nothing to do with them. She said women had been giving birth for thousands of years without hospitals or specialized doctors. She read all about it and thought she could do it herself. I should have insisted. I was out herding cattle when she went into labor. It came on quick. The baby didn’t make it, and she bled to death.”

“If you didn’t do anything wrong, why does nobody know?” Veronica knew the question could cost her life. If he’d really killed Trish and had some kind of meltdown confession, surely it wouldn’t end well for her.

“I panicked. We didn’t go into town a lot, anyway. There were no medical records for her with the pregnancy. It just didn’t look right. The guys thought I’d be implicated because I didn’t get her to the hospital and hadn’t made her go for the checkups, like I’d been negligent. And I was, but she begged me not to make her go. She was distraught. On top of that, someone might just think I killed her. Ronnie, there was so much blood. She’d tried to make it out of the house... and there was just so much blood. There would have been a lot of questions. The guys helped me bury her and the baby.”

He’d gotten choked up, and his hands shook on the steering wheel.

Veronica’s heart beat so hard in her chest she could barely hear his words. Should she believe him? She couldn’t decide if his story was credible. He sounded sincere, but if he was some kind of girlfriend-killing sociopath, he’d sound sincere and make her believe it. Had Trish ever had an accident that the hospital staff was concerned about? Had people in town thought she was being abused? Had she been?

In the months he’d had Veronica, he’d never been violent. Yeah, he’d punished her in the playroom a few times and spanked her a few times, but it had always been controlled. Not like a killer or abusive boyfriend. Not like you saw on TV or in the movies. He’d never shown a particularly sadistic streak. He was more interested in sharing her and humiliating her than physically hurting her.

“I didn’t kill her,” he insisted. “How could you even think that? I *loved* her.”

Veronica stared out the window, not sure if she could look at him at the moment. “Did you make her fuck your ranch hands? Is that love to you? Do you even know what the word means?”

“That was her idea. The brand, the ranch hands. We had our rough patches trying to make it work, but nearly every kinky thing we did had been her idea.”

But it hadn't been Veronica's. He'd been so single-minded in trying to bring back his former lover that he'd taken a darker turn where her consent had meant nothing, because somewhere in his head, she was Trish, and Trish had given consent.

“I can't be her.” Not only was it a physical impossibility, it hurt too much to be nothing more than a replacement. Like a Trish-shaped blow-up doll.

“I know.”

When they got back to the house, he carried her upstairs to bed. She'd expected to be in her room, but he set her up in his, instead, and brought a TV up to keep her entertained. They didn't talk anymore about Trish that day. He made Veronica dinner and drank from her without her having to beg for it.



WEEKS PASSED and she slowly began to hobble around. Luke had hired the services of a housekeeper to take over Veronica's work and cook the meals while she recovered. During those weeks, he kept the playroom door locked.

She didn't know what the housekeeper knew about her—probably nothing if the playroom door was locked. The woman could be an ally if she wanted out, but each day she bypassed each opportunity for rescue. Who would take care of her while she recovered? Where would she go? How would she live?

By the time the six-week checkup rolled around, Veronica had given up the fake excuses. She didn't believe Luke had hurt Trish, and though she still felt confused about all the things that had happened between them, she wanted to stay. The break in their dynamic from her injury gave her a chance to see her master as just a person. A person who brought her evening meal to her and helped her bathe, and helped her when she made her first few trips down the stairs. A person who seemed concerned for her well-being.

At the checkup, she didn't turn him in. She didn't show them the brand on her hip. She didn't do anything but discuss her foot and go back to the ranch. Soon, as she was able to take on her chores again, the housekeeper was released from her duties, Veronica's last chance to escape drifting out the

door with the matronly woman.

Slowly things went back to normal. He had her measured for new clothing, dresses that supported her breasts but left them exposed for his access. The dresses made her look like a serving wench or like what she imagined a *Milk Maid* would look like—according to Will’s definition. And he’d gotten her more corsets and jeans.

