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In the Garden of Dark Delight



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Chapter One

Glory answered the door, as she always did on club nights, entirely naked.

“Welcome Sir,” she said. “My master asked me to tell you that he particularly wished to speak with you this evening, but that he will be arriving late.”

Her blond hair, white in the street light, caressed her back and breasts as she emerged on to the porch. She took my arm and led me in, her heart-shaped ass silvered by a full moon. I could only imagine how the neighbors in this Hollywood Hills cul-de-sac had come to enjoy this graceful ritual over the years. Glory was a walking wet dream.

I followed Glory's motion as she closed the door, ending behind her to press up against her back. I swept my hands up along her torso, cradled her breasts and took her nipples between the thumb and forefinger of each hand. I rolled the soft flesh gently, heard her breath catch. Her weight shifted back against me. After a long caress I turned her around to give her a kiss. When I broke away she put her head on my chest, eyes closed.

“Such a lovely creature our Miss Glory is,” I whispered. I'd met her at seventeen, and twenty years later she was more beautiful, more desirable, than ever.

I gave her a parting kiss on the forehead and left her in the entry.

Orson's house was a glass-faced barn. The floor of the lower story was a sea of deep amber carpet and was split into roughly three parts.

Closest to the entry there were two overstuffed black leather sofas and four matching leather armchairs around a travertine marble fireplace. Two collared slaves, Bella and Venus, were fellating their respective Dom's, Dean and Bryant. A pair of men, X and some new guy, spoke nearby. X was stroking the clit of a very young, very nude woman fascinated by the sight of Bella's mouth swallowing Dean's cock as he sat beside her.

Looking past them I saw Derek, Evan, Marvel and the buxom Elizabeth playing pool. Mary and Mary, linked nipple-to-nipple by a silver chain, chatted at the wet bar. Seven or eight people gathered on the far side of the room around what Master Orson called his rumpus rug. The kitchen, to the left of this area, had the most activity as people filed in and out with drinks and food.

Roughly half the people in the room were naked while the remainder were dressed in attire the average banker would call casual. Perhaps a quarter of the slaves were men, the rest were women, and a third of the number wore collars.

I glanced out the two-story glass window to my right at the garden. Some kind of entertainment appeared to be taking place in the Jacuzzi. Perhaps Jefferson had Adams sucking every cock that came to the pool again.

Just outside the double doors that led to the pool, I saw a couple arguing, their angry voices just audible over Blue Oyster Cult's *Don't Fear the Reaper*.

From what I could make out, Jason had collared yet another un-trained idiot. This one was red-haired, short, nubile and stomping one of her little feet as she berated him. Dumpy, probably not more than twenty-two or twenty-three, she looked furious, embarrassed. While I watched she plucked two red tassels from her tits and threw them into the garden.

“Such a disappointment is our boy Jason,” said a voice.

I turned to look at Victor. His head was no higher than my shoulder, his dark hair clipped, mustache and goatee perfectly trimmed, dark eyes flashing. I saw the club ring on the middle finger of his right hand, one of the nine we'd had made two decades ago. It reminded me just how many years we had been friends.

“How does he pick them?” I asked. “Does he go from door to door in search of the most unsuitable women?”

Victor shook his head. “I don't understand why he doesn't bottom-”

Jason's hand whipped out and he slapped his misbehaving slave across the face in real anger. She put her hand to her cheek weeping.

“Ass,” I said. “Is it too late to blackball him? Can we set his bond at something like thirty billion dollars?”

“His pledge is up at next month's Dark Moon meeting,” said Victor. “We can cut him loose then.”

Jason dragged the still weeping girl into house by the chain linked to her collar. He took a conspicuous position near the pool table, unzipped his pants and pulled out his cock. The girl knelt and tried to interest herself in his limp member as she wiped away tears.

“I say we beat him to within an inch of his life and dump him naked in a ditch,” I said after a pause. I could see the hematoma forming on the girl's face. A bruise now and then was a perfectly acceptable outcome of play, but losing control and striking a slave in anger . . . unacceptable. One might as well beat a child or rape a wife.

“You go on and do that,” said Victor with a laugh. “I'm a lover, not a fighter.”

“If he hits the girl again I'll kick his ass to his car,” I said. “I hope that's in the rule book somewhere.”

Victor smiled. “Speaking of rule books, I wanted to mention Jessica's here. She's training a new slave in the kitchen-”

“On a Monday?” I asked. Since she was here first, it was up to me to stay or go.

“Showing off I think. He is quite . . . lovely,” said Victor. “I've a good mind to try and pick him up.”

“I've a good mind to give him to Jason,” I said as I followed Victor to the kitchen. If Jessica didn't mind being seen, I didn't mind seeing her. After two years, surely we could be in the same room without harsh words or tears.

Victor and I found Jessica's new man, six foot two, blond, hairless except for a long gold mop that fell to his shoulders, bent over the sink. She was applying a wide, flat paddle to his ass, artistically insuring an even hue of deep red. I could hear him grunt at each stroke.

I poured myself a glass of wine, glad that I was off-call for the first time in a month. I

didn't think I could face Jessica stone cold sober. A man has limits.

A young black woman, breasts like perfect brown pears, made me a plate. I spent a few moments trying to remember her name. Kelly? Kira? Kajira, slave to Richard, uncollared as of yet. He should make a move before she decided to find another Dom.

I took a seat at the breakfast bar and watched Jessica work her man. I noticed that his neck was bare which meant she was still playing hard to get. I also noticed that his cock was rock hard, jutting out from his body like a giant pink finger. The surgeon in me imagined cutting it off. The vision became more clear when I saw her hand stray to the rigid member, grasping its base and sliding back and forth a few strokes before she administered another stroke of the paddle.

I stood, collected my plate and glass, and walked toward the sink. I suppose I wanted Jessica to see us side by side, though at the time I would have sworn I just wanted tap water rather than Perrier.

As I put my plate atop the others beside the sink I heard a clatter behind me. I turned around to find Jessica kneeling at my feet, bare legs folded onto the cold marble, palms pressed flat against it, her head up, facing forward. The paddle had fallen a couple of feet away.

It was very hard not to smile, impossible not to control the lurch in my chest and the surge of lust that swept through me. More than two years since I'd been her Master, and still she honored me. There was no need, since we were nothing to each other, and yet she knelt for me, offered herself.

I glanced at her slave who had risen from the sink. His cornflower blue eyes narrowed as they traveled from his kneeling mistress to me. I saw . . . insolence, suspicion. I did smile then.

He needed a lesson.

I crouched, hooked my index finger in Jessica's left nipple ring, and drew her up. She rose, raised her eyes to mine, and I took her mouth. My free hand slipped between her thighs, finding the pair of labial rings I'd put in so many, many months ago. Her breath caught and I could hear a collective intake of breath from the people around us. Jess and I were a matched set. I'm six foot, two inches, muscular, dark haired. She's five-eight, shapely, with chestnut hair that flows to the middle of her back. We are the perfect master, the perfect slave.

I broke the kiss, put my forehead against hers. "Miss me?" I asked.

She nodded slowly.

"Let's give your boy a lesson," I said. "Show him how a slave obeys."

She was still for a long moment, then nodded again.

I used her tit ring to move her out of the kitchen toward the rumpus rug which was actually nothing more than a two foot pile of lamb skins. The soft platform made the ideal stage, and the collection of toys around it ranged from ottomans to discipline benches, allowing the entertainment to expand.

I slipped a hand into my trouser pocket, pulled out the Sharpie marker. When you mark things in a hospital, you like them to stay marked. In fact, these days, I frequently tagged surgery patients upon admittance, ensuring that the right area would get prepped, the right tissue removed. I hadn't had any accidents caused by misplaced patients or incorrect paper work, but I ran up to fifty surgeries a month and I was leaving nothing to chance.

Jessica stared at the pen, licked her dusky lips with her soft pink tongue. She raised her green eyes to mine.

"We'll be going the distance," I said. "Seems a shame not to with . . . what's his name watching."

"It has no name," she said.

I used the Sharpie to draw lines three inches above her wrists and to create a collar three inches from the base of her neck. I could feel her heart pounding as I touched her, saw her nipples tighten. Her Dom outfit featured leather circles that raised her breasts. She was hairless and a pair of straps wrapped between and around her legs.

"Will your boy understand that you are mine tonight?" I asked just before I lowered my mouth to her left nipple. I licked the soft flesh, tugged on the steel.

"I . . . don't know," she gasped.

"But you know," I said.

She lowered her head, her body softening, her first step into sub space.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked her. I could feel the eyes watching us but we were entirely alone. “How shall I use you?”

“In every way,” she said. “I am . . . your flesh.”

I could hear those around us shift, leaning forward at her words. It was oddly powerful to see her stepping back in time. Dom to It, sub to me.

“Undress me,” I said softly. I felt her hands come like butterflies to the buttons of my black silk shirt. Silk is the only thing shirts should be made of. Light, cool, soft, always professional. I buy them by the gross every six months. I wear lightly starched white silk shirts to the hospital, unstarched silk shirts everywhere else. Silk is the perfect slave, strong, soft and obedient.

She lifted my shirt away, kneeled to unbutton my trousers, slid them along with my silk boxer shorts down to my ankles, removed my socks and shoes. She arranged each item carefully beside the rumpus rug. Then, at my feet, she waited.

“Take me in your mouth, Jess,” I said. “Fuck my cock with your mouth.” I could hear the collective sigh as the people around us heard my instruction. A whole crowd will follow a perfect slave step by slow step into sub space, fascinated by the evaporation of self into the perfect harmony, perfect peace, of complete submission.

Her mouth was soft, welcoming, unbearably familiar. So perfect . . . she took me to the very back of her throat, controlling the spasm as I had taught her. Her lips caressed me, her tongue folded around my shaft, gentle suction. She couldn't bring me off, but she could drive me insane. I could feel something inside me loosen, weaken. Christ, I wanted her back. Why couldn't she see she belonged to me? That I belonged to her. We were a unit, a whole, the sum of more than our parts.

I caressed her face as she fucked my cock with her mouth, looked down to see that her eyes were closed, looked up to find her man watching me. I would make sure he saw Jessica the slave. He would understand what Jessica could demand from him in the months to come, would understand what he could never have from her, what she could only yield to me.

“Kneel,” I said. “I want your ass.”

I saw her smile. It had taken us months for her to learn to love anal sex, to submit to it without any reservation, to come to enjoy it's hard pleasures. That had been our first big project.

She moved to the middle of the soft platform and I followed her.

Glory's sister appeared, a blue glass jar of lubricant in her hand. She knelt to give it to me. She had her camcorder in her hand.

"I need a blindfold," I said. Jessica didn't need prosecutors stumbling across her on the internet. With her eyes covered people could only wonder. Barefaced she would be exposed to the world. Of course, whether and how she was seen was entirely my choice at the moment, because she was my flesh . . . but that submission, that trust, deserved reward.

Glory's sister stepped back to a small cabinet serving as an end table. When she appeared at my side again, she had a long black rectangle of soft wool in her hand.

I took it, wrapped it around Jessica's eyes, saw her smile in pure joy. Perfect trust, perfect understanding. She knew I was guarding her in this place. She had anointed me her Dom in this place. Her body was mine to offer, mine to protect. She was free only to accept.

I took her then, slipping inside the tight passage as if it were her cunt. It was, for all practical purposes. She had prepared it as I had taught her. It was clean, well lubed even before I used the slick oil from the pot. She had probably readied herself for her slave. Well, he would have no use of her tonight. She was my flesh, but he was not. He was one of the few men here tonight who could not use her.

Her hungry ass sucked on my cock and I allowed myself to fill her, felt her surrender, over and over again. It took me just five minutes to fill her ass with cum, and she was gasping when I finished. I slid out of her body, glanced at Glory's sister.

"Condoms," I said. I reached down to pick the Sharpie up, pulled the cap off.

"Turn over Jess," I said.

She moved to lie on her back, spreading her legs and arms. I contemplated the expanse of white before me. I stared hard at her belly, seeing the organs that hid beneath the skin as if I had torn her open. Uterus, ovaries, vagina, cervix. I used the pen to write "MINE" in the heaviest letters possible over her womb. For a couple of weeks she would see that each time she took off her clothes, every time she went to the toilet, whenever she looked in the mirror.

I felt my heart seize for a second as I finished. My mother had died when I was nine, but

I could remember that feeling of being safe in her arms, of belonging to her. Losing Jessica was like dying with Mom all over again. She was home to me.

I dropped the pen on the platform. "Stay within the marked areas," I said, looking around at the dozens of people. "Fuck her any way you like. Condoms for the ass and cunt." As her Dom, I set her terms. Violating them would mean I'd have a reason to punish someone, and I'd demonstrated on several occasions that I was well able and quite willing to punish people. Trust is so important, it is a core principal of the Garten. They could trust me to punish them.

A fishbowl of individually wrapped condoms appeared, and I chose my successor. I raised an eyebrow at Victor. He smiled and gestured at his own slave, a slender blond youth who knelt at his feet. The kid started to undress him. Why did everyone under twenty look like a kid to me?

"Jess?" I said. "I want you to accept anyone who comes to you until I come back. You'll be coming home with me. Shall I instruct It?"

She lowered her head, then nodded. It was hard for her to trust him to see her this way. But if he could not admire her as she was about to be shown, he didn't deserve her. She would not, could not, accept a man who would not accept her as her true self. This was a test and I hoped her idiot failed.

I raised my eyes to It. He looked furious, frustrated, waffling from boyfriend to alpha-male . . .

"It," I said. "Your mistress instructs you to watch but not touch her. This is part of your training. Watch her submit and know what she demands of you before you earn her collar. She may offer herself to others and not to you. She may instruct you to give yourself to others as fully as she does. You are the slave of a slave. This is what she demands of you." As I said the words I found myself thinking of Jessica and what she had demanded from me. Fury blasted through my skin, rage coiled.

I turned to find Jason and his red headed slave. Well, that was something I could God damned well set right.

"Jason, may I use . . . " I paused waiting for him to provide the creature with a name.

Jason met my eyes. I could see him break into a sweat. Was this the first time I'd actually spoken to him? Did he want to keep his girl for himself? That kind of missed the point of the party, didn't it.

“Uh . . . Rachel?” he said, licking his lips.

I shook my head, disgusted. This guy had to go. What an ass. Didn't he know her name? What did he know? Why was she wearing his collar?

I turned to the girl. The bruise on her face had turned into a swollen red flower. Head wounds bleed a lot, and if there is no opening in the skin, the bleeding just stays inside. That's why black eyes are so florid even though you bang your knees a lot harder from time to time. That bruise would be on her face for two or three weeks in some incarnation or another. She would have to explain it to friends, coworkers . . . I hoped she had parents who knew how to call the police and how to get a restraining order.

I took the girl by her unpierced nipple, pulled her to the platform, arranged her kneeling, then crouched beside her. I put my hand in the small of her back as I spoke.

“That's Jess. Her lovers will take her completely tonight, she will be entirely possessed, fully consumed with our desire and her own. You will never be as fully loved, so fully used, as she will be tonight until you can submit, first, to one man. You must find someone to whom you can surrender everything . . .”

She looked up at me. “You mean, you-”

“No,” I said. “Not me. But that's not the point.” I was too old to train newbies. I just wanted to tell her to shut up. Did she want to be like Jess? Was her “master” the man to take her there? This was like providing therapy in a roller rink.

“Why not you-”

I sighed. “Rachel, or whatever your name is, you must not speak. You must listen.”

She lowered her head, confused and angry.

“Not every woman can be a happy slave. It requires discipline, devotion and trust just as being a good Dom requires discipline, patience and trustworthiness. You need to decide if you want what Jessica has, have to decide what you want to achieve, or you might . . . find yourself badly hurt.”

Victor shot his cum into Jessica's mouth and the red-headed slave looked up.

I gave up. Who knew what trip the ditzy girl was on. “Fine,” I said. “Clean her mouth,” I

said. "Clean her each time she is used. Show her your admiration."

I slipped away from the girl, leaving her to herself and her date. Maybe she liked men who wanted to beat her at parties. Its a weird world.

I collected my clothes, walked to the bathroom, took a shower and dressed. I avoided the Rumpus area. In the past I had always taken great pleasure in Jessica's surrender. I was every cock that fucked her, every mouth that kissed her.

Now I knew I would only feel angry that we had spent two years apart, fearful that she wouldn't stay with me for more than night. And I would eventually beat the debonair It into a bloody pulp because he had her and I did not.

Orson met me as I was crossing the floor. Sixty-seven, with pepper and salt hair and leathery skin, he was the oldest of the nine. He was the chairman and CEO of Garten, an incorporated private club featuring no racial or religious barriers and some interesting stockholder meetings. We had a corporate secretary, a treasurer, and an accountant just like any other company. We had nine stock holders with equal shares and a great health plan.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked as he veered toward me.

I nodded. I had nothing but time. Jessica had just become the evening's entertainment, which meant we would be leaving well after midnight.

I followed him up the open staircase and into his second floor office. Its rear wall was a pane of glass and I could see the million dollar houses climbing ever father up hill. I wondered how often Glory and her sister performed, in the bedroom next door, for the benefit of any neighbors with telescopes.

"Have a seat," said Orson. "I don't have much time. I have someone coming over."

"What's up?" I asked. It was odd for him to take me aside. We had set up the Garten more than twenty years ago and he had only ever felt it necessary to chat with me apart from the others once.

"Do you know anyone you would consider an enemy?" he asked.

I stared at him, waited for him to finish whatever queer joke he was telling. Sitting in his office, surrounded by hula dolls and well waxed surfboards, it was hard to take him seriously.

“No,” I said at last. “Oncologists actually don't make many enemies.”

“Well, you have one.” He reached into a drawer, pulled out a thick manila envelope, tossed it to me. “And it is going to impact us all.”

I opened the envelope, saw a photocopy of a laser printed document entitled “Dr. Death Loves His Patients”. Friday's date was under a byline that had been blacked out. There were also a selection of pictures of me from a Garten meeting screwing Linda, a woman from the Garten that I'd treated unsuccessfully for breast cancer last year.

“What is this,” I found myself demanding. “Who sent you this? Who wrote it?”

“The byline belongs to a Times staff writer. I'm going to see if I can get him to pull it with a well placed bribe or two. Apparently someone has decided to attack you through us—”

“She came to me after meeting me here. She has a right to choose me as her physician. Lots of doctors and patients share membership in the same clubs—”

“Not many clubs are like the Garten,” said Orson. “I'd like to ask you to skip a few meetings so the impact on the club is minimized. Several of us would find exposure . . . expensive.”

“Shit!” I said. “Do you want me to resign?”

“I don't think that's necessary. I do think . . . well I think it would be best to see if we can just buy off the writer—”

“How much do you think it will cost?” I found myself wondering how many times we would have to pay that price, how long we would surrender to blackmail.

“I don't know . . . I didn't want to ask. I didn't know if you would be willing to pay—”

“Who is this writer?” I asked. “Maybe it would be easier to settle things more directly. Man to man so to speak.”

“I got the letter, the photos and a phone call—”

“Do you have the number?” I asked. “Do you have caller id on your phones? If not . . . I think the phone company can give it to you.”

“Well, I guess we should look into that,” said Orson. “We don't have much time.”

I said nothing, staring at the photos, thinking of the effect this would have on my practice, my patients, Linda's family who would wonder if she'd had the best care. I tossed the mess back on the table. “I guess I'll pay, at least the first time. Can you find out—”

“I think I can,” Orson said, looking relieved. “I think we have to take steps to protect the club in case the article does go to print. “

“You know,” I said, feeling defensive. “I didn't do anything wrong.”

“Of course you didn't,” said Orson. “I never meant to imply that you did. She met you here, looked into you, chose you for her Doctor because she wanted the best treatment possible. She created the connection between the club and your practice, not you. She was comfortable being treated by you,” he looked down at the photos spread across his desk. “But none of that will make any difference to her family, your hospital or the medical malpractice lawyers.”

“I have a right to treat anyone who signs the consent forms—”

Orson sat forward. “Son, take advice from an old barrister. Those forms mean nothing. Once someone decides to sue, just get yourself an attorney, start hiding your assets, and plan to hole up in your house for a long couple of years.”

“Years?” I asked. “I'm not going to let this crap kick me around for years!”

“These things happen to everyone,” said Orson. “My wife left me, took the kids, sued my ass off. I lost everything. Folks lose money in the market, mismanage their businesses, God knows what else. One survives to rebuild.”

“It's not as bad as all that,” I said. “It's an unpublished hack job filled with half truths and a bunch of photos.”

“Someone is trying to destroy you,” said Orson. “And they've done pretty well on their first salvo. You should start wondering what's going to happen next.”

There was a soft knock on the door.

“Come,” barked Orson.

Glory pushed open the door. Behind her I saw a man dressed in a business suit carrying a briefcase. He looked stunned.

“Our attorney. I brought him on a club night so he could see what's he's up against. If that article goes to print we'll receive a lot of publicity. Our neighbors didn't mind us when we were just an odd little club sucking up all the parking twice a month, but their property values are going to fall and people are going to start bitching. I expect we'll be hearing from the department of corporations and our insurance company as well. And some of our members are quite adverse to any press at all. That means dues will decline.”

“Shit,” I said, rising. “I'm . . . sorry. I don't know how I brought this on—”

“What the hell are you sorry for? These are just the first things someone has decided to take away from you. Your club and your practice. You should be asking yourself what they will attack next.”

I left the room with my heart pounding, my head floating six feet above my body as I walked down the stairs.

I walked through the lower floor, eyes barely taking in Jessica, now with cocks in both her cunt and her ass, her skin a virtual wallpaper of drawings and sexual epithets.

I moved through the kitchen to the back door, exited into the private garden and walked to Glory's sister's gazebo. It was a kind of private garden within a garden, swallowed by carefully manicured grape vines and an incredible array of exotic flowering plants. I had fucked her here at the last meeting.

Before I could sit down on the steps, I found someone tugging at my arm.

“Mr. . . . Mr. . . . Master.”

“I'm not your Master,” I told the little redhead sharply. “Address me as Sir. What the hell do you want?”

“I . . . I wanted”

“Stop,” I said. “I don't have either the time or the inclination to remediate you.”

“What?” she asked, obviously confused.

I sighed. This girl was a fool. “Where are your clothes?”

“In . . . in the car. He . . . made me take them off before we came in.”

“Put your clothes on, call a cab, go home to your parents.”

“But . . . but . . . I live with him.”

“Well, don't. He is an ass.” I couldn't believe I was talking to this girl when my life was about to fall apart, everything I'd worked for—

“But . . . he's my . . . Master.”

I reached out, worked the dog collar until it came loose, then threw it into the darkness of the garden. “Now he's not.” I said.

“But . . .”

“Listen,” I said. “It is a consensual relationship. It is over when you say its over. It is not about him applying discipline to you, it is about your disciplining yourself to please him. It is your submission—”

“But he's my Master—”

“Only if you say he is. You choose a Master like you select a . . . priest,” or a Doctor, I found myself thinking. “You choose someone to yield to, someone you trust to help you walk down a path to . . . enlightenment. Over time you may select other Masters, or allow yourself to be sold to strangers. But your first should be someone you can trust with your life. Because you are trusting him with your life.”

She was silent, stunned by what I'd said.

“Look, get dressed and get out of here,” I said. “I wouldn't let Jason take care of my dog for a weekend. There is something seriously wrong with him.”

“Will you . . . take me?”

“God no,” I said. “You are twenty . . . what? Two, Three? I've no patience with the idiocy of a novice. Go find someone younger, or someone with a fetish for newbies. I have enough trouble.”

“I don't know how-”

“Have you considered chatting with other slaves?” I asked. “They can talk you know-”

“I’m . . . I didn’t know. I just met Jason—”

“You don’t even know if you are cut out for the lifestyle. Go some place and think it over. It’s like joining a religion and its not something you should enter into without a lot of thought. There are real risks and it sure as hell doesn’t suit everyone.”

She looked at the ground, obviously coming into the awareness that she was naked with a virtual stranger. Somehow, in a room full of naked people, being unclothed is a form of being dressed.

“Go home,” I said. “It’s a good time to get away. He’ll be here for hours yet.”

I left her then, unwilling to talk any longer. I didn’t care what she did really. Stupid little girls like that are prey for anyone with yet another plan to abuse them. They find it easier to beg people for advice than find answers for themselves.

I entered the house through a back door into a mud room. Glory’s sister kept her gardening materials here and the floor was covered with clods of damp dirt. I took extra care to wipe my shoes as I entered the house, and eventually found myself at the front door. Glory, still at her lonely post, turned as I entered.

“Glory, my pretty thing, I wish you to serve me,” I said.

She smiled. As Orson’s slave she was sworn to serve any of the nine as if at his command. We took care to trade the secrets of our slaves around, including code words, so there were no misunderstandings. At times I had thought it to be a kind of communal marriage with nine or so husbands and seventeen wives.

“My Jessica is servicing so many tonight, I feel she could use a little help. Please offer yourself to any man who approaches her.”

Glory’s face fell a little. “May I not offer myself to you, Sir?” she asked.

“You have,” I said. “And were I in the mood I might well take you out into the street where you could show the neighbors what they were missing. But alas . . .”

“Sir is too kind,” she said. “I . . .” I could see her struggling with herself, wondering how to express something of what she had overheard when she entered the room. “You

know . . . if there is anything I can do.”

“You are a good friend,” I said. “If there is anything you can do, you know I will ask.”

She laughed, and for an instant I saw the seventeen year old girl who had come to Orson. She had gone to college as his slave, worked now as a senior librarian at the University, had accepted Orson's new slave as her very own sister. So warm was Glory's welcome that the new girl had subsequently asked to be named Glory's sister in her honor. They were three of a perfect pair as we liked to say.

I reached out to ruffle her hair and to tweak a tit. “I do love you Glory-belle. I'll ask for your help if I need it,” I said. “But for now, just run along and take care of my Jess.”