One Sunday afternoon after her foot had healed and she was walking normally again, Freida came over and took her to the playroom. Veronica thought something illicit was about to happen, but she had a box of hair dye and a comb and scissors and a smock. Nothing kinky.

“It’s okay, hun. I do this for a living,” the woman said, gently pushing her into a chair.

Veronica could only assume Luke had ordered this. But why? The woman worked quietly. Veronica couldn’t think of anything to say to her, and for her part, the hairdresser didn’t seem compelled to engage in small talk either, so they didn’t. When Freida was finished, Veronica’s long brown hair was chin length with bangs... and golden blonde.

Luke stepped into the room then.

“What do you think?” Freida asked.

“Perfect. Thank you.”

She packed up her things without further acknowledging Veronica, and left.

Luke sat on the leather sofa and watched her for a long time. He’d dressed her today in a corset and jeans. Trish’s clothes had been packed away as the new things Luke kept buying slowly replaced them.

“You don’t look like her anymore,” he said. He handed her a mirror, and it was true. With the bangs and new color, the resemblance had all but disappeared.

He went out into the hallway and came back with a large, wrapped box. “I got you something.”

Veronica tugged at the red ribbon, and then tore through the gold wrapping paper. Inside the box, wrapped in tissue, were a pair of cowboy boots in her size.”

“I prefer you without shoes, but when you need them, you can wear them. Will you run from me?”

“Where would I go?”

“Good answer, princess.”

She put the boots on and went outside. The temperature had started to turn warm again, the first hint of spring easing its way into the air. She lay in the grass, looking up at the sky and the clouds that had turned fluffy again. She stared up at it for a long time, her mind going back to that first night on the road when she'd stopped and stared up in awe at the stars, and then the day of the branding, where she'd fallen asleep watching the clouds blend and merge through the euphoria of the endorphin rush. She'd felt open and free.

Luke joined her a few minutes later and lay beside her. "What are you thinking about?"

"You were right, I love this sky. I love this ranch."

"Thank me for bringing you here," he said. The day he'd told her she'd politely thank him by the time he was finished with her flashed through her mind.

"Thank you, Master."

A tear slid down her cheek, but Luke didn't see it. He seemed preoccupied with pretending he wasn't crazy—as if he could allow her to be a separate person from his tragic love. But the gestures: the hair, the boots... they meant nothing. When he'd looked at her, after Freida was finished... it hadn't been with the same intensity as before. There had been a note of disappointment that had registered in his eyes for a moment before quickly flitting away.

No, Veronica saw clearly. Soon her roots would grow out, and Luke would let them. She'd be back to the way she'd looked before, as if today had never happened. She'd traded one slavery for another, one lie for another, no more in control of her destiny than before—no matter how much hedonistic pleasure this version brought her. The irony of it all was that she could have been the gold standard, but now she'd stand in the shadow of a ghost, forever clawing for the love and approval that had so easily been given to the other woman.

She blinked back the tears before they could overwhelm her. If he couldn't love her, this had to be enough. The pleasure. The clean air and peace. The freedom from her debt. As she looked up, bright blue with dots of cotton candy clouds filled her vision. In the end, the sky was the only thing that was real.



I HOPE you enjoyed THE DARKEST ONES! Please don't hate me for that Big Sky ending! I was going through a "phase" at the time. I know it's not a "happy ending" but they ARE together pretty much forever.

ALSO VERONICA IS AN "UNRELIABLE NARRATOR". i.e. her personal opinions of what everything is or means isn't necessarily correct. I'm planning to write a bonus epilogue to let people finally get Luke's POV on this which I'll share with my newsletter when it's ready! (You can subscribe at kittythomas.com)

IF YOU'D LIKE another dark romance from me, I highly recommend TENDER MERCIES. It's dark but has a happy ending!

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THANK you so much for reading and supporting my work!

Kitty ^^