She left and I put my back against the door. My Jess. My Jess. After two long years, she was still My Jess and yet she would never be mine. We had set one another aside, parting by mutual agreement after some of the most brutal fights I had ever survived. It was insane to consider returning to battles two years old and irreconcilable on their very face.

I spent a lonely hour and a half guarding the door. As the rules indicated, I barred it at midnight. Anyone in was in, anyone out was out. I waited another half hour in the silent vestibule wanting to make sure that Jessica had enough time to fully enjoy her lovers while still not inclined to watch her take them. I had plenty of time to think about the article some writer would publish on Friday.

Linda had come to Garten through a regional slave auction. She had approached me at a dark moon meeting, and I'd given her my card and collected her contact information. Normally it might take a patient three months to make an appointment with me through my office, but I had given her name and phone number to my nurse the next day. She and all her medical records were in my hands within a week.

Stage three breast cancer. She had gone through the usual regime of chemotherapies. The cancer had slipped from one breast to the related lymph nodes. There were other sites. I scheduled surgery and performed the double mastectomy. As an oncologist I'm a butcher. If a cancerous mass can be removed, I think it should be. I see no point, once a tumor has been decreased to an operable size, leaving it in. Of course, it only takes a cell or two and a hospitable environment for cancer to return, so surgery doesn't always work. But, frankly, I think it's impossible to get cancer in breasts one doesn't have, so people who have had breast cancer that seems inclined to spread should not have breasts.

Anyway, perhaps because I was her surgeon, she felt comfortable enough to return to Garten meetings shortly after her stitches were removed. If you were to attend one of our

gatherings you might believe that we were addicted to exercise and eating right. There is no doubt that we are a generally attractive bunch. But our health comes from living in our skins. We treat our bodies kindly and, as a rule, they respond by being beautiful.

Linda's flat chest was not unbeautiful. After a meeting or two, she found herself quite the rage. She mended with time. Reconstruction gave us another version of her body to love. But the cancer returned, and she began to waste. She died on her twenty-ninth birthday. There was nothing I, or anyone else could do to prevent it.

And yeah, I fucked her. I liked that little body and have a fetish for wounds from time to time. I liked her because she was a valiant little thing.

I could see how the world would view the images of a doctor having sex with a patient. It would be impossible to explain Garten, how the point of the club is to have sex with people you can trust. I could try to explain that I was one of many, that I didn't hurt her, that fucking her didn't effect her treatment. But, physician ethics are mandated by the state, so on Friday the long process of stripping away my license to practice medicine would begin.

People would see their nightmares when they looked at Linda and me in those images. Trying to explain that Garten was a careful, caring community of adults having entirely consensual sex would be impossible. Discipline, trust, honor, honesty: the words we used to describe ourselves would be heard against a backdrop of bad movies and the abusive chaos on the six o'clock news.

And, in truth, we were not such a careful and caring community because someone at one of our meetings had taken unlicensed photographs. There was one photographer for our meetings. No other cameras were allowed. The only time pictures could be taken was in the Rumpus area, and then participants could request not to be included. We collected images and posted them on password protected websites our members could access when they couldn't come to meetings. We changed the passwords weekly. We watermarked images so breaches could be tracked. We were well aware of the danger the images represented to us, to our professional careers.

And now there were photos of me fucking Linda, with and without breasts.

Who would do this to me? Who could hate me so much? Could it be a member of Linda's family? How could they have taken the photo? Had I hurt someone else without knowing it? It couldn't be someone I knew, someone I trusted. Could it?

After half an hour, I went out to my car, collected a black velvet blanket I kept in my

trunk, and brought it back into the house. I walked to the Rumpus area to find Jessica covered in cum, panting as yet another man fucked her ass. She was covered in lewd drawings, sexual insults, arrows from here to there.

I collected her when her last guest left her, cloaking her in the soft fabric before I picked her up. Glory's sister handed me her handbag and a floor length cloak she had worn in.

I carried her from the house, felt her snuggle in to my chest. I put her in the front seat, leaning it back. I knew she was on the edge of consciousness, lost in endorphins. There is a complex alchemy in pain and pleasure. As sexual excitement climbs, the body's ability to feel pain evaporates. In this state, I could drive spikes through her body. In fact, she was in just such a way when I put in her nipple rings. Some women report that labor and delivery are a kind of white-hot pleasure. I wondered if she would ever decide she wanted to experience that.

It took forty minutes to get home along Sunset. About three miles from the beach in Brentwood, I have a house in a large verdant yard. It has three thousand square feet of floor space, a pool, a pool house. I bought it the year Jessica and I agreed to part ways.

I flashed the gate, watched the black wrought iron doors open, drove onto the grass-crete driveway as they shut behind me. I climbed out of the Jag and scooped Jessica out of her seat. I could see tears rolling down her face from under her closed eyes. I don't suppose that either of us could have put a name to the emotion she was having. Grief, misery, joy, relief, too many words but not enough.

I took her in the house, up the stairs to the master bedroom, and put her on the bed. I drew a hot bath. When I came in, she had removed her Dom harness and was looking at herself in the mirror. Her hand lay across her belly, covering the word I had written on her. She looked at me.

"Get in the bath," I said. "It takes a couple of weeks to wear off."

She padded across the beige carpet into the spacious marbled bathroom. I followed her. She stepped into the hot water without testing it first, surrendering herself to whatever temperature I had selected.

She submerged her head in the water, came up. I took off my clothes and got into the bath. The tub could easily accommodate three. Had, in fact.

I turned on the jacuzzi jets and found her foot amid the bubbles.

“What happened to It?” she asked.

“Who knows?” I said. “I’m not keeping track of your subs for you.”

She nodded.

My hand moved up her leg, and I shifted toward her. As my middle finger parted her nether lips, she raised her eyes to mine. I watched her as it slipped inside, could feel her heart quicken.

I pulled her into my lap, slipped my free hand around her back and under her arm to tug on her nipple ring. I slid a second finger inside her.

“Please,” she said.

I shook my head, warning her not to speak. Dom's have a space too, and after two years away from my wayward slave, it was hard not to push her to the very hard edge of submission. It was utterly obvious that she belonged to me. It was obvious to everyone but her. And I was tired of the word consensual in the term consensual slave. I wanted her to want me. I wanted her to choose me, not that It creature that would bend to her every idiot whim. Why hadn't I kicked his teeth in? Was it too late?

“Please,” she gasped as I pried the sensitive opening to her ass open. “David, I can't!”

She had used my mundane name and I removed my hands from her, took a deep breath. If she had a code word, we had forgotten it. She hadn't used it with me for a lifetime. My name sufficed.

“Do you want to stop?” I asked. The words were lead in my mouth.

She shook her head. “Please . . . Master. I don't want to stop.”

Something broke inside me without warning.

I stood up, dumped her into the water. “Well, I do,” I said sharply.

I got out of the bath. I could feel the dangerous rage building. I was about to become my father and she was about to get beaten to within an inch of her life.

“What the hell are we doing? What are you doing?” I jerked a bath sheet off a rail and wrapped it around my hips.

“I . . . I don't know,” she said, huddling in the water. The girl knows me.

“Well . . . you have to decide! Do you want that It thing? Do you want me? What do you want? What the fuck do you want!”

“You,” she said, “with . . . adjustments.” She was starting to cry.

I drew a deep breath. In this state tears make it worse. Some kind of feedback loop. I feel murderous, someone cries, I feel guilty and brutal, and then I feel more murderous. My father was an alcoholic so I tell people my explosive rage is hereditary. I can control it. My dad couldn't. It was time for me to manage this situation.

“Morgan. You are in danger. Stand up. Get dressed. Call a cab. Go home.” My orders were curt, precise.

She looked frightened, shifted away from me in the bath, watched me like a rabbit in front of a snake.

I left the room, grabbed a robe from the back of the bedroom door.

I heard her tumble out of the bath.

“Master . . . David!” she was suddenly outside the bathroom, standing by the bed.

I turned to look at her. I could see she was steeling herself to stand up to me. Some distant part of me was glad. Wasn't that a lot like asking to be beaten?

“We have to talk. Can't you see that?”

I took another deep breath. Then another. Then another. I shook my head, unable to speak. I did not want to hurt her. I did not want her to go. I could not bear another minute of her in my house. We had gone over this ground again, and again and again. There was nothing else to say except-

“You know I love you—” she said.

My hand found the antique marble-encased clock on the bookshelf by the door and I hurled it through the mirror behind her with such force that the glass shattered from top to bottom. I left the room then, running down the stairs and out through the kitchen to the pool. I took off the robe and towel, threw myself into the water and started swimming.

The steady movement of my arms, the drumbeat of my heart, the splashing silenced my thoughts and made it impossible for me to hear when the cab came.

I came into the house just before dawn, arms and legs rubbery, skin wrinkled. I'm a big man, a strong man, a bull of a creature like my father. His rage ruined his life because he never mastered it. I have mastered mine through will and a few years of therapy. It is a leashed demon. It serves me. I do not serve it. I never will.

Physical exhaustion is the single most effective remedy for my wanting to rip someone's head off. Now that I was calmer, I no longer wanted to hurt Jessica. I just wanted to . . . hurt her. Actually, I wanted her to stop driving me utterly fucking insane.

I went into the house, dropped onto the couch and fell asleep.

Chapter Two

At six thirty, the buzzer went off for what seemed like forever. I ignored the sound. Finding street numbers in the woody area of Brentwood was impossible. Probably someone had ordered a limo to the airport, and they thought my house was the one next door or the one down the block. Who the hell knew what the street number was with all those damned plants everywhere.

I sat up when I heard a knock on the door. That was impossible. I had a security gate. To knock on the door, you had to get through the ten-foot wrought iron gate, or you had to climb a twelve foot wall.

I walked toward the door.

“Police! Open up!”

“Just . . . just a minute,” I called out. I worked the lock and chain on the door, shivering as the cool California morning washed over my damp robe. Managing my anger. What a crock. I had an acre of glass upstairs, a damp couch, and probably a cold.

“Are you Mr. Churing?”

“Doctor,” I said. “Doctor Churing.” A Master’s in Biology, four years of medical training, two separate residencies, and nine years of practice. Give me my God damned Doctor. I shook my head, rubbed my eyes. The residue of rage was irritability.

“May we come in?” said the officer. He was dressed in regulation blues. The two guys

behind him were dressed in cheap suits. All three of them were about my size. Cops and military men are about my size. Most men are smaller.

“Sure,” I said. “Is there some sort of problem?”

“Were you at 1921 Beverly Drive last night?”

“Uhhmm, yeah,” I found myself remembering what Orson had said, the article he had given me. Was this visit from the local constabulary related to that? “Is there something wrong?”

“What time did you leave?”

“Half past midnight or thereabouts.”

“Were you alone?”

“No . . . Yes . . .” I didn't want to involve Jessica, or rather Morgan Reilly in whatever misery might be coming my way. “What difference does that make?”

“Can you describe your activities last night?” asked one of the detectives. We were all standing in the entry, and the door was wide open. How long was this conversation going to last? I was cold.

“I . . . went to a party. I ate . . . I left.” The Garten had fairly strict rules about revealing what happened at meetings, and any discussion of such matters would involve listing names of people who could confirm what I said.

“Did you speak to an Elizabeth Myers?”

“Not that I know of,” I said.

“Red head,” said the oriental detective. “About so high.” He held his hand up to his shoulder.

Jason's slave. Had she disappeared? Had he . . . hurt her for trying to leave him?

“Yeah,” I said. “I did. I told her to ditch her boyfriend. He was hitting her.”

“When did you last see her?”

“Eleven or so”

“And then what did you do?”

I stared at the men, realization finally dawning. Something really had happened to the girl, and they thought I was responsible.

“What's this about?” I said. The cold from outside had slipped inside my bones somehow. I could feel the ice climbing up my back into my brain.

“She's dead. Someone slit her throat. We've been told you saw her last. That she followed you outside. We found her in a gazebo-

“Shit,” I said. “I need a lawyer.”

“Doctor Churing, at this time we would like to have you come with us downtown. You are not under arrest at this time, but you are a material witness-”

“Can I get dressed before we do all this?” I asked. “I have clothes upstairs, a wallet.”

The white detective looked at the cop and his associate. He shrugged.

We climbed the stairs to the bedroom. The glass from the night before lay in shards like a broken star in the soft carpet. Thankfully Morgan was gone.

“What happened here?” asked the white detective. He had taken out a notebook and was writing something.

“Lost my temper,” I said, “Threw a clock into my mirror.”

I walked to the closet.

“Tell me what you want to get out,” said the policeman getting between me and the closet.

“Black shirt, pants, underwear, socks, shoes,” I said. Good thing I didn't mind being naked in front of men.

Ten minutes later, I was dressed, and one of the detectives was thumbing through my wallet as the cop handcuffed me.

“I need to call my attorney,” I said.

“At the station,” the cop replied. “We gotta do this by the book.”

So it was, seven hours later, that I found myself in Morgan's office in Beverly Hills. She entered the room, and I stood up. It's an old habit that I can't seem to get rid of. My father always stood up when a lady entered the room. So do I and my two brothers to this day.

She was dressed in a long dark gown, with silver buttons at the cuffs and long black boots. My mind flickered to what lay under those clothes, and I slipped into my chair. I needed more sleep in order to make any sense of the wonderful dream or terrible nightmare my life had become. I had fucked Jess, and here she was again. Did I give a shit about anything else?

She closed the door.

“Well, quite a morning,” she said. “Picked up for murder?”

“Why . . . did you sub for me last night?” I asked. “I have to know.”

“This isn't the best time to talk about that, is it?”

“I have to know,” I replied.

“I don't know . . . I enjoy topping now, but sometimes I miss . . .”

“Sometimes Doms like to sub,” I said.

“Have you ever subbed?” she asked. She was seated now, leaning back in her chair, watching me.

I shook my head slowly. “Subbing is about . . . trusting people on some level. I trust myself. I haven't ever trusted anyone enough to want to . . .”

She sat forward. “You are going to sub for me now,” she said. “Because I do have your life in my hands, and you are going to have to do exactly what I say—”

“You are mixing metaphors,” I said. “The attorney client relationship—”

“Why did you talk to the police?” she asked. I didn't like her tone. Bitchy, demanding, as if I were stupid. I'm not stupid. She knew that.

She was still talking. “Do you not watch television? Do you not go to movies?”

“It was six thirty in the morning. I was asleep—”

“Of course you were. That's why they came. It's always six thirty in the morning, or after midnight, or while you are in the middle of something impossibly important that they show up. They want to catch you off guard, and they did—”

“I told them the truth!” I said.

“You told them you were at the murder scene, and that you were the last one to see the girl alive.”

Well, that was true. After a pause, I shrugged. “I told them I didn't kill her.” I said. “I told them she is just some . . . was some silly sub of Jason's. Why aren't they investigating him?”

“I'm sure they will,” she said. “But he has a pretty good alibi. Almost everyone at the party does, don't they? There was a girl there taking all comers . . .”

“Shit!” I said.

“Exactly,” she replied. “So, any chance you could muster up the words 'I need to talk to my attorney' a shade sooner in the future?”

“Shit!” I said again. “God Damn!” I sat forward. “It's probably part of that other thing.”

“What other thing? What other trouble have managed to get yourself into?”

I quickly reviewed what Orson had told me, described the article and the photos. “He asked me if I had an enemy, and I guess I do. It's . . . this is going to tear apart my career, the Garten—”

“It is going to get you a life sentence,” she said. “Maybe I'll contact Orson and see what he has on his plate. Maybe between us, we can figure out what's going on, gather some resources.”

I sat back in my chair studying her. So quick . . . so beautiful. A bit bitchy, but I could fix that.

“Can you remind me again why we aren't married?” I asked. “I can't for the life of me recall . . .”

“Because one of us wants kids,” she replied tersely.

“Yep,” I said.

Her eyes met mine, and I suddenly saw the frightened woman she had been last night. I saw Jess cowering from me in the bath water.

I shook my head. “This is the wrong thing to do. I need another lawyer.”

“David,” she said. “You don't need another lawyer. I'm one of the best in the city and you don't have to explain your . . . lifestyle to me. And that will be the key in this case if they charge you. Your lifestyle. If you will enslave women, rape them, then why not kill them?”

“You know I've never . . .” I stopped.

“Hurt a woman?” she said with wry smile.

I sat forward, rubbed my tired eyes, tried to think. “I . . . don't know what to do.”

“Go to work, see your patients. Start making some arrangements to hand off care if you have to,” she said. “Looks like you may be taking an extended vacation.”

She stood up, offered me her hand.

I stood up as well, looked at it.

“Glass-walled office,” she said with a smile. “Please shake my hand.”

I did take her hand, felt it as the lifeline it was. I never wanted to let it go, never wanted to let her go. But she was a consensual slave, and marriage was a consensual union, and I couldn't force her to carry my children or give up her career. We had come to the crossroads and parted company. So why was I holding her hand?

“Thank you,” I said. “I . . . don't know how to thank you.”

“I’ll think of a way,” she said, as she slipped her hand out of mine. “Just be prepared to pay up when the time comes.”

Chapter Three

Morgan, Jessica . . . I didn't know what to call her anymore. Jessica was the name I had always called her by. She had used it at the Garten on her first visit. Over six months, as I had come to know her at meetings, I had no need to think of her other name.

She might be Morgan Reilly Esquire at work, but at the Garten she was just another sub. She had been thirty-one, a little overweight, a little pale, a lot uptight, and a lot awkward.

The first time I fucked her, I could feel the effort she was making to accept me, to take me within her with so many people near by. Richard, the Master who had brought her, had dated her on and off for almost a year before bringing her to the first meeting. I had thought, at the time, that she was on a marriage track and was humoring Rich in his fetish.

One thing about the “lifestyle”, it doesn't lend itself to lies. If some girl says she's a sub, that she likes it “any way”, that's what she gets. So a sub showing up just to appease a boyfriend stands out like a sore thumb. And she did. The ice-maiden Victor called her, gritting her teeth through every encounter.

I am something of a sadist so I made a point of seeking out the ice-maiden each time she came to a gathering. As such things always happen, we started to talk after our scenes. As everyone knows, fucking strangers leads to earnest conversation and confession.

One night—the memory was burned into my mind—she'd shown up with wide black leather cuffs on her arms. I had fucked her hard, holding her arms behind her, clenching the cuffs in my hands. And blood had come.

“What the hell?” I jerked away from her, pulled her up. I pulled apart the stiff snaps, yanked off the cuffs, and the scabs inside them had come off as well. The result was that several deep three inch cuts along her wrists started bleeding freely.

“That's nothing,” she said, looking at the blood sliding dripping from her wrists onto her legs. “I had an accident . . .”

I looked at her, glanced at Richard who was taking head from a girl that looked about fifteen. (She wasn't of course. We did a background check on everyone who walked through our doors. She had to be eighteen or whoever had door duty would have kicked her out.)

I looked at Jessica again. “Was that an accidental suicide attempt?”

She shook her head, biting her lips, silent, miserable. “Just a thing I do. I cut myself when I get tense. Lots of people do it.”

I borrowed some clothes from Glory, drove the girl down the hill to my flat and stitched up the cuts at my kitchen table using the sutures I carried in my first aid kit. I didn't use any anesthetic and she didn't ask for any. She told me later it was agony, but she was so glad I had taken her away, that I had singled her out, that she had said nothing. If I thought she could take it, she decided she could.

I asked her if Richard were training her, and she had shrugged. I asked her if she wanted to be trained, and she shrugged again. I asked her if she wanted to live another day or draw another breath. She shrugged once more.

I asked her if she loved me, and she started to cry.

At the time I remember being surprised that somehow I had melted the ice-maiden. Did I feel anything else? I don't know. I had a hard time feeling anything in those days. I was a young oncologist participating in two research teams, treating more patients than I could count, and on call for surgery six days a week. I was Doctor Unstoppable except when I was at the Garten when I was a Doctor Sadist.

Two days after the stitch up, I'd called Richard, asked to take her over, and he'd given her up without a moment's hesitation. She was a pretty girl, but he liked them younger. He was glad we'd hit it off. He thought she was wound so tight her head was going to pop off one day.

I found out Jess was an attorney in the mundane world. In fact, the first official date she made with me she blew by showing up an hour and a half late. She had to work, she said, as if that explained anything.

I'd sent her home after a fierce dressing down, then called her a month later at two in the morning to ask if she wanted a date in five minutes. She had responded in the affirmative. I'd collected her, taken her home, and that night, she had anal sex for the very first time. She also had oral and vaginal sex, but the anal sex was the thing that dropped her firmly into sub space. The next morning, I sent her to work. Neither of us had slept.

From then on, I'd started training her, shaping her behavior, even before she had fully accepted me as her master or had known that she wanted one. I knew, I understood, what she needed, which was a refuge where she could stop thinking, stop planning, stop arguing, mediating and defending. She needed some time to herself, a way to live in the here and now, instead of in a paper palace of court dates and legal briefs.

I gave her that refuge. For two years, she'd had a home where her only concern was pleasing me, and by extension herself. I chastised her severely for any attempt to bring her work into my house. She had partners, she had assistants, she had money and could buy absolutely anything it took to be home when I wanted her there. If she had to blow judges or fuck DA's in order to be home on time, so be it.

She was Morgan somebody from six in the morning until six at night, and my Jessica the rest of the time. I also had her for all weekends, all holidays and for her three weeks of vacation each year. During that time, she had herself. And, in order to enforce all this, I had to be home.

So I cut one of the research projects, ended the on call, and moved heaven and earth to stuff my life as the uber-oncologist into the daylight hours as well.

On her own, Jess lost weight, began training four days a week, went to the dentist to get her teeth straightened, learned to cook. She acquired, grace, and poise, and peace and became herself. My perfect, perfect Jess, every man's picture of the perfect woman. I thought she was happy. I knew she was happy.

And then . . . I bought her a house, asked her to marry me, told her I wanted children.

You know the rest. We fought for weeks before she finally took off my collar and

disappeared from my life.

But now she was back. Only she was this Morgan Reilly thing. I know you will think that I wanted my Jess back because I wanted a slave who cooked me healthy meals, fucked me several times a day, and kept me company in the weight room. But the truth is I wasn't sure I could make this Morgan person happy. I certainly couldn't force her to have my children. And I could not bear to give them up.

I'm a freak of nature I suppose, but I'm one of the two guys on the planet who can't figure out the point of a life without children. I could talk about Darwin or mention evolution, but . . . I just love kids. I love holding them, and talking to them, and smelling their hair. I want to show them things and teach them things and help them become wonderful, happy people. Maybe it's a Dom thing. Maybe it's a human thing. A father thing. I was born to be somebody's dad.

I was forty-two, almost forty-three when the fight started. She was thirty-three.

She said she didn't want kids. She didn't want to take time off to have them, or to raise them. She said she had lots of time before she had to start a family. There was no hurry. I tried to explain female fertility falloff, that three children would take six to ten years to manufacture, that she didn't have time. She tried to explain to me why she didn't care.

As the taxi dropped me off at home, I could feel the ache in my chest. This was really Jess's home, and last night I'd thrown her out of it. Last night, when she had come so willingly to me, I had forced her to leave.

Some men in my position might have been worried about the destruction of their career, or the notion that they might spend the rest of their lives in jail. I was thinking about how to talk some chick named Morgan out of a seven figure a year job, so I could knock her up and turn her into a soccer mom.

Chapter Four

I went to work the next day, a Wednesday, trying to pretend I wasn't waiting to be publicly accused of murder and medical malpractice.

I saw fourteen patients that day, including two new ones. One of the two was an old woman who had just been diagnosed with lymphoma. The other was a thirty-six year old with ovarian cancer who had been referred to me because it had spread. She was a surgery consult and I had to tell her I thought she was inoperable. There's only so much of a person one can remove, and a bladder, kidneys and liver are non-optional components of the human body. I provided her with information on hospice care and collected her phone number. We sat together, chatting about the meaning of life, until her husband came to get her. She fell apart as I left the room.

Everyone is going to die. Remember that. Don't plod through your whole life doing only what you have to do, only what you can't avoid, only what you can get away with. Because I guarantee that misery is just around the corner. I've watched lots of folks die and I can tell you, those who have done more, suffer less.

I made a couple of calls to some of my associates, indicating that I had some personal issues that might require time off. They said they could cover most of my patients. The few they couldn't manage, I would refer to someone in-plan at my hospital if necessary.

Orson called on my cell phone shortly after four.

"I wanted to let you know that the police were here. They collected the video from

Monday—”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I didn’t kill the girl and any evidence they gather will lead to that. Give them whatever they want—”

“You know. That girl that came with Jason? She wasn’t even registered with us,” Orson sounded bewildered. “He gave us the card for the girl he brought the time before. He changed the pictures. We have no record of her.”

“What’s Jason got to say for himself,” I asked.

“The police haven’t told me,” said Orson. “I don’t think they can find him.”

I felt a shot of adrenaline. Fleeing the scene was an admission of guilt, wasn’t it?

“I saw him hitting her,” I said. “Victor—”

“We shouldn’t be talking,” said Orson. “I just wanted to let you know. They have the tape.”

“You might want to call Jess,” I said. He had her real name and contact information on file. We had HIV and other tests run on all members before every meeting. No test? Don’t come to the meeting. Of course, tests don’t tell you everything, so most folks use condoms with folks they don’t know very well. And, as Jason had demonstrated, that was a good thing. We needed better identification cards.

“Jess is defending me. I told her about the article you gave me. She said she was going to call you.”

“She left a message,” said Orson. “I didn’t know why. I guess I’ll call her. I don’t know what I can tell her—”

“Well, anyway, I wanted to let you know,” I said. “If that guy calls, and he wants money, tell him I’ll pay it.”

“Have a good afternoon, Dave” said Orson. “I . . . I’m sure we will all get through this.”

And then he was gone. I found myself thinking how old he was, how the weight of this affair would effect him. He was an old man, an old lawyer, and he knew better than most how costly involvement with law could be. Chances were good he, through Garten, would play some role in a capital murder case, a medical malpractice suit, and a civil suit

brought by Linda's family. I hoped that Glory and her sister would be able to get him through it.

I got a call from Simon B. and Steve, two other Garten masters, offering what little help they could. Simon was president of a bank and could put together a loan if I needed cash for my defense. Steve ran an air cargo service and offered to take me out of the country. I thought that was somewhat surprising.

I told them I was well provided for at the moment, and offered them thanks for such practical aid. In every cloud, there really is a silver lining. Eight other men and I had formed Garten twenty years ago, more as a commitment to sexual freedom and personal safety rather than as an eternal bond among us. But, here we were twenty years later, and Garten had effectively married us to one another. Now these brothers-by-chance were offering me real help.

I arrived at home to find a white Mercedes and a beat up Toyota parked in my driveway. The gate was wide open. I walked through the front door to find small pools of water drying on the freshly washed white tile. I heard voices falling down the stairwell, climbed up to find a two man, two woman crew picking up broken glass and shampooing the carpet. I could see yellow crime scene tape and some black powder on some of the surfaces of the room. I came back downstairs to find Jess cooking.

As I entered the kitchen, she spoke.

"Is there any chance you could refrain from trying to convict yourself?" she asked as she saw me. She was dressed in another dark gown, this one with a barely detectable floral print. Her face was hard, and she was stirring the food in the wok furiously.

I walked around the counter, came behind her, brought my hand to her breast. In a second, I had her by the nipple ring. I pulled it out as I held her back against my chest with my other hand. She gasped as the pain shot through her, tried to pull away. I held her until she stilled.

I let her go, moved her out of the way, turned off the fire under the wok.

"No," I said. "I'm not going to live with Morgan. She's a nice girl, good lawyer, probably all the rage. But I'm not having her in my house."

"You called Orson-"

"No," I warned. "I will make Morgan leave. Jess can stay. I love Jess. Jess belongs to

me. But Morgan . . . I can live without her.”

She was silent for a time, staring at the ground, then she looked up. “Morgan is defending you in a murder case-”

“Morgan should be home now, fucking her husband,” I said. I glanced at my watch. “It’s almost seven.”

She was silent again, watching me.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She said nothing, and I could see the wheels spinning. She was trying to figure out a way to make me let her talk about the case, about Orson, about some other long list of concerns. But I’d be damned if I’d spend twenty four hours a day thinking about that crap. Something fucked up is always going on. Not letting it ruin every minute of your life is a matter of discipline, not luck.

“I was just going to say-”

“Jess, you know I am a son of a bitch. You know that I am perfectly capable of throwing you out of my house, of taking steps to insure that I never have to look at you again.” She did know that. I wanted to make sure this Morgan-thing did as well.

She slipped to her knees, placed her palms flat on the floor, looked forward.

“There we go,” I said. I moved forward, placing my crotch in front of her face. “Suck my cock,” I said. “Show me you are glad to be home.”

Her hands came to the zipper, pulled it down. Soft hands reached inside to free my rigid cock. As it slipped inside her soft mouth, found the back of her throat, I heard voices in the hall. The two man, two woman cleaning crew filed into the dining room. From where they stood they could see me but not Jess.

“We finished the room,” said the older of the two women.

“Where did you put the glass?” I asked.

“The lady say to put it in the blue one,” said the woman.

“That’s right. Did you have any trouble with the powder?” The graphite used for finger

printing had probably coated everything including the carpet. The police had probably wanted to know if the redhead had visited my home.

“It not come out of the carpet in some places,” said the man. “I think . . .”

“Bueno,” I said. “Es nada. Puedo comprar un otro.”

There was silence, and I realized that they wanted to be paid. I took out my wallet, caressing Jess's cheek as I did so. Her mouth was sliding up and down my cock, finding the back of her throat on every long stroke. Heaven over and over again.

I pulled a couple hundred dollar notes out and held it out for the man. He stepped forward to take it and he saw Jess, now working the tip of my cock.

“Is this enough?” I asked.

He glanced at the money, then at Jess, and smiled.

“Gracias por todo,” he said, then ushered the team out of the room. I could hear them speaking, laughing, as they walked out the front door.

“Stop,” I said. “Stand up. Strip. Don't wear clothes in the house unless I tell you to. You know better.”

She stood, began pulling off her clothes, revealing all the words her lovers had penned on her less than forty-eight hours ago. I saw the word *Mine* over her womb and said a silent prayer that it wasn't a lie.

I met her eyes. “Just to be utterly clear. If Morgan needs to talk to me, she can contact me by phone or arrange a meeting with me during normal business hours. She works for me. I don't want to hear any more of that crap about me subbing for her.” I put my stiff cock away, took a step back, and gestured at the wok. She stepped forward, turned on the flames and finished cooking the meal.

I took my seat at the table and she brought me food and a glass of red wine. She knelt at my feet and I fingered her sore tit as I ate. When half the food was gone, I slid my chair back and moved to feed her with my fork. Watching her eat, feeding her, seeing her face relaxed, meditative—I felt the world recede. I helped her drink the half glass of wine we had left.

“Did you clean yourself for me?” I asked her. “Where can I fuck you?”

She shook her head.

“Go upstairs to my bathroom. You'll find supplies. Clean yourself and meet me in the den.”

She rose, walking as if in a dream, moments later I could hear the water running. She would give herself two large enemas, then pack her ass with lubricant. I walked to the den, queued up an old tape I'd made of her at a house party. That night I'd made her take five men. She'd been sore for a week. I was watching it when she returned. She knelt at my feet again.

“Are you clean enough to eat out of?” I asked.

She nodded.

I stood up, pulled her to her feet and brought her to the leather covered hobby horse. I applied pressure to her back, bending her over until her ass was the highest point on her body. I came around to clip spherical weights to each nipple ring, heard her sigh as she felt their tug. I turned up the sound on the TV, loud enough that her gasps and groans were audible. Loud enough that you could hear some of the men talking.

I started to spank her then, using the flat of my hand to mark her. The blows punctuated the long ago orgy, and I could hear her gasping then and now. After thirty hard blows, I slipped a finger inside her cunt to find it wet, swollen with desire.

“Shall we stop?” I asked. “Shall I call It? Have him service you? Do you want to have him here?” I had no intention of inviting It over. It was an ass. But I wondered if Jess wanted him.

“No, Master,” she said.

“I want him to see you like this. Is that what you want?”

She said nothing.

I got my digital camera out of the toy drawer, started taking photographs of her, making sure her face was visible when the tit weights could be seen dragging her breasts into long points. I opened her cunt for a view only her gynecologist must have had until now.

I slipped a condom on my cock, came behind her and slid it into her ass. She wriggled

her hips in an attempt to take me deeper. I took more than twenty shots of my cock fucking her ass, enough to make a movie of. I would send the movie to It, would make it clear to whom Jess belonged.

At long last, I put the camera down and gave her the long hard fuck I owed her. After I came, I jerked the condom off and dropped it in the wastebasket. I spent a long few minutes fingering her clit, bringing her to the edge of orgasm. When she began begging me to fuck her cunt, I stopped.

I connected a silver chain to one labia ring, wrapped the chain around the front of her legs, and clipped the other end to the second labia ring. This stretched the flesh between her legs tight, exposing the soft red curves of her vaginal lips. I pulled a prep pack out of my pocket, swabbed the area around her cunt and clit. I walked to the toy drawer, removed a sterile package I'd kept against all reason for more than two years. I tore it open as I walked back to her, removed the small barbell with the pointed end. Without preamble I used it to pierce the hood of her clit.

We had been working up to this when she left. Now we were back on track.

She cried out, tried to sit up, and I applied a hand to the middle of her back until she subsided. I screwed the other end of the barbell on so it wouldn't slip out, then fed my cock into her cunt, began to fuck her slowly. In less than a minute she was contracting around me like a vice, begging me to fuck her harder. After I came I pulled out, and used my camera to capture both gaping holes and the new clit jewelry.

It would have to find another girl. This one was mine.

I helped Jess up, led her to my chair and held her in my lap as we watched the end of the tape. I fingered the new clit ring, slipped my fingers back inside her, considered fucking her again. Was too much ever enough?

"Are you all right?" I asked instead, burying my head in her hair.

"I can't live without you," she said softly. "I tried . . . for two years . . . but its not really living. I just slide from day to day."

I said nothing. My heart had become steel in my chest. I was marrying her, and she was having my children. I needed all my weapons in this war, because she wanted me to accept that this Morgan-thing was more important to her than our children were, and I was absolutely determined not to. All's fair in love and war.

I stood up, dumped her onto her feet.

“I can live without you,” I said. “I won’t live without children. I deserve kids. I can afford them. I’m having them.”

She started to say something, and I saw the shadow of Morgan building arguments in her head.

I put my hand over her mouth.

“I absolutely can live without you. I don’t want to, but I can. And I can find another woman willing to bear my children, and who will mother them into the fine people they are going to be. You know I’m not an utter asshole. You know I respect what you do, how important it is. But . . . in this case, I’m standing up for you, for me and for two or three people we don’t even know yet who we are sure to love. I will absolutely go to the wall for all of us. This is make or break.”

I took my hand away. “The day you tell me that’s never going to happen is the day you leave. Do you understand?”

She nodded slowly.

“It’s time for bed,” I said. “Those other people we give half our lives to have a busy day ahead.”

The next morning, just as dawn was painting the sky blue, I woke up. My heart was pounding and images of that dead girl floated behind my eyes. Someone had killed her. Someone had murdered her minutes after we spoke. The Garten wasn’t safe anymore. Jess, I, all of us had spent the evening with a murderer.

Jess stirred, then turned toward me. Her hand came to my cock, caressed it until it rose, then she slipped atop me. She rode me, sliding up and down until I couldn’t stand it any more. I rolled her on to her back, filling her over and over again as she struggled under me. She came, gasping, her mouth looking for mine. I tumbled over the edge a moment later, crushing her in my arms.

The odds were impossibly high that a murderer, one bent on destroying me, had fucked her three days ago. If he knew the first thing about me, he had to know that losing her

would be the end of me. The need to find that son-of-a-bitch, to kill him, was overwhelming.

Jess went back to sleep almost instantly, but I lay in the half-light reviewing the evening over and over again. He was there, somewhere, and given time I would remember something, some tiny thing, that would tell me for certain who he was so I could choke him to death.

Chapter Five

I called Morgan the next morning from office. "Hello counselor," I said. "I heard you had some instructions for me."

"Please refrain from talking to anyone about the death of that unfortunate young woman the police think you may have killed. Please do not discuss your association with that . . . evil sex club." There was a smile in that. Then she went on. "Though I am not representing you in your medical malpractice suit or any related civil suit, I recommend that you refrain from discussing that unfortunate patient you treated who died from breast cancer. Every word you say about any of these issues is likely to be repeated on a witness stand."

"Orson contacted me to let me know that the police collected the tape."

"But you discussed other matters."

"He told me he didn't know who the girl was, that Jason had jerked us around."

"Well, quite frankly, I think you should consider following my advice, or you will be going to jail for quite a long time." She might have been discussing the weather. I smiled. The hardest thing for Jess and her alter-ego Morgan to do was to stop mothering me. What I did or did not do was up to me.

"Thank you for your advice. I have a couple of other matters to discuss."

“Indeed.”

“Has it occurred to you that someone at the meeting did murder that girl, and they might decide to murder someone else. They may be after me but they are coming at me through people I love.”

“Yes,” she said. “That had occurred to me.”

There was silence as I waited for her to provide me with some assurance that she was taking some kind of precaution to safeguard her own life.

“Was there something else?” Her manner matched mine. Apparently Morgan thought what she did or did not do about her own security was her own business. Fuck. I didn't know if that were true. I didn't think so. Perhaps it was. Well, what did it matter? I was going to rip the murderers head off at the first opportunity.

“I want It's email address.” I said.

There was silence. Then I heard her clear her throat. “I . . . am not sure.”

“I can get it from Jess this evening if you prefer. That might be rather entertaining in fact. But I think, on balance, we should put it to bed this afternoon. Do you know where It is?”

“At my house. It . . . lives there.”

“And you live at my house.”

Another long pause, then a sigh. “Yes,” she said at last.

“Well, let's all act like adults and normalize this situation. Explain that you aren't coming back. Tell him to be out in a week. Or is he some kind of actor-”

“Yes,” she said.

“Then he's poor and stupid. Give him thirty days, some cash, whatever. But get him out.”

“I dare say It and I can manage this like adults . . . but you want his email address.”

“I'll send him your photos as a kind of . . . parting gift.” Actually it was more like a threat. I was marking my territory in no uncertain terms. If he showed up at Garten, I'd probably let him fuck Jess. But then again, maybe not.

“Fine,” she said. “I just emailed you It's address. I'll tell It what you said. I'm sure It won't be shocked-”

“Jason has disappeared,” I said. “I'm guessing he's either run away because he killed that girl, or he's dead.”

“The police are looking for him.”

“I think we have to find him. Garten did a background check-”

“I don't want the DA asking for all the Garten records.”

“So tell Orson to hire an investigator-”

“The police have their own resources. They find people all the time. They will find Jason.”

“I want him found now.” There was no reason for Jason to be missing. There was certainly no reason to let him remain missing.

“Don't you have enough fish to fry?” she asked. “Can't you go pester your Medical Malpractice attorney for a while?”

“Over what?”

There was a pause. “Well, I guess you can pester him tomorrow when the story comes out.”

“I expect I will,” I said. “Thank you, counselor.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” she said. I heard the phone fall into the cradle. I stared at it for a moment thinking of the woman I'd spoken to. Morgan. Not such a bad creature, though she was a bit rude. Did I want to correct that? I didn't know.

I picked up the phone, called Orson.

Glory answered the phone, and when I asked for Orson she told me he was sleeping. At eleven o'clock in the morning?

“Is he ill?”

"I believe my Master . . . is under a great deal of stress," she said at last. "He hasn't been sleeping well."

"I wonder if you could do me a favor," I said. "Can you collect all the background information we have for Jason? He's the wannabe Dom-"

"I know who he is, Sir," said Glory.

"I'm going to see if I can have him found. We need to know if we have two murders, or a murder and a missing person."

"Yes sir," she said. "My Master . . ."

"I'm certain he will approve."

There was a pause, then Glory spoke again. "I will fax the information over right away."

I raised my eyebrows at that. "Do you want to check with -"

"Was there something else, Sir?" She interrupted me. She did not want to check with Orson. She was skirting the rules.

"I think you should probably get Orson in for a check up," I said. "He's not a young man, and it's unusual for him to nap at this time of day."

There was silence, and then I heard her speaking to her sister. She came back on the line. "We have been considering just such a thing," she said.

"Do you think you will need help to get him to the doctor?" I asked.

"No," said Glory. "Perhaps not-"

"Well, you are to call me if you do need help," I said.

"Yes, Sir," she said.

"I'll call later in the week," I said, then returned the phone to its cradle.

I took my next patient then, a myeloma patient in her sixth year of remission after a stem cell transplant. We were just about to start thalidomide and I'd done a panel on her

kidneys. As she sat in my office, a seventy-one year old woman accompanied by a frail old codger who wavered as he stood by her side, I saw Jess. One day would I stand beside her riding the white water rapids of cancer or some other wasting disease? The idea of letting her go, of not knowing she was being cared for, was a waking nightmare. I wanted to be that old man . . .

I arrived home at seven fifteen to find Jess kneeling beside my chair in the dining room. The braised chicken and asparagus was hot, the green salad chilled, the white wine cold. Mozart was playing. I took my seat at the table, caressed her hair as I ate, then fed her. I finished the wine and she rose to get a second glass. I held that glass for her as she drank from it.

“Is there a movie you would like to see?” I asked, using her nipple ring to tug her to her feet. I rose as well, put my head against hers. “A gallery you want to go to, something else you would like to do?”

She shook her head, her eyes closed.

“Tell me what you do want,” I said softly.

“To touch you,” she said.

“Do you want me fuck you?” I asked, my hands slipping down her hips.

“If you like,” she said. “I was thinking of a bath, then maybe a massage . . .”

I nodded, took her hand and led her up the stairs to the bedroom. We went into the bathroom and I started the tub. She began to undress me. Minutes later, we were in the bath, her back against my chest as my hands traveled over her body.

“Talk about It,” I said. “What he did. What you liked.”

“Nothing,” she said.

“What do you mean? You did nothing?”

She sighed. “We did lots of things. I enjoyed nothing. I endured.”

“You don't like being a Dom?” I asked. “You like to take orders but not give them?”

She shook her head. "Is . . . everything about who is dominant? Don't we have . . . real lives?"

It was my turn to sigh. "My life is a tad too real just at the moment."

"Would you rather not talk about-"

"I think I brought It up," I said. "I asked if you liked being a Dom."

"I felt dead inside," she said. "I . . . was dead inside. I thought it would wear off, that I was just grieving over you. But really, I had just died. I saw you Monday and . . . I felt something for the first time in two years. I still can't believe I'm here. That you took me back."

I thought about her words, wondering if I should correct her. Had I taken her back, or had she taken me back? We had agreed, somehow, that we should part. We'd never had a cross word before I proposed. Then we had so many that I lost track of who said what.

Had I told her to leave? I didn't think so. I thought she had left me. Now, was there harm in accepting her construction of events? That I had told her to leave and I had taken her back? She understood that I wanted children, was demanding them. If she wanted to believe that I had taken her back pending the outcome of that discussion, that was probably best. In reality, I thought she had come home.

"Do you suppose we might have a non-contentious conversation about the murderer that's climbed into our Garten?" I asked. "I don't want to talk to Morgan, just Jess, who has fucked every man and half the women at Garten, and who must wonder, as I do, who could kill in our midst."

"It must be Jason . . . don't you think?" she asked.

"Why would Jason want to expose me? Why would he want to . . . destroy me?"

She was silent, then she shook her head. "I'm not going to be much help. Once I saw you . . . I stopped paying attention to anything."

"I think you spent the evening on your back," I replied, "blind-folded."

"So I did," she replied. I could hear the smile in her voice. She lifted one of her hands from the water, and I saw the words slut and whore written in bold letters on her arm. She

caressed them with one manicured nail. "I am a slut and a whore," she said with some satisfaction.

"Why does that please you so," I asked. "It's an odd thing . . ."

"I am a slut, and a whore, and a slave and a cock sucker . . . a hundred things, a thousand things, and none of them are respectable, and all of them are desirable, and I don't give a shit what anyone thinks but you. And you . . . love . . . me." She put her hands to her face, rubbed her eyes. "I want people to know what I would do for you. I want them to see me with my legs spread, want them to watch you fuck me in the ass. I want them to see me fuck anyone you tell me to fuck ."

It was an effort of will not to point out that having my child would prove to many that I had fucked her, and that a labor and delivery room was the perfect place to demonstrate she would do anything I wanted her to. I didn't want to fight.

Instead I said, "Well, you'll have your wish with those detectives at least. They have video of me fucking you and of you fucking everyone else."

"Good," she said fiercely. "I hope they show it to everyone at their precinct and put it on the internet. I hope they put it on television with my name underneath."

"Really?" I asked.

"Fuck them," she said. "I'm a damned good attorney. I defend my clients viciously. And, yeah, I spread my legs for friends and strangers. When they see me, I want them to want me. God knows they already fear me--"

"Maybe you are a Dom," I said ruffling her hair. "You want them to know you do what you want, and you want to make them do what you say."

She smiled. "At work, I really am quite a handful."

"Is there anyone else you can imagine at Garten who would do such a thing? Who would want to kill that poor, stupid little girl."

"I didn't talk to her," she said. "How stupid was she?"

"Just another 'why-am-I-here' girl. Jason drags these girls in knowing nothing about anything, they mope about, and he brings another girl to the next meeting. You know what newbies are like."

“Jason,” she said, “I am sorry to say, does not stand out in my mind. The nine masters are quite clear-”

“For good reason,” I said. “We know what women are for.” The nine masters, with Orson as instigator, had formed Garten specifically to provide a safe place to enjoy our lifestyle and to find a way to meet other participants. AIDs was a growing concern, data about links between venereal diseases and cancer had been mounting. It was too easy to fuck a girl only to find out she was sixteen and at the party with her big sister. It was easy to see that random parties run by anyone with anyone in attendance were a dangerous and stupid way to have a good time.

So nine Masters started a gentlemen's club and created a set of rules that mandated things like testing, background investigations, dues, and behavior.

It wasn't an entirely unheard of thing. There were certainly other groups, and we met with them from time to time. Our registered Dom's were accepted at clubs worldwide. We routinely held auctions where subs from other clubs were purchased by our members.

“Jason, did he know what women were for?” she asked. “I think he only had me once or twice.”

Victor said he should sub.

“Oh God,” I said suddenly. “He's gay—”

“Pardon me?” said Jess sitting forward. “I didn't say that.”

“Get out—” I said, struggling to untangle myself from her body so I could escape the bath.

She slipped away, rose as I was stepping out of the water. I snatched a towel from the rack as I passed it, sat on the bed and picked up the white handset of the phone. I had Victor on the line in two minutes.

“Victor, did Jason . . . was he a homosexual?” I was trying to figure out how I was so certain that he was. I had seen him screw women, but few and far between. Something just seemed so off about him.

“I don't know,” said Victor. “He brought women to the gigs.”

“He did, didn't he. But then . . . we only have one fully homosexual pair. Jefferson and Adams. Did he hook up with them?”

“Avoided them like the plague,” said Victor. “In fact, I think he hated them. I would say he was . . . asexual more than anything else. Just . . . kind of feral. Universally mean to his women though.”

“Thanks, Man,” I said. “I'll call you later.”

I put the phone back in the cradle and stared at Jess. “He was gay I'll bet. Gay and in the closet. He came because he liked the men, the Masters, the domination. But . . . he didn't know-”

“You can't get to be thirty and not know you are gay,” she said.

“I think he was in his mid-twenties, and I bet you can,” I replied. “I'll just bet you can.”

“It is . . . homophobic and generally offensive to say that Jason was gay because you don't like him,” said Jess in a conversational way. She was toweling her head dry.

“What?” I asked. What on earth was she talking about? “I like gay men just fine,” I said. “Have you met Jefferson and Adams? Who do you think sponsored them?”

“You?” she asked. She took a step into the bedroom, put a hand on my forehead as if checking for fever. “You had sex with Jefferson and Adams?”

“Adams,” I said. “And I was drunk. But regardless of that I certainly have no particular distaste for gay men. I should flog you for saying that.”

“Please,” she said with a smile. “May I get the whip? Will you tell me more about the gay men?”

I laughed out loud. “Look, I don't know how I know, but I know that Jason was gay. But he kept bringing girls to the meetings. So maybe he didn't know he was gay, or didn't want to be gay. But then she told him, a shot in the dark . . . And he killed her.”

“Thin and impossible to prove,” said Jess.

“Not if we find him,” I said. “If we find him, then we can ask him . . .”

“David, you can't track him down. You are the subject of a criminal investigation. If you

accidentally kill the guy, you'll get the chair as a serial killer.”

“You are probably right,” I said. “Now get the whip. I'm going to prove to you that I'm a closet homosexual.” My head was spinning. I knew Jason had killed that girl. All he had to do was confess. And I could make him confess. I would just have to break his arms or amputate something.

Jess handed me the soft leather whip, put her head and arms on the bed beside me, her breasts dangling and her ass upraised. I caressed her with the whip, let her feel the lashes between her legs. Did I mention I'm something of a Sadist?

Chapter Six

It was Friday. On the way to work, I bought the Times and sat in a coffee shop. I read it from cover to cover looking for an article on me. I had no sooner determined that the piece hadn't run than I got a call from Morgan.

"You are not in the newspaper," she said. I could hear the smile in her voice.

"Why no, I am not," I said. "I know someone who will be quite relieved."

"As your attorney, I would like to remind you that you should probably not hunt down the other major suspect in a particular murder investigation because, if you kill him, you are going to the electric chair."

"Lethal injection," I said.

"Actually, I believe it's the gas chamber," she said. "In fact, I'm certain it is because I've attended an execution."

"Really?" I asked. "That doesn't bode very well for my defense."

"Listen-" she said.

I hung up. I wasn't going to be lectured by that bitch Morgan on the best day of my life. I was not in the newspaper today and that meant there was some reason to be hopeful.

I saw four patients, one of which I had to admit. No blood pressure, white as a sheet, wasting. Since he was on his fourth or fifth round of chemo, I suspected I would have to recommend hospice care some time next week. You would like me to tell you that sending people to hospice care is very difficult.

Sometimes it is. Sometimes it would be more pleasant to have all your teeth pulled. But you can't be a doctor, particularly a surgeon or an oncologist, without being able to differentiate between your misery and someone else's. Doctors and nurses are not the people you should turn to for sympathy and compassion. You should turn to them for help treating your disease or narcotics to ease your pain.

When I got back to my desk I found a twenty page fax and a note to call someone named Gloria urgently. I picked up the phone to call Orson. Glory answered on the first ring.

"David?" she said. "I . . . You have to come right away. I think he's going to shoot himself."

"Shit!" I said. "Call the police—"

"No!" I heard Orson. He must have picked up an extension. "No police—" He sounded more than agitated. "I'm not going to lose it all again. I'm not. It's . . . not my fault. I did it all the best I could."

"Orson? What say you let your friend the doctor stop by? Are you gonna shoot me?"

"I . . . I'm not going to shoot anyone else," he said. "I just want to -"

"Orson, I don't think you have to shoot yourself. You aren't going to lose everything. I have lots of money. So does Jess. We can buy you out of any trouble you may be in." It was my turn to help another Master.

"I know!" he said. "Don't you think I know that!" He was screaming at the phone. Then he dropped it. I could hear him weeping.

I was out of my chair like a shot, snatching my illegal morphine stash from my locked drawer. Why do I have an illegal morphine stash? Because my patients are often in pain, and morphine is a controlled substance that I can prescribe. However it often takes more than four hours to get the morphine I've ordered from the pharmacy up to the patient I'm treating.

So, in a little black bag with some syringes, I carry a big bottle of the stuff I checked out a

year ago so I can get folks out of pain in a few minutes rather than a few hours. Feel free to report me.

I drove like a madman from the hospital down Sunset, the black and silver Jaguar hugging the curves like the race car it was. I parked in the driveway, ran through the open front door to find the lower floor empty. I could hear someone shouting upstairs.

I went into the office to find Orson sitting in his chair with the gun pointed at his chin. Glory and her sister were both begging him to put the gun down as he wept. Glory was standing a few feet away; her sister was kneeling.

"Orson," I said, walking past the girls without looking at them, "What problem could you possibly have that unlimited money, hundreds of good friends and a pair of sex slaves can't solve? Are you sick?" I was hoping Glory or her sister would have sense enough to call the paramedics. Well, unless that would make Orson shoot himself. I had filled the syringe with morphine . . . if we could pin him down I could inject it. That ought to take the edge off of whatever was bothering him.

"You know," he said. "You know already. I told you." It was hard to make out the words through his sobs.

"The article wasn't in the paper," I said, mystified. "I'm fine, everything is fine."

"But you know about the money," said Orson. "You know what . . . what I did." Tears were running down his craggy face.

"The money," I said, mystified. What money? Had Orson killed that little girl over some money? What on earth was he talking about.

"I . . . couldn't . . . you see I didn't have any money, and I had to pay the mortgage . . ."

I stared at him. Enlightenment came like the dawn. I leaned forward, met his eyes.

"Orson, put the God damned gun down. You are not going to shoot yourself over stealing money to pay your mortgage. That's idiotic."

"I'm not going to lose it all again. I can't . . . I lost it once already. I don't want to have to move. I can't take care of them."

"Orson, if you'll put the gun down, I'll write a check. It's just money."

"Just money," he said, bringing the gun down. "Just . . . more than a million dollars. One

point two million dollars. I thought I could invest to make up the difference, but then there was the crash and I lost more.”

One point two million dollars.

“Is that a million dollars we have to write a check to someone for? Or is that just what's missing off the books.”

“We owe about eighteen thousand in insurance payments and medical expenses, and another forty thousand for background checks. Then we have next month's expenses,” Glory's sister spoke from the floor. She's a pretty thing by the way, a cherubic blond who really looks just like Glory's little sister. “The rest is just book money.”

“Glory get me phone numbers for the eight other masters. Orson put down the gun.” I could just imagine the old man shooting himself in the head. The blood would be everywhere. There would be no hope of saving him. How could I explain that I was utterly willing to write a check for a million dollars just in order to avoid watching him die?

“I was going to black mail you,” he said, as if I hadn't figured that out. “I was going to call you and tell you how much to give-”

“Well, you are a stupid little old man,” I said. “Because all you had to say was ‘Dave, can you give me one point two million dollars?’” I stood up, reached across the desk, took the gun from him and unloaded it. I handed it to Glory's sister. “Can you find away to destroy that?” I asked.

A couple of hours later, I'd spoken the nine, and we'd agreed to write off the one point two million as bad investments. Our expenses were really quite minimal. We started up the bank with twenty thousand each and upped our annual dues to thirty. You are asking why they are so high. Because we are insured up the wazoo and because bringing in and vetting newbies who are usually poor, making sure we aren't breeding some sort of first world plague, and preparing for a day when some one or two of us comes up with AIDs . . . all that's expensive.

I asked each of them if they wanted to be CEO of the Garten, but I had no takers. So, by default, I was the new man.

I turned to Glory. “Isn't your sister some kind of bookkeeper?” I asked.

“Ex-CPA,” said Glory. She looked at her sister. “You can talk.”

“I can take over the books,” she said. “There aren't many expenses to manage. I did the taxes every year. I tried to tell him . . . but he was so ashamed . . .”

“Well, you work for me now. Figure out what to pay yourself as Chief Financial Officer and then tell me. Let me know if I have to round up more money.”

I turned back to Orson. “I'm sorry we didn't help you more, and I understand how . . . this all happened. It's a family business and shit happens in family businesses.”

“Shit happens,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“This is your house. You can live here until hell freezes over. Please refrain from future suicide attempts.”

I left the house an hour later, driving the twenty or so miles to Brentwood without going over thirty. The sun was going down, and my watch said it was six fifty-nine when I pulled in the yard. The white Mercedes was already waiting.

I found my slave seated by my chair, eyes lowered, a Mediterranean chicken salad and a martini by my plate.

I collected my martini and sat on the floor beside her.

“Sometimes,” I said. “You have a day . . . that just defies description. I want you to know, my lovely Jess Morgan or Morgan Jess, that I have had such a day.”

Chapter Seven

The next day, I lied to my slave, which is actually all but unforgivable. One never lies to slaves. It is entirely unnecessary. They have no control over your behavior, you owe them no information at all, so to lie to them is simply obscene.

I told her I was on call.

“But . . . you don't work weekends,” she said. “I . . . cleared my calendar.”

“Who knew you would be coming back? I agreed more than two months ago to work this weekend.”

“I . . .”

“Why don't you go to work too?” I asked. “Don't you have some murderers to get out of jail or something?”

She looked at me, and for an instant I saw Morgan.

“Are you . . . lying to me?” she asked. “Are you . . . seeing someone else?”

“Down!” I said, pointing at the floor.

She dropped to her knees as if I had struck her.

“If I were fucking someone else, I'd probably tell you,” I said.

“Not if you cared for her,” she said. “Not if you loved her-”

“Then we would have a third-”

“I . . . don't want a third,” she said.

“Stay here, on the floor, until I call you. Don't move. Don't change position. Just sit,” I collected my keys and my wallet. “Think about this. You can't live without me, so I can pretty much do as I please, can't I? If I want a third, then we'll get one.” I knelt in front of her, tugged at both tit rings until she gasped, kissed her mouth.

“Actually, my plan is to knock you up, not bring another girl home. Get a clue.”

Then I was out the door, the background check for Jason in my hand. The guy was a loser, with nothing, and he really couldn't have gone far. He lived in Silverlake, his parents lived in the San Fernando valley, and his brother lived downtown. I figured I could flush him out in an afternoon.

Jason's brother was just getting up as I arrived. Actually, to be precise, I got him up. It was just before nine on a Saturday morning and I was at his door, ringing the doorbell and knocking as if his massive condo were on fire. I was considering kicking the door down, when the guy opened it a crack. I shoved it back hard. Did I mention I'm a big man? Not huge, but very muscular. But, that's not the key thing. The key thing is that I am a monster, and I'm quite willing to break stuff and hurt people when I decide that it is time to do that. Even a little man or a woman becomes dangerous when they make that choice. Sociopaths and serial killers make that choice.

“Christ!” he said, stepping back as he clutched his now bleeding nose. “What the hell do you want? I don't have any money-”

“Your idiot brother,” I said. “He's trying to fuck me up, and I'm not having it. Where is he?” I started looking around the one bedroom flat, walked into the bathroom as if I expected to find him in the shower, looked in all the closets, ended up back at the bleeding guy.

“I don't know,” said Edward Rice. “I told the police.”

“Laurence needs to call me, or I'm going to kick your head in,” I said. “I know where you live, and I absolutely guarantee I'll kill you if he doesn't contact me before midnight.”

“I'm telling you! I don't know where to find him! He's blown town-”

“Why,” I asked. “Where's he gone?”

“They say he killed some chick at a party. I . . . I don't know if its true. He's kind of fucked up, but I never saw him really . . .”

“He's a faggot,” I said. “Why would a faggot kill a girl?”

“He's not a fag,” said the guy, his blue eyes narrowing. “I should know. I'm his brother.”

“Yeah, well, you are a faggot too,” I said. “Your dad probably fucked you both up the ass.”

“What the hell!” he said. “You don't even know my dad-” Note that this guy was now arguing with a guy that had probably broken his nose and had promised to kill him.

“Yeah, but I know your faggot brother. You have him call me. Tell him I want to fuck him up the ass. You got that? You tell him his soft white butt is mine-”

I gave him my card with my cell phone number. I was guessing that if Jason did like men, having an alpha-male like me questioning his sexuality might well yield a response. All I wanted was a phone call. I was certain I could work backward from a phone number . . .

I went to his parents' place next. His mother was out, but his dad was there, already soused. He was a big man, heavy set, reminded me of my dad, except my dad was a military man and always managed to look well-pressed even when he'd just downed a fifth of bourbon.

“I don't know where the fucker is,” said Mr. Rice. “I guess he's probably in Phoenix by now. I hear he knocked up some girl.”

“I hear he's a homosexual,” I said. “In fact, I know he is-”

“Fuck you say!” said the man, “My kid's not a fag.”

"Yeah, he is. He fucked my kid brother and sliced my sister up-" I wondered how drunk the guy was. I wanted him to remember this story. "I came to find him-"

"I don't believe you," he said. "My kid's not a fucking . . . fucking . . . fag."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Because he said he was when he fucked my brother up the ass. He said you made him one-"

The beer bottle flew past my head and broke a window. "Here's my card, you sorry son of a bitch," I said as I tossed it onto his black plastic TV. "Send your asshole son to talk to settle this like a real man."

I got back on the freeway, was heading back toward Brentwood, when I remembered Jess. I called her. "Well," I said. "Sorry about that . . . got caught up."

"You're not at the hospital," she said. She was crying. "You lied to me."

"Not about another woman," I said.

"Worse," she said. "What the hell do you think you are doing? Do you think you are bullet proof? You are . . . hunting a guy that's already killed someone."

"Look, I'll be home in an hour. We'll talk."

"I . . . don't know if I'll be here."

"If you aren't, whose gonna make sure I don't go to jail?"

I hung up, feeling my heart pound with unspent adrenaline. Dealing with those assholes had reminded me just how much I hated dealing with assholes. I hated my dad except when I loved him. My brothers and I hardly spoke because of the bitter competition he had forced upon us. Every battle was a fight to the death, every contest the last chance to prove ourselves. One of these days, I was going to drive up the coast just to piss on his grave . . . again.

I pulled into the driveway, hopped out of the car, found the door locked and fumbled with my key. Before I could unlock anything, I heard the tumblers roll, and the door knob turned.

The first thing I saw was Jess's face, white as a sheet with pale pink lips. The second thing I saw was the barrel of a gun at her temple.

“Jason,” I said.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said, “Shut the fuck up, or I'll shoot her in the head now.”

I said nothing, frozen with indecision. It took an instant to pull the trigger, and I could do nothing in time.

The door was finally open, and he stepped back. Jess had her hands tied behind her back with the belt of a robe, a bruise was forming over one eye, and her left nipple was bleeding freely from the ring he had tried to tear out.

I would like to tell you that a strange calm settled over me, that my monster started thinking all these tactical thoughts. Actually, I became numb. Suddenly I felt like I was dreaming, like I was watching a movie from a mile away. I wanted to put my hands over my eyes and I had no plans to peek through my fingers. Disassociation. The word tumbled through my head. Shock.

“You . . . said . . . I was a . . . fag,” Jason said. He was spitting as he spoke, too furious to talk, hyped on something. Crank? Speed? Not PCP . . . too functional. It crossed my mind that I needed a new gate. My security system was crap. Cops, murderers, no one else needed that little box I used to get in.

“I know you are,” I said. The words were out before I knew I was going to say them.

“What?” he said. “I'll fuckin' kill you!”

“You want me to fuck you up the ass,” I found the words suddenly. My father's voice was clear in my head. You have the advantage. Use it. “Don't you want my stiff cock in your ass? Don't you want me to do you just like I do the girls?”

The gun came to me, I could see his finger flex.

“Come on, lemme fuck you little boy,” I said. “Let me show you what your daddy likes.”

“I'll fuck you!” he said. “I'll fuck you up the ass!”

And there we were.

“Come on Jason. Or should I say Lawrence. That's such a faggot name. Law-rence. Larry. No wonder you picked another faggoty name like Jason.” I took a breath. “I got a room, just down the hall. Come on down and let me fuck you up the ass like you want and then you can go home and get it from your old man.”

“Show me the room!” said Jason. I'm gonna fuck your ass, then fuck your mouth, then shoot you in the head!”

Part of me recorded the enlarged fantasy. Whatever he wanted to do was fine with me. We could make a day of it. I just wanted to make him trade me for Jess.

I sauntered down the hall. “It was the girl wasn't it. She told you I said I wouldn't let you train my dog. I told her you were a fag.”

“Shut up about her,” Jason said. “Shut up, or I'll shoot this cunt right through the head.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why not? After all, she's a woman. You got no other use for her-”

“I'll fuck her after I kill you,” he said. “You first, then her-”

The plan kept getting bigger, a fugue of sexual violence.

We entered the den. I turned to find him looking around the room, saw his eyes alight on the hobby horse.

“Take off your fucking clothes asshole,” he said. “Let me see that butt you want fucked.”

“Sure you are up for it? What are you on? Speed? Makes it hard to cum. Makes it hard, but you can't cum-”

He pointed the gun at me again. Jess stood stock still. She was working hard to be as non-existent as she could be. Years of play, of ritual, made us familiar with the dance we were sharing with this madman. She knew I was dragging him off. It was going to be up to her to get the gun or figure out how she could disable him.

I made a show of removing my clothes. I think I mentioned I'm very fit. I work out with weights and swim most mornings before work. I find that without exercise I feel my dad's rage building. I'm convinced it's some kind of birth defect. Anyway, as I stripped, I turned my back to him, wagged my butt.

“Like what you see?” I said. “Too bad you are the one going over the horse. You won't be poking my ass. I'll be pumping yours.

His eyes were riveted on me. I could see a flush crawling up his skin. Speaking of endorphins, he seemed to be having some kind of rush. That made sense. I would be his first full sexual encounter with a man. Good enough. I'd make sure it was his last.

“Bend . . bend over,” he said. “Put your butt . . . in the air.”

“Why don't you just bend over,” I said. “Show me your ass.”

“Get some rope or something,” he said to Jess. “Tie him to that thing the way he ties you. If you fuck it up, I'll shoot you both.”

She turned around to show him her bound hands.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a six inch pocket knife, sliced through the belt without regard to anything else he might cut. In moments, her hands were free, and she moved toward me. I could see blood dripping off her finger tips as she moved.

She walked behind me, pulled two sets of hand cuffs from the wall cabinet.

“Come on, Jason,” I said. “This has gone far enough.” I tried to put a little whine in my voice.

“Shut the hell up,” he said. “Bend over and . . . take it like a man.”

“I . . why don't you fuck her,” I asked as Jess stood in front of the hobby horse. I could see her eyes were lowered, her face relaxed, the picture of a woman in sub space. Jason knew nothing of her other than she fucked men at parties.

Jason raised the gun to point at my head.

“Bend over,” he said.

I made a show of walking to the horse, of hesitating. Then I slowly rolled myself over it. Jessica cuffed my hands to the legs of the horse. As she rose she put a hand on it, made it tip slightly. It was a heavy object, I understood, but it wanted to roll. She must have noticed that on many an occasion. Clever girl.

She stepped back, and Jason walked around to inspect her work. He knelt, training the

gun on my head, jerked on the cuffs, made me open my hands to show I had no key. He stepped back, motioned Jessica to her knees near the horse.

“Watch me fuck your little man,” he said. “After I whack him, I’ll have you.”

Jessica kept her head lowered, eyes down, the perfect submissive.

I heard him fumble with his pants, felt him touch my bare skin, gave him a little resistance when he tried to pry my cheeks open with one hand. Then I felt the barrel of the gun at the back of my head.

“Give it to me, fucker-”

Frankly it was no problem at all to take his cock up my ass. I’ve had larger and more uncomfortable things. Twenty-five or so years in some of the most raucous scenes to be had in Los Angeles, and a brief exploration of all the more interesting pharmaceuticals a physician could prescribe, had given me a chance to try most things twice. I’m not gay. I’m not bi. But I’m adventurous.

So, I let him have me. It was only fair in a way, since I was going to kill him. He should get one decent fuck.

The gun stayed at the back of my head as he ramped up. As I suspected he was on something that kept him hard but kept him from coming. When he flagged I would moan and wriggle a little. Jess and I waited.

As his pace increased, and his breathing became more rapid, I saw her hand rise along my arm, up my shoulder to the back of my neck. As soon as I felt the gun leave the back of my head, I rolled the horse backwards, bringing myself down on Jason as hard as I could.

I heard the gun go off, felt something burn on my ear. Heard Jess scream. I twisted my ass to the right while grinding it back into his body. His cock was bent at a 90 degree angle. I heard the gun go off again.

I threw my head back, heard his nose crunch. I saw Jess appear with the poker and pulled my head to the right just in time to miss being impaled on the damned thing. Our guest wasn’t so lucky.

She had me unlocked in a matter of seconds, and I shoved the hobby horse away. That was a toy we wouldn’t be using for a while.

Jason's eyes were wide and staring. Blood and brain tissue mixed on the floor.

"I thought you said not to kill him," I said, as I stared at the body.

"Fuck you," she replied. "God Damn! You almost got us both killed!"

"That I did," I said. I kicked the corpse hard in the side. "Son of a bitch."

The cops came. We explained what we could. They went away without arresting us, and Jess said that was a good thing. I decided just to live without the top of my right ear. I drove Jess to the ER and called a plastic surgeon I knew on the way. Her breast had to be stitched back together in just the right way.

That night Jessica, or Morgan I should say, slapped me so hard and dressed me down so completely that my ears are still ringing. She was about as submissive as a rattlesnake. But she was breathing, and I honestly didn't care what she said.

Chapter Eight

“Okay,” I said. “Why don't you want to have children with me? Are you against them entirely?”

Jason had died three days ago. The cleaners had come back, and the house was ours again. Jessica wandered around naked, but ate at the table, and wouldn't let me feed her. I had broken the horse into kindling and burned it in the barbecue. No sex, no conversation to speak of. I knew Jess was thinking me over, and I didn't want say anything to make it worse. But now, at our first outing, it felt like time to chat. An upscale coffee house was neutral territory.

“Who do you want to respond,” asked Jessica tersely. She was staring at her hand which was wrapped around an untasted cup of tea.

“Whoever will give me a straight answer,” I replied. I had to be the only man on earth having a *ménage-à-trois* with a single woman.

“Fine,” said Jessica. “I am not against children entirely. I have two issues which I believe are not resolvable, and I'm willing . . . to give up having kids in order to keep you. Except you won't do that.”

I stared at her, waiting for her words to make sense. Then I took a deep breath. My father's anger was not coming to the table.

“I wouldn't be . . . a good father in your opinion.”

She didn't look up.

"I don't want my children to live . . . our life style."

I was silent for a moment, surprise and anger warring for control. I exhaled slowly, reminded myself that my father was dead and his anger had died with him. Jess and I were just going to plod through this problem one agonizing step at a time until we figured it out. I was willing to do almost anything in order to have her. I had nothing to lose. We were just setting her price.

"What are you talking about?" I finally managed to say.

"Our lifestyle, the slave thing, the master thing, the whole thing.

I was silent for a moment, then sat forward. "You are a ditzzy girl," I told her. "Tell me you did not-"

"No," she said. "No more insults. Don't call me stupid any more."

"I mean it in a clever, fun way-" I said.

"I mean don't say it or anything close to it ever again," she said.

I said nothing for a moment, adding her instruction to my mental check list. No joking insults. Done.

"I apologize. It won't happen again."

"Regarding our lifestyle," she prompted. "I . . . don't think you will accept me without it."

I sighed, surrendering to the insanity. I could not be understanding what she was trying to say because what I heard made no sense.

"There is probably some huge something in here I just don't understand. Because I know you did not waste almost three years of our lives because you thought I'd make you act like a sex slave in front of our children-"

"It's the condition under which you accept me-" she said. "When I try to be assertive-"

I stared at her for a long time, finally shook my head. “Honey, it’s the condition under which you accept me.”

“What?” she demanded.

“My role in your life has been insisting that you take time off, that you don't spend every waking minute of every single day being the uber-lawyer woman.”

“I never said-”

“I don't want to explain the details, but you made it clear early on that the only way you would set aside space for our relationship in your life, space for me in your life, space for you in your life, was if I was completely brutal with you when you didn't. You insisted, I complied.”

“I never-”

“Do you enjoy being my slave?” I asked. “Do enjoy having me for a master?”

She said nothing for a moment, then nodded.

“I enjoy having you for a slave. Together, as master and slave, we insist on a certain . . . standard of living. We have sex a lot, we go to the Garten, we go on vacation, we leave work and get home by seven. Don't you see? Its functional-”

“But not with children.”

“If you don't think we'll both be sub to the children you are out of your mind.”

“I don't understand-”

“We will play a more clandestine game of master and slave while they are young, and what they will learn is that . . . people work very hard during the day and enjoy their time off. They will see their parents enjoying their sex life without knowing all of the details. They'll think we are Bob and Carol Brady-”

She stared at me as if I'd grown a second head.

“I can't believe you never told me this was an issue,” I said. “That's actually rather irritating.”

“You . . . never asked me. You never said . . .”

“Well, somewhere in our conversations about a slave's obligations, I'm pretty sure that full disclosure was mentioned. Your job was to raise any issues you had.”

She shook her head.

“So, can we get married and have babies now.” I said. “I think that's very good news.”

Her face became grim again. She looked at her cup, then at the ground to her right, sullen.

When she spoke, she bristled with anger. “I want to be a lawyer. I enjoy it. I'm good at it. It . . . makes me whole and I can't live without it.”

“So will children,” I said. “They will make you-”

“No. Children will make you whole,” she said. “I don't want to be a soccer mom. You be a soccer mom.”

I shook my head slowly. “A father is not a mother. Mothers are special . . . are crucial. They do things fathers can't on every front, from breast feeding to bed time stories . . .”

She looked at me. “Bullshit. This is make or break. I know I will love my children. I will do what it takes to care for them, to make them whole people. I'll take some time off but . . . I'm not taking off ten years. I don't think it's fair of you to ask me to. It . . . dishonors me and everything I am. Would you take ten years off if our positions were reversed?”

“Yes,” I said. “Of course. Are you out of your mind?”

“Then you take ten years off. If you handle all the roles an intelligent nurturing father can handle, I'll . . . do the rest. But if you want a twenty-four hour a day stay at home parent, I'm afraid it's you.”

Enlightenment dawned on me as she spoke. Freedom to hang out with my kids, to take them to the beach, to smell their hair and give them baths, to teach them to swing a bat and to drive them to school.

“Done,” I said. “Absolutely. Who wants to spend all day with cancer patients anyway?”

“Done?” she asked. “Like that? Hardly. You think I'm going to change my mind once

they get here-”

“Have I ever lied to you?” I asked. “When have I ever lied to you?”

“You must be joking,” she said. “You told me so many lies I can't count them all -”

“Just that one time,” I said.

“That one time counts,” she replied. “Jason totally counts.”

“Well,” I said. “He would have come after me sooner or later. It's like having a rabid dog in the house. It has to be dealt with-”

“Shut the fuck up!” she said, “I am going to slap you again!”

There was silence for a minute as we studied one another, something electric building around us.

She spoke first, evaluating me. “You are telling me you will quit your job, abandon your practice, just to raise our kids.”

“You bet,” I said. “Absolutely. I hope you don't change your mind. You want the murderers, you can have them. I'm done with the sick people. I'm a stay-at-home Dad, if we ever get any babies for me to stay home with.”

“I . . . never expected you to agree.”

“It would have been easier for me to agree if you had decided to ask,” I said. There was a very long pause. Have you ever been up just before dawn, when you can feel it coming, can feel the sun swelling out of the horizon? Have you ever crossed some kind of threshold knowing that a whole new life lies on the other side?

I smiled, shrugged, “Frankly, I think you are a fool. It's like saying 'Oh, yes, please let me go to school rather than have summer vacation.' But, then again, maybe its just . . . another wonderful gift from my devoted slave.”

She stared at me for a long moment. I could see her shattering inside, a flurry of emotions ranging from joy and fear to disbelief and regret tumbling across her face.

And then, I swear, she put her hands over her eyes, and began to sob like a child. She slipped to her knees, body rocking to and fro.

The half dozen people around us in the coffee shop turned to look at us as I leaned forward to stroke her back, fighting off my own unexpected tears. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt moved to cry. When my father died perhaps?

"It's okay Jess," I said. "It's going to be okay."

Epilogue

Xander and I collected Morgan from the court house. I snuggled my dark-haired hero's neck as his mom strode down the steps in her elegant heels and fashionable suit. "Look, there's Mommy," I said. "Isn't she pretty?"

Xander lifted his hands to her, and I traded her the briefcase for the boy.

We ambled down the street past the hot dog vendors on our way to the small deli we favored on court days.

"Xan has a surprise for you," I said. "How old are you, kid?"

He held up two fingers.

"Two?" she asked. "Are you two?"

"Two," he said. "Two, two, two."

"He's two," I confirmed. I opened the door for the pair of them, followed them into the darkened room.

We were escorted to our table, and I told her that Xan and I had checked out another apartment building for Garten to invest in, and that the dump truck had come to fill the swimming pool with sand just before we left the house. "The play equipment arrives tomorrow." I told her. "We are quite excited."

“What's wrong with the park?” she asked. “You know, the one a five-minute walk from our front door. The one with all the other kids?”

“The ten thousand gallon pool of murderous water that wants to suck my boy to the bottom,” I replied. “That's what's right with the sandbox and the play equipment.”

We ordered food and when it came, she met my eyes. “I took a fork full of ravioli and lifted it to her mouth. She ate it slowly, then turned with a smile to her own food. “I know Xander will love his new toys,” she said. “We should invite the kids next door over to play.”

THE END